LEADING A HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAM

BY RANDALL S. PETERSON

No matter where you work, teams are an inevitable fact of life — partly because they can achieve things that no one individual can, partly because they are oftentimes a forum for resolving conflict, and partly because an effective team gives its members a sense of belonging. Teams are the fundamental building blocks of human civilisation. They sit at the heart of our everyday lives. But that does not make them easy to lead. Indeed, because they are doing such important work is part of why they are difficult to lead effectively. So are there any basic and straightforward principles for leading a high performance team? Research has indeed revealed some basic principles and one hundred plus years of scholarly research suggests five simple keys to leading high performance teams.

ASSEMBLE A DIVERSE TEAM

Diversity matters — if you don't have all of the perspectives around the table, you can reach resolution, but you'll never really solve the bigger problems, and you'll never have all of the necessary skills combined to resolve the issues. So, assemble a team that is diverse in skillset as well as one that represents all of the stakeholders you need to involve.

START BY BUILDING TRUST

Once you have built a diverse team you'll need to combine those different views, perspectives, knowledge, experience, interests, motives and personality types to get the job done. Your next challenge is to build a team that has the capacity to deal with the issues. It is easy to see the absolutely central role of trust. When there is trust, people can disagree about a task or process without it turning personal. Without trust, people tend to interpret things in the worst possible light. Start your team by building trust before you move onto decision making and action. If you start with decisions rather than building relationships, you'll likely experience unhelpful conflict pretty quickly. With low trust levels, members will then start thinking: "I'm really different from them." Then they start disliking each other, which leads to a further decline in trust and poor group performance.

GUARD AGAINST COORDINATION FAILURE

People talk and operate at cross purposes, even within the same organisation. Someone from marketing will talk about a topic, and may even use some of the same words, in a completely different way to someone in operations. We may think we're talking about the same thing, but it turns out we're not. I'm talking feet and inches and you're hearing centimetres and metres. Teams with diverse information, perspectives and values are likely to experience these kinds of coordination failures early on. And research shows teams are very good at dividing up work and pulling apart, while being notoriously bad at putting those pieces back together again. Once a coordination problem occurs, team members tend very quickly to start explaining it by looking for people who are different. So, why did this not work? Why are we having problems? It's not simply that we come from different worlds, it's because that person looks different, they have different values to me, and it's obviously their fault that this is not working.

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So the challenge is to create coordination early on, watch out for problems and, if they do come up, avoid finding fault and focus more on how to work together going forward and ensure this coordination failure doesn't happen again.

HAVE A CLEAR DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Clearly the best situation is a cohesive group that agrees with the decision. But in reality it is rare that everyone will come to complete consensus on a single plan of action. When you are struggling to get agreement, which is most of the time, there are three options. The best option is qualified consensus: everybody can live with the decision, even if they may not think it is the best. Second-best is that the matter is discussed and the team leader decides. The advantage is that this doesn't disenfranchise or disconnect any subgroup that perhaps doesn't like the result. It maintains a relationship between the leader and the individuals so is it a better, more reasonable way of going about things.

What you should actively avoid is the third option: majority rule. Most people think this works because it is a well-known form of democracy. But it's associated with really angry people, disenfranchised or disconnected subgroups, and really poor team performance.

MANAGE CONFLICT BY BEING PRE-EMPTIVE AND PLURALISTIC

With all these challenges you might well be thinking: "Why bother with teams at all?" And indeed one of the reasons I started studying teams and conflict was because I couldn't understand how groups of really great people can come together and make bad decisions. But much of it revolves around how they manage conflict, or in many cases how they don't manage conflict.

The secret to managing conflict is to tackle it head-on, by being pre-emptive — that is anticipating the types of conflict that might emerge in the team and pre-empt the negative effects of those conflicts before they happen. Secondly, you need to create conflict resolution strategies that focus on what is good for the group versus what is good for specific individuals within the group. Overall, if you can keep focused on these five basic principles, you'll have a much better chance of looking back on your team experiences with appreciation rather than frustration, and anticipation for the next opportunity rather than dread. That still won't make leading a high performance team easy, but just

remember that nothing worthwhile is ever that easy. Prof. Peterson, London Business School, will be in Brussels for an exclusive leadership programme with colleagues from Insead, Saïd at Oxford University, Esade Barcelona, London School of Economics. Organised by Global and Diplomatic World. For more information and deadlines go to www.globalmagevents.com

Additional Reading
• Ferguson, A. J., & Peterson, R. S. (2015). Sinking slowly: Diversity in propensity to trust predicts downward trust spirals in small groups. Journal of Applied Psychology, 100(4): 1012-1024. doi: 10.1037/apl0000007
• Peterson, R. S., & Ferguson, A. J. (2014). Strategies for Developing Trust Through Constructive Conflict Resolution in Teams. In O.B. Ayoko, N. Ashkanasy & K. A. Jehn (Eds), Handbook of Conflict Management, p. 193-204. Cheltenham, UK.: Edward Elgar.
• Behfar, K. J., Peterson, R. S., Mannix, E. A., & Trochim, W. M. K. (2008). The critical role of conflict resolution in teams: A close look at the links between conflict type, conflict management strategies, and team outcomes. Journal of Applied Psychology, 93, 170-188. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.93.1.170

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