

Seven Ways to Develop High-Performance Teams



Michael D. Taylor

Copyright © 2003-2009 by Michael D. Taylor

All Rights Reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means -- graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or information storage and retrieval system -- without written permission of Michael D. Taylor, Systems Management Services (<http://www.projectmgt.com>).

SEVEN WAYS TO DEVELOP HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS

In order for project managers to effectively develop their project teams as quickly as possible they must establish the following seven practices.

Teams Need a Clear Common Goal. Each team must have a clear goal that each understands the same way and has commitment to it by all team members. The goal, or purpose statement must be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant to the overall project goal, and it must contain a timeline.

Teams Need a Specific Performance Challenge. Teams that are not challenged will not work synergistically. While the goal must be achievable it must also stretch the team in such a way that they cannot meet it by working alone as individuals. Only when a goal is beyond their individual grasps will they see the need to work together. Synergy comes from having a specific performance challenge.

Teams Need the Ability to Manage Agreement. If all team members do not contribute to problem solving and decision making, teams will inevitably make poor decisions. It is not uncommon for some team members to steer the team by dominance, pushing their own views and hindering those of others. This is clearly demonstrated in the Abilene Paradox¹ where the group did exactly the opposite of what they wanted to do. Teams need to manage agreement, and if they are unable to do so, the project manager must provide needed coaching and mentoring.

Teams Need Participative Management. If team members are not part of the project planning process they will not become committed to the project or the project team. Project managers must be sensitive to the Thorndike Effect² and its tendency to make all project decisions autocratically. Even though it takes less time for a project manager to plan a project single-handedly, it will take longer to implement the plan because of a lack of team member commitment. Participative management ensures that all expert considerations have been incorporated into the project planning process, and as a result, full commitment to the project will take place.

¹ Jerry B. Harvey, *The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1988).

² Thorndike put forth the theory that the greater the satisfaction or discomfort, the greater the strengthening or weakening of the bond. To project managers this often means trying to do everything by themselves, because that's what made them successful in the past. Source: Edward L. Thorndike, "The Psychology of Wants, Interests, and Attitudes," 1935. Appleton-Century, New York

Teams Need to Conduct Efficient Team Meetings. Studies have shown that a typical meeting attendee views them as being 2.3 times as long as they should be. Since meetings are vital to a project's success, the secret lies in simply making them more efficient. For team meetings to be effective and efficient the following practices must be enforced.³

- Inform and remind team of purpose just before meeting.
- Minimize participants.
- Establish and follow an agenda.
- State the purpose and intended outcome.
- Attempt to involve each team member.
- Use diagrams, pictures and graphics.
- Park important but unrelated topics.
- Record action items, actionees, and due dates.
- Issue a brief written meeting summary.
- Periodically measure the effectiveness of the project meetings.

Teams Need a Clear Definition of Success. The team goal may be viewed as a “dot.” This means that it is an ideal budget, an ideal schedule and ideal scope. However, most teams will not complete their portion of the project exactly on time, or on budget, nor will they complete the precise scope of work they intended to accomplish. Does this mean they failed? Probably not. In addition to the “dot” (goal) teams also need a “circle.” The circle represents the amount of acceptable variance between the goal and how close the team comes to it. The circle represents the success criteria. For example, it may be acceptable for the team to finish with two weeks of its target completion date. Success criteria keeps the team motivated when it knows that it is going to miss the dot. Examples of success criteria can be found at www.projectmgt.com.

Teams Need Recognition When Performance is Exceptional. Recognition and rewarding of exceptional work is often overlooked. As a result, when many individuals who go beyond what is expected of them are ignored, discouragement can set in, and they soon drop back into doing mediocre work. To counter this, project managers must be on the alert for those who do exceptional work and recognize it appropriately. Alfie Kohn, in “Punished by Rewards” provides valuable insights into proper recognition and rewarding of exceptional employees.⁴

³ For more on this see, “How to Conduct Better Meetings” [www.projectmgt.com].

⁴ Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise and Other Bribes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999).