



CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE TEAMS

by Eve Ash and Peter Quarry, Psychologists

More and more organisations around the world are turning to teams as a key way of structuring their operations. Whether they be ongoing work teams, self-directed teams, quality action teams or whatever, interest in how to build and maintain effective teams is increasing.

For a team to be effective in what it does and how it does it, five key characteristics must be present. The absence of any of these characteristics will pinpoint what a team needs to do to improve.

The five characteristics of effective teams are:

1. Clear Role and Specific Objectives

Every well-functioning team needs to have a clear role in its organisation. This role must be important and meaningful to team members. Absence of a clear role can lead team members to feel unmotivated - after all, if the team doesn't have a real purpose, what is the point of working?

But above and beyond a clear role, a team also needs specific objectives. These should include measurable performance indicators, so that the team can really evaluate how well it is going. Increasingly, the emphasis in measuring a team's performance is moving from what the team does to what the team achieves.

Well-functioning teams are identifying their internal and/or external customers or clients and measuring their performance in terms of how well they are meeting their customers' or clients' expectations.

2. Mutual Support

This may mean taking on extra tasks or activities, temporarily increasing workloads, being prepared to learn a variety of jobs to increase flexibility, or just pitching in when a problem comes up.

Unfortunately, team members often view their jobs rigidly and are reluctant to be flexible in either what they do or how they do it. They put their own needs and wants ahead of the team's needs. In a well-functioning team, it is the team's goals that are of paramount importance.

3. Learning from Mistakes

The way a team evaluates its own performance and deals with any aspects that are not satisfactory, is a good indicator of how well it has been built. A poorly built team spends little time reviewing its performance. When things go wrong team members avoid taking responsibility, instead blaming lack of resources, poor management, faulty equipment - everything and everyone else.

In a well-functioning team, when mistakes occur they are treated as opportunities, not threats. Problems are viewed as providing keys to open areas for improvement. Time is spent looking at what went wrong, and how this situation can be dealt with better next time. Team members take responsibility.

4. Shared Leadership

In traditional organisational structures, the boss, or manager, or leader is the person who is expected to carry out certain functions - defining the work, delegating, monitoring performance, training and coaching, giving feedback and solving problems.

In a team that is not functioning well, team members follow this traditional approach, leaving it up to the leader to lead.

In a well-built, well-functioning team, the leadership functions are shared by all team members, including the 'formal' leader. So if a team member needs some coaching, any other team member can, and will, take the initiative to help out. If someone is not pulling their weight, the others will not passively wait for the 'boss' to do something. They will do something about it. If there is a problem, everyone shares responsibility to act.

5. Open Communication

In a true well-built team, there is an open, trusting atmosphere which encourages honest communication. Team members do not gossip or complain about other team members behind their backs. Feedback, be it positive or negative, is given openly, frequently and directly. Team

members express their thoughts and feelings about the team and each other, focusing on specific work behaviour, not personalities. Team

members listen carefully, seeking clarification when necessary. Team members are skilled in resolving disputes or disagreements.

REFERENCE

Team Building, a video training package produced by Ash.Quarry Productions and distributed by Seven Dimensions Pty Ltd, ph: +61 3 9686 9677.

For more free articles and online resources, be sure to visit Seven Dimensions' website at
www.7dimensions.com.au.