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## How to Build Strong, Cohesive Teams (by Jeff Davidson)

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Whether handpicked, assigned, or some combination of the two, team members need to get to know one another. First-time team leaders can be overly eager to tackle the tasks at hand. The longer the project, the more critical it is to devote time and effort in the early stages to forming bonds between team members, defining and clarifying roles, and simply getting to know one another as individuals. From there, communication patterns emerge. You can more easily formulate a schedule that all team members understand and follow.

Getting-to-know-you sessions allow and encourage team members to speak up, share their views, and feel at ease about being on the team. Particularly for long campaigns, it makes sense to establish an orientation plan.

### Orientation Sensation

The time and energy you invest in helping team members to establish bonds with one another and to feel as if they're part of a cohesive unit is seldom wasted. The payoff comes in the level of cooperation among team members.

If some or all of your team members already know each other, then obviously the time you have to invest in orientation can be shorter than if a group of complete strangers is getting together for the first time. In either case though, it behooves you to review the fundamentals, such as who reports to whom, how resources are allocated, how we order supplies, and so on. The more issues you can air at the outset, the greater your probability of heading off potential problems downstream, such as individual power-plays, hidden agendas, and bottled up frustrations.

As the new team is assembled, don't be afraid to call upon each member of the group during orientation and have him or her introduce themselves. If team members already know one another instead each team member can speak about what he or she would like to accomplish, or air any concerns he or she may have.

### Ground Rules for All

When it's your time to speak, after saying a little about yourself, focus on the team ground rules, such as how time will be allocated and money will be spent. Also talk about the internal hierarchy within the team, in the case where some team members may be reporting to others, rather than to you. Team members may have more questions that need to be addressed, such as:

- Can we get in touch with you after hours?
- Will other team members be added later?
- What if we need to add outside resources?
- How do we authorize payments for needed supplies or equipment?
- Where will we store project resources?
- To what degree can we share team information with outsiders?

If it helps, establish common terminology, so that team members know the difference between, say, putting a rush on something versus handling it as soon as possible. Craft your own exhibits such as the example shown below and share them group wide so that everyone is singing from the same hymnal!

## A Hierarchy of Requests

1. **As Soon As Possible ASAP:** Drop everything, and finish as quickly as you can.
2. **High(est) Priority:** Put this at the top of your to-do list.
3. **Please Rush:** Please complete this and report back quickly.
4. **Priority:** Put this task high up on your to-do list.
5. **Crucial:** Handle this when you can, but soon.
6. **For Your Information:** Look at it once, when, and if you want to.

As you can begin to see, by surfacing basic operational issues at the outset, burdens that you alone may have had to assume can be alleviated.

## Head 'Em off at the Pass

You're not omniscient. You can't think of everything. It is to your extreme benefit to have team members conversing, sharing ideas, and surfacing issues early in the game. In general, issues identified at early-round meetings help to head off problems that likely would have emerged later. Everyone wants to feel as if he/she is a valuable addition to the team.

No one wants to be completely managed. People prefer to feel as if they are in a collaborative situation. They are more than willing to acknowledge you as the team leader, but they don't want you to be autocratic in any way, shape, or form. Their highest level of contribution often directly relates to the degree to which they believe managerial type information is shared freely with them. Especially in the case where you've assembled a number of get-it-done types on your team, you're going to find that people don't want to work in a vacuum.

A competent and responsible professional staff increasingly seeks to gain access to the reports and management documents that you, as team leader, are privy to. If you've been a play-it-closely-to-the-chest type of manager until now, you may want to let go of the reins a little.

## Charting Progress Individually and Collectively

To increase the propensity that you're all working in unison, with the same final objective in mind, each team member needs to have some access to the project management tools that you employ, such as Gantt or Milestone charts, Pert charts, flow charts, calendar tracking, and any other types of project management or scheduling software. When team members have the opportunity to review Gantt or Pert charts and can observe how their current progress precisely impacts the progress of fellow team members, the probability increases that each team member will perform as required. After all, no one wants to look at a chart and discover that he or she is holding up the works!

Project management charts offer a pictorial look at how individual team member contributions support the overall project. Often, meetings, discussions, memos, and messages can't convey the same immediate impact.

As I stated in *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Change Management*, "When all players have a vivid understanding of their roles and how they are interrelated, then group cohesiveness, uniformity, and peer pressure can generate significant input."

As much as anything, remaining on the project's schedule is fueled by each team member realizing the importance of his individual role, how responsibilities interconnect, and what it means to the team as a whole to stay on track. As team leader, once you're assured that each of your team members possesses this level of realization, the potential for you to complete this project on time and within budget rises markedly. Peer pressure alone can often do the trick!

## Telling the Truth Works Wonders

Once you've successfully recruited talented staff, you maintain your passion. Until they embrace the project as their own, team members will feed off of your energy. Thereafter, you'll know if you've assembled a winning staff when their energies feed off of one another, much like a baseball team proceeding toward the pennant in late September.

Just as you were truthful in recruiting skilled and talented employees to be part of your team, it pays to be truthful as you proceed along the path to getting something done.

When you leave out critical facts, or paint a rosy picture on how the team is progressing, you can actually impede performance because you're preventing your staff members from seeing reality. In other words, how can each of your team members succeed at their assigned roles if they don't know the true situation they face? So, as your project ensues, telling the truth becomes more vital than merely relating good news.

*Jeff Davidson is "The Work-Life Balance Expert®" and the leading personal brand in speaking, writing, and reflecting on work-life balance issues. He's spoken to U.S. Fortune 50 companies such as IBM, Cardinal Health Group, and Lockheed; and to American Express and Westinghouse. He wrote *Simpler Living*, *Breathing Space*, and *Dial it Down—Live It Up*, among other books. Visit [www.BreathingSpace.com](http://www.BreathingSpace.com)*