

## A Purposeful Approach to Team Work

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Leading teams successfully requires an understanding of what teams are, when they are appropriate, and how to establish an environment in which they can thrive.

Not every task should be taken on by a team. Teaming is an intentional strategy used for specific circumstances, says Lane Glenn, dean of academic and student services at Oakland Community College in Michigan.

Glenn differentiates teams from work groups. (In most instances, Glenn considers academic departments work groups rather than teams.) Glenn uses the following criteria to define a team: a small number of people (fewer than 20, perhaps a few as six) with complementary skills ...

- who come together around a common purpose—a “performance challenge”
- who have the ability to hold each other mutually accountable
- who have a common working approach, which may take the form of ground rules or a charter.

Team leadership, unlike work-group leadership, is shared, depending on the tasks that need to be completed. For example, a creative team member might lead brainstorming sessions, while a team member with strong organizational skills might take a leadership role when it comes time to put together an action plan.

Unlike the products of work groups, the products of a team are mostly collective or joint efforts. And, when operating well, teams engage in open, honest dialogue and learn from mistakes in an atmosphere of trust, Glenn says.

Teams generally are formed to address a particular issue, which means that once the team finishes its task, the team will disband.

### **DECIDING ON WHETHER TO USE A TEAM**

Teams are not always necessary and can be counter-productive. When deciding on whether or not to use a team, consider the following questions. If the answer to most of these questions is yes, a team approach might be the answer:

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- Does the project or challenge you’re trying to address require collective outcomes from two or more people?
- Will leadership roles need to shift among the people involved as the team becomes involved in different aspects of the issue or project?
- Are team members mutually and individual accountable?
- Does the work cross departments within the institution?

## **BUILDING A TEAM**

Teams need to be a reasonable size, otherwise they will focus on the relationships among team members rather than the performance challenge, Glenn says. “At the same time, you need to be sensitive to the department having some degree of control over who is participating in these teams. It becomes a challenge at times to convince people that six or eight or 10 people can provide a reasonable voice for our campus. We are always balancing the commitment to shared governance and the deliberative process with the need for efficient decision making.”

Building an effective team takes time. “You’re not going to haul 12 people into a room and by the end of the day build yourself a cohesive team. It takes time to get to know one another and how team members’ skills will complement each other,” Glenn says. “When I’m selecting a team, I look for those complementary skills—technical ability, problem-solving ability, communication skills—and you usually don’t find all those skills in the same person.”

The team leader has the most control over influencing relationships, the tone, and the pace of communication, Glenn says. To do this, the leader needs to clearly communicate the rewards for moving in a particular direction. “Sometimes people need to see what’s in it for them. Where is the potential for success, either for their students or themselves? Everyone is motivated differently. In the case of assessment, for example, it’s the team leader’s responsibility to convince other team members that assessment is a necessary, helpful thing.

“You bring people along differently. Some are motivated by the idea that using assessment tools and techniques will lead to greater understanding among students. Some are motivated by mini-grant opportunities that will give them funding to do new things in their classrooms. Some are motivated by peer pressure. It is important for the leader in putting together a team to recognize all those different personalities and appoint team members appropriately. It’s almost like addressing student learning styles in the classroom: When trying to advance a cause with a team, you need to place things in the environment that are going to resonate with people who respond differently to incentives for participation.”

When teams first come together, team members need time to get to know each other. The team leader should spend time up front talking about working methods, styles, and how people function in a group. Glenn says that it may be worthwhile to have team members take a personality assessment like Myers-Briggs. If the team will be working together for a long time, it might also be worthwhile to invest in professional development in team work as well.

## **TEAM EFFECTIVENESS**

Meetings are an important part of team effectiveness, and they need to be structured to provide accountability and make the most use of the available time. Unlike a typical department meeting, which often devotes a large amount of time to old business and roundtable discussions, team meetings should be more action oriented, Glenn says, by

- maximizing the time spent discussing issues that need to be decided or brainstormed by the team
- minimizing simple information-sharing in meetings by discussing old business or distributing documents via e-mail.

If the team is relatively small, each member should come to each meeting prepared to discuss his or her role in the project, Glenn says.

Glenn recommends answering the following questions to assess team effectiveness:

- Are team members arriving at meetings on time?
- Are the team members prepared for meetings?
- Are the meetings organized?
- Does the team follow the meeting agenda?
- Do team members contribute equally? (Everybody should have role to play. After four or five meetings, each team member should be assigned at least one task.)
- Does the team commit to decisions?
- Is the team achieving the desired results?

## **COMMON TEAM DYSFUNCTIONS**

According to Patrick Lencioni, the leading causes of team failure are absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. Teams need to find ways to avoid these dysfunctions. Glenn recommends the following:

- **Absence of trust**—If members are not forthcoming in meetings or say things like, “I can’t trust the group to respect my opinion,” or “I can’t trust the team to keep what was said in the room confidential,” the team lacks trust. To resolve this, Glenn recommends identifying and discussing strengths and weaknesses and spending more time together as a team.
- **Fear of conflict**—Although most people don’t enjoy conflict, it is important to acknowledge that conflict is required sometimes to get through an issue, Glenn says. To deal with conflict effectively, the team needs to discuss each member’s conflict styles and to establish ground rules at the beginning for how the team will work through conflict.
- **Lack of commitment**—Review each team member’s responsibilities at the end of each meeting and ensure that all team members are aligned, Glenn says.
- **Avoidance of accountability**—“State explicitly what the team’s goals are going to be; regularly discuss progress toward those goals; and continually emphasize as a group how important it is to meet these goals for the success of the project and the satisfaction of the team,” Glenn says.
- **Inattention to results**—Keep the team focused on tangible goals and reward individuals on successes, Glenn says.

Shaping the environment is a long-term process. It may take three or four efforts at team building before the team starts to understand why focusing on the team process is important. The team-building process can help create a productive environment in which team members speak openly and honestly, deal with problems professionally, share expertise, and feel like they contributed. When that happens, future team efforts will be more productive, Glenn says.

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