

Team Leadership

Some Guidelines for Making It Work



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by Kendall L. Stewart M.D.

Introduction

Teams rule. At least they can and should rule. But for all the talk about teamwork, it is rare in most organizations. Managers are hesitant to give up control. Executives are reluctant to do more than talk about empowerment. Then too, not every front-line employee wants to be empowered. Teamwork is hard. It is much easier to show up, get your list, just do it and go home. It requires little thinking, a minimum amount of stress and almost no emotional commitment. It also produces little real satisfaction.

Mindless assembly line jobs are disappearing. The increasing demand for quality, service and customization means that the customer is more important than ever before. The fortunes of today's organizations rise and fall at the customer interface. The only organization that can consistently attract and hold on to the employees dedicated to customer satisfaction that these times demand is a company led, supported and represented by effective leadership teams.

This paper is about building effective leadership teams using the Team Leadership Model (TLM) as implemented at Southern Ohio Medical Center (SOMC). This model of operational structure, focus, accountability and documented outcomes grew out of early experiments with leadership teams here. It calls for interdisciplinary teams at every organizational level. These teams do not supplant the manager's role. They augment and support that role.

TLM continues to evolve. Those leaders who have adopted and refined it believe it has made their departments more effective, improved their relationships with their colleagues and enhanced their effectiveness. Following are some practical guidelines that will assist directors in implementing this model successfully in their business units.

Adopt the right attitude

Your success will depend on your conviction that effective teams are critical to your personal success. Some managers have an awful time giving up control. They long to micro-manage every aspect of their department's activities. These controlling leaders hoard critical information, thrive on secrecy, suck up to superiors, issue cryptic orders and become enraged when they are not carried out unquestioningly. If this descriptive shoe fits, your managerial instincts may hobble you. It doesn't mean that you cannot succeed in a team leadership environment, but it won't come naturally. You won't be comfortable. You will need to find a mentor who will challenge you when your old attitudes and behaviors emerge and begin to strangle the individual

freedoms that are essential to team effectiveness.

Leaders most eager to embrace this leadership model take the view that it doesn't matter who gets the credit—it is the result that matters. These leaders view themselves as coaches. The employees they support are the stars. Leadership stars in this business environment are facilitators instead of dictators. They honestly believe that teams are more likely to get to the real problems, discover practical solutions, implement action plans and measure the results than corseted individuals are. Facilitative managers are not passive. It is just that they focus on conducting while relying on talented musicians to bring the score alive. The most effective managers were effective team players before they became managers,

and they are committed followers as well as leaders.

Organize the departmental leadership team

In every department or business unit, there are a few formal and informal leaders whose support is essential to the department's success. These are the people you will need to have on board if you expect to get something significant done. These are the natural leaders you will want to recruit and retain. Those leadership teams that do not enjoy executive support are not as likely to succeed. For this reason, you will want to recruit at least one executive champion to your leadership team.

Effective leadership teams meet regularly but briefly. The agenda is tightly scripted. This is not the forum for brainstorming, grandstanding or bellyaching. This group focuses instead on performance. These leaders demand action and they are accountable to each other. When an issue is decided in this group, there should be no additional organizational hurdles to vault. When a commitment is made, results are produced or the other members will expect to know why not. This group identifies key performance measures and follows them closely. They agree on priorities and expect to see documented progress every time they meet. A position on an effective leadership team is one of the most exciting seats in business, but it is no easy chair.

Conduct an annual retreat

This annual brainstorming retreat is the foundation of the team leadership model. This is where problems are aired openly, opportunities are identified and where the 10 or 12 most talented leaders in your department take the greatest organizational risks possible – talking frankly and listening non-judgmentally. Working together outside the usual business environment promotes comradeship among colleagues who don't usually have the opportunity to work together that closely, and deepens relationships ordinarily limited to sterile business exchange.

Such retreats are not mere social opportunities. Real work is accomplished. The day begins with a review of the previous year's goals and accomplishments. This is a time of celebration and renewed commitment. Customer satisfaction data and a review of the current key indicators set the stage for the general brainstorming that follows. Ideally, retreat groups identify 100-150 important issues in the first hour and a half. After a break, the group fits these issues into six to eight natural categories, and the leaders in the room volunteer

to lead each of the emerging specialized teams. The retreat ends with these leaders prepared to take their issues back to their teams where, with the manager's support and guidance, priorities are determined, goals are agreed upon, outcome measures are identified and action plans are launched.

Organize and support specialized teams

Those people who take on a specific category of departmental challenges are perfectly positioned to make a difference if they are selected carefully, directed adequately and supported appropriately. First, they are at the front lines and they know what is really going on.

Second, they care. The issues they are wrestling with affect their everyday work lives. Third, they are the opinion leaders in the trenches. Since every organizational campaign stands or falls at the front lines, you cannot fail to make these crucial specialized teams successful.

Here's how to do it. Choose the people who will get the job done. In deciding whom to invite to the annual retreat, you have already picked your team leaders. You must give them some leeway to choose their team, but you shouldn't leave these important selections entirely up to them. Consult with your team leaders about who they believe would be good team players. They may feel considerable peer pressure to choose certain colleagues who would be poor choices, and the opportunity to hide behind your "final decision" may give them just the political cover they need to exclude negative and disruptive persons from the team. Every organizational leader is obligated to field the best team he or she can even when such choices are painful or politically incorrect.

Enlist executive support

Executives must be managed too. You cannot just assume that executives will read your mind, offer support when you need it and stay out of your way the rest of the time. Like everyone else, executives act on the information available and in the emotional context of the moment. These people think they are in charge. They believe they are supposed to make decisions. Watch out for these folk. Unmanaged executives can be dangerous to your health and career.

When possible, arrange for your executive to serve on your leadership team. This puts the executive in the process where he or she will become better informed and an accountable participant in the team's work. If your executive cannot attend your leadership team regularly, make sure that he or she

gets a copy of the monthly key indicator presentation and the running list of your team's accomplishments. Meet with him or her regularly to explain the data, what problems you expect to attack next and exactly what support you require. This is critical. If you know you are going to run into stiff opposition and you suspect that others will try to go over your head to the boss, clarify your position up front and get approval to proceed. Extract a pledge that the executive will hold the line when the malcontents come calling. If you are going out on a limb, build a nest and invite company over.

Give your team members the training and support they need

So far, this is pretty straightforward, but the success or failure of this leadership model is in the details. Ensuring that your team leaders are successful is one of those critical details. You already know that getting a group of people together does not produce an effective team, but your new team members may not know where to start. If they have served on a leadership team before, make sure that they get the training they need. Even more important than training, they will need support and encouragement about how to proceed and what to do when the team runs aground. Be very clear about what you expect your leadership team to accomplish while resisting the urge to tell the team exactly how to do it.

As the operational leader of your department, you must make your leadership team meetings a priority. You can miss a meeting from time to time so long as an equally passionate team member agrees to lead that meeting, but if you miss several meetings everyone will assume your heart is not in this effort. Make sure to clarify next steps before each meeting concludes. Assign responsibility for each item. Don't fail to follow up on each objective at the next meeting. When you make a commitment to help the team reach a particular goal, they expect you to stick to it.

Arrange for infrastructure support

Don't underestimate the importance of supporting leadership team members. The success of this model depends heavily on data, demonstrated outcomes and effective communication to all levels of your department and the larger organization. It is your responsibility to see that consistent agendas are prepared, understandable minutes are distributed in a timely fashion, data are collected and arrayed, accomplishments are documented and key performance indicators are kept up to date. This is a considerable task, often overlooked or taken for granted. You cannot afford to do either. Since this is too big a job for any one person, you will have to coordinate

the efforts of several people. No matter how creative or hardworking your team members, they will not continue to push themselves if they cannot see the results of their efforts on a regular basis.

Effective managers, in search of the information they need to make the case that they are fully engaged, leave nothing to chance. In building the infrastructure support you require, you will ensure that the same organizational infrastructure is available to your colleagues, and you will model leadership excellence.

This challenge will put your organizational skills to the test. Begin with what you expect to present at the monthly leadership team meeting. At a minimum, you must present the key indicators, the accomplishments realized during the past month, and specific follow-up to issues that were raised at the previous meeting. Now ask yourself where you will get that information. Go to these people and tell them exactly what you need and when you need it. Obtain their commitment to deliver it. Do not expect others to read your mind. And don't think you can communicate with these persons just once. Creating productive routines demands persistence and repetition. Effective managers, in search of the information they need to make the case that they are fully engaged, leave nothing to chance. In building the infrastructure support you require, you will ensure that the same organizational infrastructure is available to your colleagues, and you will model leadership excellence.

Set priorities and stick to them

Since everything can't be done at once, every team's early task is to decide what should be tackled first and what should be left for later. As a practical matter, most highly functioning teams can expect to address ten substantial issues at the most during the year. After all, ongoing operations have to be sustained and there will always be those organizational fires that must be extinguished. Failure to decide on priorities early in the process will leave everyone feeling overwhelmed and demoralized.

Generally speaking, it is best for new teams to tackle the "low-hanging fruit" first. Addressing the quick and easy issues allows for some early success and a growing confidence that this team may really make a difference. Confronting the most difficult issue first will increase the chances of

team failure. Failures will occur and they need not be fatal, but experienced team members only come to realize this through time and experience. Seasoned troops are more likely to take the tough hills. Getting your best potential soldiers slaughtered in their first battle is tactically flawed and strategically foolish. If you stick to your priorities and save the toughest battles until later instead of being goaded into a premature assault on some emotional fortress, you will have a better chance of breaching that wall down the road.

Document and publicize accomplishments

There are two problems with organizational accomplishments. There are too few of them and, when they occur, we tend to forget them in our preoccupation with the challenges of the moment. It is important for teams and entire organizations to reflect on what has been accomplished instead of focusing solely on “what have you done for me lately?” One of the greatest dangers of the Team Leadership Model (TLM) is that everyone can get so enmeshed in the process of teamwork that they forget that the point is, after all, to get something done.

It is your job to stay focused on what is getting done and to make sure that your team leaders stay focused on the same goal. Many team leaders will report with satisfaction that “we have been meeting to consider that,” but you must not accept this as an outcome. It is just a statement of process. You must insist that they actually get something done. This is hard to do. They are working hard and they believe that should count. It doesn't. Only results count. When they do accomplish something and document it, take time to celebrate. Make it clear that this is what you expect every month. Make sure that the entire department hears about these accomplishments repeatedly and that the entire organization is informed about the team's ongoing achievements.

Identify and monitor key performance indicators

These are measures that matter. The leadership team will want to review up to a dozen indicators each month that reveal whether the business unit is being managed effectively. The specialized teams may wish to select key indicators too. It is not always easy to select these key performance measures since there are an infinite number of things to measure. Measuring takes time and energy and you must make sure that the resulting metric is worth the effort and expense. It is easy to forget that when we are doing something, we are not doing something else. Whether we are doing the right thing—not whether we are busy—is what matters.

When everyone agrees that you are measuring the right things and that these measures are at the very heart of the department's goals and objectives, they must be monitored carefully and communicated widely. They should be presented and discussed at every departmental meeting, posted everywhere and published every month in the departmental newsletter. Most of these measures should include targets or comparison values. Most should include trend lines since month-to-month variations are often misleading. Also, there should be enough history to make the trend lines meaningful. Over a period of time, everyone in the department will realize that these performance indicators are the targets they must shoot for, and their individual performances will start to fall in line with the objectives being measured and publicized.

Use benchmarks to compare your performance

Effective teams are not satisfied with merely improving their performance. They want to measure themselves against the best teams in the world. Most organizations are wrestling with similar problems and some have found a better way. These organizations are increasingly publishing their data and sharing their methodology. This is the only way the best teams can force themselves to continue to improve. By giving away their competitive advantage, they force themselves to move to the next level. You may have to do the research yourself. Whatever you are working on, some national or regional group is probably struggling with the same issue. You can usually find out about these efforts on the Internet or through consultation with your colleagues. Colleagues who share your passion for excellence have discovered sources of helpful information that they are eager to share. Nothing will ignite a team's competitive fire quicker than evidence that it has the potential to achieve at a world-class level.

Learn from other teams

When you have your teams in place and you are beginning to understand the problems you face, you may want to take time to visit with peers that are further advanced in their quest for demonstrated excellence. All of the ideas that have worked for them won't work for you, but your consultations will produce new ways of seeing the problems that may suggest creative solutions to both of you. They may have found resources you have not yet considered, and they may have fallen into some of the same traps that are awaiting you. This is why one or two site visits or membership in an appropriate professional society is such a good investment.

Maintain a small library of resource material in your office and invite others to contribute to it. Make yourself the local expert on the issues in your department. Specialized, practical knowledge is an important key to leadership success.

Make the most of your collaboration. Take careful notes and make them available to those who could not attend. Keep a notebook of ideas and refer to it often. Keep a list of telephone numbers and email addresses nearby for follow-up questions. Maintain a small library of resource material in your office and invite others to contribute to it. Make yourself the local expert on the issues in your department. Specialized, practical knowledge is an important key to leadership success. Just being a manager is not enough. You must bring something else of value to the team table.

Understand and manage team dynamics

High performing teams are among the most productive machines any organization can deploy but they are difficult to acquire, expensive to maintain, challenging to service and complicated to use. Inadequately burnished, they rust from within, imploding to worthless rubble, spreading canker to everyone that touches them. There is nothing better than a good team, nothing worse than a bad one.

Teams are rarely self-sustaining and they cannot be run from a distance. You must become personally involved. At the very least, you must mentor the team leader adequately. Any group of people is inherently unstable. Otherwise capable team members are tempted to pursue personal agendas, indulge in editorializing, lose focus and go off on tangents, or to sulk or withdraw in protest when things don't go their way. Applying balm to bruised egos, minimizing embarrassing gaffes, declining to get emotional with everyone else and gently directing the group back to the task at hand with equal measures of humor and firmness are just a few of the facilitating strategies you must master and pass on to others.

Hold yourself and others accountable

Even highly motivated leaders are more inclined to stand and talk instead of stand and deliver. It's not that you intend to put things off or lack good intentions. Over-promising and under-performing is so common that it has come to be expected. No one seriously expects a politician to deliver on

promises, but we do expect that leader to tell us what we want to hear. This expectation that every complex problem must have its simple solution is part of the problem. The tendency to take on too much at one time is another. Many of us leave meetings without making clear commitments about what each of us will accomplish by the next meeting. This diffusion of responsibility can result in no one taking any responsibility for anything. This is one of the major criticisms of teams. It is too often a justified criticism.

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How can you resist the temptation to drift aimlessly from one meeting to another? Keep a writing instrument in your hand. Make it clear what you will accomplish by the next meeting and then write it down. Don't let the discussion of an issue end without asking, "What are the next steps? Who is accountable for this?" Make sure that the minutes reflect who has promised to do what by the next meeting. At the beginning of every meeting, circle the commitments from the previous meeting and ask the responsible person about each one. Be forthright when you believe that a personal commitment is premature. By your silence you may imply that you are ready to go along with a hasty consensus before you have adequately reflected on an issue.

Deal with distractions

Distractions are the bugs on every team's windshield. The faster you drive the more they splat in your face, obscuring the view and shifting your focus from the road ahead to the mess right in front of you. The one thing you can depend on at every meeting is the presence of distractions. Unexpected complications occur. Feelings get hurt. Insecure people won't feel loved. Strong personalities impose their wills on the group. Personal struggles intrude on group process and team members find it hard to concentrate. Not every item on the agenda is fascinating to everyone in the room. Sustaining group focus in the face of this endless blizzard of distractions is a huge challenge, but it must be done.

Deal with your own distractions before you try to help others with theirs. If they observe you showing up to the meeting on

time, focused and prepared, they will realize that this is the expectation. Make notes about the points you want to make so you can make those points clearly and succinctly. Before you are asked, describe your accomplishments since the previous meeting. Keep the rest of the team on task by asking direct, clarifying questions in a respectful way that makes it clear that you will be following up to confirm that everyone is keeping his or her commitments. When the conversation starts to drift, call attention to it without scolding. When other team members take up this good habit, thank them publicly for assisting the team in bringing current priorities back into focus. This increases the likelihood that they will do it again and that others will look for an opportunity to lend such a hand.

Centralize the data management functions

The success of TLM depends on accurate data published in a consistent, understandable way. It is important that persons managing the data understand how important this is. When you present data to any audience in the organization, your credibility is on the line. If listeners discover a mistake, they will start to question all of the data you present. When that occurs, your persuasive goose is pretty much cooked. Most people will only invest a few seconds trying to understand a table or a chart. Its message had better be clear right away. Not everyone who can generate a PowerPoint slide can use those technical skills to communicate effectively.

For these important reasons and for efficiency's sake, it is best to monitor all of the data and the presentations yourself. That doesn't mean that you need to make all of the presentations. It just means that you must go over them before they are presented. There are few opportunities in business where attention to detail matters more. If your organization has adopted TLM, the quality personnel who analyze and display such information will be delighted to assist you with the data management expertise so critical to your success.

Find effective ways to communicate

Communication is so complex and difficult, it is a wonder that it works at all. First, there is the message in my head. Then there is the message that comes out of my mouth; it may or may not accurately reflect what is in my head. Third, there is the emotional cover under which my message hides. Everyone pays more attention to the emotion conveyed than to the data contained in the message. Fourth, there are all of your filters I've got to get through—if you're even paying attention. And I must go through this with every single person with whom I hope to communicate. Now consider

that my message and my emotions are constantly changing and that yours and everyone else's are fluid too. Do you see why communication is hard? And yet we must succeed.

What can be said in one paragraph that might help you communicate more effectively? Build and nourish relationships. It is much easier to communicate effectively when some level of relationship exists. Don't send paper. Even voice mail is better than paper. Use email only if you feel positive about the person you are touching digitally. Be consistent in your message. Insofar as possible, say exactly the same thing in the same tone to everyone. Ask for feedback to make sure that you have been correctly understood. Keep your mouth shut as much as possible. The more you talk, the less others listen.

Create cycles of refinement

You won't get this exactly right the first time. This model is straightforward, but that does not mean it is simple. It involves people and people are never simple. Everyone who serves on one of your teams will bring a different level of skill and commitment to the process and from this you must cobble together a winning team. As you adapt structural principles of TLM to your department, you will find that strategies that have worked well for other managers may not be as effective for you. Everything about this model is malleable except the basic principles—excellence, service, teamwork and outcomes.

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In your untiring efforts to improve yourself and your department, you must choose a strategy, deploy it, study it and then refine it based on what you have learned. This continual process of refinement is the basis for process improvement and increasingly effective management techniques. In every business environment, there are always a number of ways to do things and there is always a best way. TLM is designed to help you discover and implement the best way today and then to find a better way tomorrow.

Conclusion

In spite of all the talk about the value of teamwork, organizational teams rarely achieve their potential. They often fail miserably. The business environment will not

permit us to dispense with teams though. Individuals or mindless drones acting blindly on orders from above cannot do today's work—only teams can. The Team Leadership Model can provide a template for organizing and supporting more successful teams. The department manager is still at the heart of business unit effectiveness, but today's successful manager is a coach and team facilitator instead of an aloof dictator. Adopting this model will encourage you to invest your energy where it will produce the greatest returns, both for your organization and for you.

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