SEVEN
KEYS
TO BUILDING GREAT
WORK TEAMS

1 COMMITMENT

Commitment to the purpose and values of an organization provides a clear sense of direction. Team members understand how their work fits into corporate objectives and agree that their team's goals are achievable and aligned with the corporate mission and values. Commitment is the foundation for synergy in groups.

This shared purpose provides a backdrop against which all team decisions can be viewed. The team develops goals with corporate priorities in mind. To reach an acceptable solution when conflict arises, the team focuses on aligning purpose, values, and goals.

To enhance team commitment, leaders might consider inviting each group to develop its mission, vision, and values statements that are in alignment with those of the corporation but reflect the individuality of each team. These statements should be visible and "walked" every day. Once a shared purpose is agreed upon, each group can develop goals and measures, focus on continuous improvement, and celebrate its success at important milestones. The time spent up front getting all team members on the same track will greatly reduce the number of derailments or emergency rerouting later on.

2 CONTRIBUTION

The power of an effective team is in direct proportion to the skills members possess and the initiative members expend. Work teams need people who have strong technical and interpersonal skills and who are willing to learn. Teams also need self-leaders who take responsibility for getting things done. But if a few team members shoulder most of the burden, the team runs the risk of member burnout or, worse, member turn-off.

To enhance balanced participation on a work team, leaders should consider three factors that affect the level of individual contribution: inclusion, confidence, and empowerment. The more individuals feel like part of a team, the more they contribute. To enhance feelings of inclusion, leaders need to keep work team members informed, solicit their input, and support an atmosphere of collegiality. If employees are not offering suggestions at meetings, invite them to do so. If team members miss meetings, let them know they were missed. When ideas — even wild ideas — are offered, show appreciation for the initiative.

Confidence in self and the team affects the amount of energy a team member invests in an endeavour. To breed confidence in a work team, leaders can highlight the talent, experience, and accomplishments represented on the team, as well as keep past team successes visible. The confidence of team members can be bolstered by providing feedback, coaching, assessment, and professional development opportunities.

Another way to balance contribution on a work team is to enhance employee empowerment. When workers are involved in decisions, given the right training, and respected for their experience, they feel enabled and invest more. It is also important to have team members evaluate how well they support the contribution of others.

3 COMMUNICATION

For a work group to reach its full potential, its members must be able to say what they think, ask for help, share new or unpopular ideas, and risk making mistakes. This can happen only in an atmosphere in which team members show concern, trust one

LEADERS NEED TO KEEP WORK GROUP TEAM MEMBERS INFORMED, SOLICIT THEIR INPUT, AND SUPPORT AN ATMOSPHERE OF COLLEGIALITY.

TEAM MEMBERS ARE KEENLY AWARE THAT AS PART OF A TEAM, EVERYTHING THAT THEY DO, OR DON'T DO, IMPACTS SOMEONE ELSE.

another, and focus on solutions, not problems. Communication — when it is friendly, open, and positive — plays a vital role in creating such cohesiveness.

To assess work performance, members must provide honest feedback, accept constructive criticism, and address issues head-on. To do so requires a trust level supported by direct, honest communication.

Positive communication impacts the energy of a work team. When members talk about what they like, need, or want, it is quite different from wailing about what annoys or frustrates them. The former energizes; the latter demoralizes.

To enhance team communication, leaders can provide training in listening, responding, and using language skills as well as in meeting management, feedback, and consensus building.

4 COOPERATION

In increasingly complex organizations, success depends upon the degree of interdependence recognized within the team. Leaders can facilitate cooperation by highlighting the impact of individual members on team productivity and clarifying valued team member behaviours.

The following F.A.C.T.S. model may serve as a guide for helping teams identify behaviours that support synergy within the work team.

Follow-through

One of the most common phrases heard in groups that work well together is: "You can count on it." Members trust that when a colleague agrees to return a telephone call, read a report, talk to a customer, attend a meeting, or change a behaviour, the job will be done. There will be follow-through. Team members are keenly aware that as part of a team, everything that they do, or don't do, impacts someone else.

Accuracy

Another common phrase heard in effective work groups is: "We do it right the first time." Accuracy, clearly a reflection of personal pride, also demonstrates a commitment to uphold the standards of the team, thus generating team pride.

Creativity

Innovation flourishes in a team when individuals feel supported by colleagues. Although taking the lead in a new order of things is risky business, such risk is greatly reduced in a cooperative environment where members forgive mistakes, respect individual differences, and shift their thinking from a point of view to a viewing point.

Timeliness

When work team members are truly cooperating, they respect the time of others by turning team priorities into personal priorities. They arrive for meetings on time, share information promptly, com-

municate succinctly, and ask: "Is this a good time?" before initiating interactions.

Spirit

Being on a work team is a bit like being part of a family. You can't have your way all of the time. To add value, you must develop a generous spirit. Leaders can help work teams by addressing these "rules" of team spirit: value the individual, develop team trust, communicate openly, manage differences, share successes, and welcome new members.

5 CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

It is inevitable that teams of bright, diverse thinkers will experience conflict from time to time. There may be misperceptions, ill feelings, old hurts, and misunderstandings. The problem arises not from the differences but in how they are managed.

Three techniques that help members shift obstructing paradigms are reframing, shifting shoes, and affirmations.

Reframing is looking at the glass half-full instead of half-empty. Instead of thinking "If I address this issue, it'll slow down the meeting," consider "If we negotiate this difference, trust and creativity will all increase."

Shifting Shoes is a technique used to practise empathy by mentally "walking in the shoes" of another person. You answer such questions as "How would I feel if I

TEAMS THAT CONNECT WELL WITH OTHER WORK GROUPS TYPICALLY THINK OF THOSE GROUPS AS "INTERNAL CUSTOMERS."

were that person being criticized in front of the group?" or "What would motivate me to say what that person just said?"

Affirmations are positive statements about something you want to be true. For example, instead of saying to yourself right before a negotiating session: "I know I'm going to blow up," force yourself to say: "I am calm, and prepared." If team members can learn to shift any negative mental tapes to more positive ones, they will be able to shift obstructing paradigms and manage conflict more effectively.

6 CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Tom Peters, in Thriving on Chaos, writes: "The surviving companies will, above all, be flexible responders that create market initiatives. This has to happen through people." It is no longer a luxury to have work teams that can perform effectively within a turbulent environment; it is a necessity. Teams must not only respond to change, but actually initiate it. To assist teams in the management of change, leaders should acknowledge any perceived danger in the change and then help teams to see any inherent opportunities. They can provide the security necessary for teams to take risks and the tools for them to innovate; they can also reduce

resistance to change by providing vision and information, and by modeling a positive attitude themselves.

7 CONNECTIONS

A cohesive work team can add value only if it pays attention to the ongoing development of three important connections: to the larger work organization, to team members, and to other work teams.

When a work team is connected to the organization, members discuss team performance in relationship to corporate priorities, customer feedback, and quality measures. Leaders can encourage such connection by keeping communication lines open.

When a work team has developed strong connections among its own members, peer support manifests itself in many ways. Colleagues volunteer to help, cover for each other in a pinch, congratulate each other publicly, share resources, offer suggestions for improvement, and find ways to celebrate together.

To develop and maintain connections, allow time before and after meetings for brief socialization to schedule team lunches, create occasional team projects outside of work, circulate member profiles, take training together, and provide feedback to one another on development.

Teams that connect well with other work groups typically think of those groups as "internal customers." They treat requests from these colleagues with the same respect shown to external customers. They ask for feedback on how they can better serve them. They engage in win-win negotiating to resolve differences, and they share resources such as training materials, videos, books, equipment, or even improvement ideas. To build stronger connections with other groups, work teams might consider: scheduling monthly cross-departmental meetings, inviting representatives to their own team meeting, and combining efforts on a corporate or community project.

To compete effectively, leaders must fashion a network of skilled employees who support each other to achieve corporate goals and deliver seamless service.

DBR