

SOLUTION: Strengthening Team Dynamics

THE EARLY DAYS OF A TEAM

At these first team meetings, there is often a hint of quietness and uncertainty around what the future holds for this new ensemble. Participating on a multi-disciplinary team may be a new concept for them and/or they may be skeptical about their ability to accomplish such a big and important purpose for their organization. The employee team members may even question, “Isn’t this the work of leaders?”

It may be helpful to enlighten the members as to how and why they were selected. These employees should know that leaders saw special qualities and passion in them. This team is not a place to “rehab” wayward employees, it is a place for the organization’s rockstars to contribute beyond the duties defined in their day-to-day job descriptions.

Even in small organizations, there will likely be people in the room who have never formally met. Allowing time for “getting to know you” type activities is time well spent in the early days.

Beyond getting to know each other, members must gain clarity around the purpose of the team and how it aligns with the organization’s mission and key strategies to fulfill that mission. The team’s purpose is what binds the members together.

At the start, it is good to give these new members the opportunity to gracefully “bow out” in the early months of the team if they don’t feel that it is right for them for any reason. The invitation to participate isn’t a life sentence or a condition of employment, it is a privilege that they can accept or decline after thoughtful consideration.

In the early months of a team, it may become obvious that there is a missing element on the team given its current makeup. An additional member or two may need to be added.



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New teams must also spend time clarifying the role and expectations of the team leaders(s) and the team members. This really focused on the employee-driven nature of the team.

The team leader's role is to lead the organizational aspects of team meetings. Since the team leader/facilitator is someone who is familiar with the organization's bureaucracy (e.g., how to change a policy, how to access resources, approval processes, etc.) the team leader/facilitator to be able to help navigate these processes so that the employee-driven team will not be slowed down, become frustrated, or unable to accomplish their purpose.

The team leader/facilitator does not do most of the talking at meetings and does not take on all of the work to be done at meetings or in between meetings. There will be work (aka "action assignments") to be done in between meetings. A high functioning employee-driven team is evidenced by each member of the team taking on action assignments that assist the team to accomplish their current improvement project(s). A red flag goes up if the leader of the team is leaving each meeting with a laundry list of things to do before the next meeting and the employee team members leave with simply the next meeting date, time, and location.

Team members need to consider what they can do to contribute to the team by way of taking on action assignments. Each team member is different in their set of skills and abilities. Team members will often volunteer for things that they are confident that they can do well. Yet, we also encourage team members to take on action assignments for things that are new to them or a bit out of their comfort zone. A supportive team will promote the growth and development of the individual members.

When team members are committing to action assignments, they must also consider how much time they can contribute to action assignments in between team meetings. To keep the progress of the team going, team members shouldn't under- or over-commit to action assignments. Each team member's "day job" will likely dictate how much time is available to them to work on team action assignments. The employee may want to have this conversation with their direct supervisor to determine how to fit team action assignments while still accomplishing their job tasks.



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Below is an example of an action assignment card. We recommend to teams that they have a stack of these printed on brightly colored paper and available at each meeting. Team members can take a blank action assignment card at the start of the meeting with the purpose of documenting their action assignment that arises out of the team's meeting.

<div><div>ACTION ASSIGNMENT CARD</div><div><div>Date: ____/____/____</div><div>I'm going to contribute to the team's work in this way:</div><div><div>Due Date: ____/____/____</div></div></div></div>

A new team, as an early action item, may want to develop a team charter that details such things as their purpose and their membership. This team charter should be reviewed at the start of each year and as new members join the team.

A fun first action of a team is the selection of their team's name. The Voice, Staff Matter Here, and the E.A.G.L.E.S. are examples of employee chosen names for Employee Experience Teams.



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OVERCOMING TEAM STRUGGLES

Teams may struggle episodically or chronically for a variety of reasons. Working on improving the aspects of team functioning, while continuing to make progress toward the completion of the team's action plans, can feel like quite a challenge.

Because there is a high likelihood that a team at any time may experience a struggle that will interfere with their team's successful completion of their action plans, the Steering Team can be on the watch for this on a regular basis. One primary responsibility of the Steering Team is to engage and empower employee-driven teams and to support their optimal functioning.

SOME OF THE MORE COMMON STRUGGLES OF TEAMS ARE OVERVIEWED BELOW.

Burdensome bureaucracy. This may be sensed as "everything is harder than it needs to be." It can refer to policies that required no less than twenty signatures before going into effect. It can be caused by layers and layers of committees in which approvals must be sought for even the smallest of changes in protocol or practice. It can be difficult to navigate processes to access even minimal funds for the team's work. Even with great team leaders assigned to assist with navigating this bureaucracy, it still proved to be burdensome for the teams.

Slipping into old ways of problem solving. Some teams may struggle episodically, or chronically, to work together to accomplish their action assignments. If this happens early in the team's work, it may derail the success of this team, or even the organization's perception that employee-driven teams can work. A common cause of this struggle can be attributed to the "old" and predominate method of how decisions and improvements were made in a "leader-driven" and not "employee-driven" manner. So, while the employee members of the team may have a great desire to lead improvements and were brought together to do so, other leaders (including the team leaders/facilitator) may take over the work by making the decisions and taking the majority of action steps toward making this change.

This can cause employee team members to become confused about what their role is and why the team even exists. They may feel unheard, unvalued, and unable to contribute to a change that ultimately, would affect their employee experience.



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Getting away from the team's purpose and plan. Some teams may experience action assignment “creep” or purpose “creep.” When you gather a great bunch of high performing employees who in the past may not have had a forum or structure to contribute their ideas and energy beyond their “day job,” they may take off on tangents that aren’t aligned with their team’s purpose and may distract them from accomplishing their annual action assignments.

Taking on too much at once. Sometimes the excitement that comes with empowerment of employees leads to them wanting to take on the world. And even when they are trying to accomplish aligns with their purpose, they are going to have trouble succeeding at too many things at once. Annual action plans should be on the higher end of difficulty and effort required, yet not impossible to accomplish in the timeframe allotted.

Struggles with attendance. Team meeting attendance can be a fickle thing. When it's problematic, there can be a host of reasons why. When putting together diverse teams, it can be challenging to find the sweet spot of when to meet. Schedules may not align. This problems takes creativity and willingness to keep working toward finding the best day and time or finding a rotating pattern that keeps members attending enough meetings to keep them engaged and feeling like they are contributing.

It can be that employees are well intended in their attempts to get to a scheduled meeting, and then something happens in their work world to make it not so. Their obligations to their “day job” may prevent them from getting to the meeting. This is where employee’s relationship with their direct supervisor is important. The employee should discuss with their supervisors regarding the best way to be released from their work assignment to be able to attend the meeting (and to complete any action assignments).

When a member has missed two meetings in a row, it should prompt the team leader/facilitator to reach out personally to the team member. The team leader/facilitator should avoid making assumptions as to why they’ve been absent from meetings. Ask. Listen. And then work toward resolution.

Keeping team members up-to-date on what they missed when they couldn’t be in attendance is important to keeping them engaged. As well, absent team members can still be engaged in taking on action assignments that come out of the missed meeting.

Negativity screams at you. Many of the changes that are championed by the teams involve the creation of new habits by those who work in the organization. In essence, behavior change. Which is the hardest change of all - in individuals and groups of individuals. In the early days of making such changes, it is normal for



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human beings to meet these changes with resistance. And often, that comes out in the form of negativity. Negativity is heard very loudly and has an impact on the team members. That negativity can cause team members to question their efforts. That negativity can cause them to stop at a point in which they fall short of reaching the critical mass needed to make a change stick.

Keep going. In the face of negativity, keep going. Look for the positive - it is there. It only whispers. You've got to listen carefully to find it. The normal change process requires you to circle back to initiatives over and over again until you reach more and more people with these new habits that create positive results.

Poor meeting mechanics. There's a lot of advice out there about how to make meetings more efficient and productive. The team leader/facilitator must pay attention to creating a quality experience for each member and the group as a whole.

A quality meeting experience leads to team members feeling more connected, valued, and fulfilled. Of course, there still must be a focus on achieving the meeting agenda and outcomes, but thoughtful meetings and productive ones don't have to be at odds.

A great habit is to open all meetings by each person present saying something positive (e.g., what they like most about being on the team, what progress was made since the last meeting, a story of the team's impact, etc.). Focusing on positivity has the ability to stimulate our brains to make us better at communicating, collaborating and critical thinking. All of this will make for a better frame of mind for a productive meeting.

How often your team meets depends on the amount of activity that needs to be organized through meetings. You don't want to meet just for the sake of meeting. There needs to be a clear purpose to meet. You want to meet often enough to keep your team engaged and inspired and keep the progress of your team moving forward toward its goals.

Many employee-driven teams meet for one hour on a bi-weekly basis for the first year, and often can back off to monthly after that first successful year of their efforts. Also, they may need to meet on an ad hoc basis during times of peak team activity.



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THE FOLLOWING MEETING ASSESSMENT TOOL MAY BE HELPFUL IN GUIDING YOUR TEAM TO BETTER MEETINGS.

Meeting Assessment Tool

- Is there a clearly defined purpose for each meeting that moves the team closer to a goal or propels a project further?
- For each meeting, is there the necessary preparation to achieve a very productive meeting (i.e., agenda, materials to be reviewed in advance, reports, completed action assignments, etc.).
- Is the team behaving as an employee-driven team? Are the ideas generated by the employees? Are the decisions made by the employee members? Are the employees taking on action assignments in between meetings? Is the team leader promoting these behaviors and actions in the members?
- Are the right people at the table? Who should be there that is not? What other stakeholders should be consulted or invited?
- Are there more efficient methods (i.e., project management tools/apps) other than a meeting to accomplish some/all of the team's work?
- Is the frequency and length of the meeting adequate to keep moving the goal or project forward toward the targeted deadline?



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Sample Team Member Commitment/Re-Commitment Statement

I, _____ hereby declare that I am committing to a (one or two or three) year term on the following team _____.

In doing so, I realize the following:

- I was chosen for this team for a reason. I am seen in my organization as a positive role model for inspiration and change. I will do my very best to be a positive role model in and out of my team meetings.
- My role on the team may change given the current Action Plan the team is working on. On some days, I may be an advisor. On some days, I will be accepting and acting on action assignments. I will do my very best to recognize my role and carry it out to my best ability. If I am not recognizing the role I am called to carry, I will listen to my teammates as they ask me to provide input and/or assist in the work at hand.
- It is my responsibility to champion the work of my team and the work of the other Journey teams. If I am in disagreement with the work of the teams, or in question of anyone else's work, I will be sure to ask clarifying questions without putting down the work of my teammates or of another team.
- It is my responsibility to show up for meetings whenever my work and home life permit me to. Should I have cause to miss a meeting I will take the necessary steps to stay up to date on what was missed and request an action assignment from my team's leader.
- I will collaborate with my direct supervisor if I am needing assistance in coordinating my schedule so that I can attend meetings and complete my action assignments for the team.
- During meetings, I will practice being in the moment and fully present so as not to waste my teammate's time. I will free myself from distractions such as my cell phone, etc.
- Before I leave a team meeting, I will make sure that my action assignment and due date are clear in my mind. I will do my very best to contribute to our team's work by completing action assignments by the deadline. I realize that at times, my only assignment may be to positively support the work of my team and the Journey overall.
- I will strive to uphold and champion the standards of behavior written by my peers. Knowing that a positive work environment takes three positives to every one negative, I will strive to behave in a positive manner and will support others in doing the same. I will call out negativity in my work environment when I see it happening. I seek to guard against the degradation and apathy that sometimes happens in a work environment because no one is willing to speak up in helpful and constructive ways.
- I believe in my organization and the people who make up this great place. I believe we can make it the best place to work and the best place for patients to receive care. I will hold that belief close in the midst of the day-to-day whirlwind and stressors.

With my very best intentions,



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Date

Inspired Team Member



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