Effective Team Leadership

You've been assigned to a team yet again. Almost instantly, feelings of dread and frustration from past teamwork experiences start bubbling to the surface of your consciousness. Your stomach is in knots, and you've already convinced yourself it's going to be a complete disaster.

Glancing at your calendar, you wonder how you'll be able to fit in all the extra work that will be dumped on you because your team members aren't going to pull their weight. With a big sigh, you decide that if you don't step in and take over, nothing will get done, and the team won't meet its goals.

Sound Familiar?

Most of us can easily recall a negative experience when working as part of a team. That doesn't mean that all teams are bad or ineffective. Nor does it mean you should bring your past baggage, including your fears and attitudes, to every future team.

There's no formula that will magically make you a great team leader and make teams run smoothly and efficiently all the time. But, of course, you have to start somewhere, so here are some basic but important steps you can take.

Step 1. Know Yourself

Before you think about the needs of your team, think about the strengths and weaknesses you bring to the table. How do you like to receive information? How do you best communicate? Are you an introvert or an extrovert? What really motivates you? In answering these questions, you can start to get a better understanding of your team leadership style.

Professional and personal self-awareness are critical for effective leadership. By knowing what makes you "tick," you can be more effective at understanding others and how best to interact with them.

Step 2. Make Time to Lead

As a team leader, you already have a lot of responsibilities on your plate. It's critical that

you create time and opportunities to be visible to your team members, offering your support.

This might mean that you schedule time on your calendar to visit team members in person, have virtual "office hours," or do something else that allows you to invest time in the people you're leading. Simply put, without that time investment, you're not going to develop the relationships and trust needed to effectively lead your team.

Step 3. Know Your People

As you make time to engage with your team, make sure you're intentional about getting to know each one of them. In particular, try to determine what motivates each person and where they have strengths or weaknesses.

Team leadership is a little bit like assembling a puzzle, pairing employees who make each other stronger or make up for each other's weaknesses. It also means knowing how to select the right person for any given role or project. All of this requires real knowledge of the team, both individually and collectively.

Often, though, individuals are "assigned" to teams for reasons other than their relevant strengths, weaknesses, knowledge, and skills, and this is out of your control. When this happens, you have to be more intentional about understanding each person on the team and making it work.

Step 4. Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

It's no secret that communication is one of the most important skills to have in your role as a team leader. This includes being intentional in the way you communicate.

Set expectations. Be clear about your team's mission and purpose. Let others know how they can connect with you and when. It's always better to over-communicate than under-communicate.

On the flip side, listen, and listen well. Not all of your team members will be comfortable speaking up in meetings or even one-on-one. Pay attention to who dominates the floor during meetings, and ensure that everyone has a chance to be heard. Ask open-ended questions to engage others and solicit their ideas.

Step 5. Don't Do It All Yourself

Don't repeat the mistakes of past teamwork experiences, and don't assume you can do it all yourself. All leaders need to delegate. Trust the people around you to step up and do great work, freeing some of your time to lead! Part of making this happen is being clear with your team about expectations, goals, and deadlines—as well as the consequences of not meeting them.

If you don't trust your team members to do good work, or if you're anxious about delegating to them, that's a problem. If you can't trust the people on your team, then it's hard to justify why they're on your team at all. Learn to share your responsibilities with others, but also make sure you constantly surround yourself with good people!

If you're in a situation where your team is chosen without your input and you're struggling with delegation, go back to steps one through three. Spend more time getting to know yourself and your team members upfront so you can better plan how to reach your goals in the coming weeks or months.

Step 6. Be Thoughtfully Decisive

To be an effective team leader, you ultimately have to make some decisions. That doesn't mean you should be reckless. On the contrary, it's important to review the available data, think critically, and make a wise decision.

What you shouldn't do is agonize over every decision to the point where you're wasting time. Sooner or later, you have to move forward with a decision and all its related consequences.

Effective team leadership isn't something you can achieve overnight. In fact, it's something you can spend a lifetime mastering. The best team leaders know that providing vision and motivation to a team isn't something you ever perfect, but rather an area for continuous improvement. Sometimes you'll get it right, and when you do, celebrate. Sometimes you'll get it wrong, and when you do, be sure to learn from it.

Sources

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