

Important Steps when Building a new Team

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This article outlines essential steps in forming a new team. These steps are also useful for existing teams that are interested in assessing their format and effectiveness.

First, the work of the team needs to be clearly defined and matched to some real needs of the department, lab or center or of the Institute as a whole. If the team doesn't get a clear mission or scope statement from the team sponsor, creating these should be part of the team's kick-off process.

In the early stages it is important to talk to the team's sponsor about his/her role and how he or she will support the team's work. What will the sponsor do for the team? What does the sponsor expect from the team? Teams need the clear support of the organization's leadership, including concrete support such as release time, funding and resources.

Selecting the right team members is critical. Ideally, teams should be small (not more than ten people) so that members can develop a high-level of connection and interdependence. Members need both technical expertise (including writing and presentation skills) and good interpersonal skills for working in small groups. For teams working on Institute-wide projects, diverse membership (across MIT's units, across payroll/employee classifications and across gender/race categories) can lead to a richer team with better results. Content experts, process experts and end users can all play key roles.

Team kick-off events are an important part of the start-up process. Kick-off events enable the team to articulate and understand the goals, mission and structure. A well-planned kick-off can increase team productivity and build team momentum. A formalized start-up activity will help the team define its mission, deliverables, roles & responsibilities, and success factors.

Six items are crucial to help teams function effectively.

1. Mission

It is the shared commitment to a specific mission that helps define a team. A mission statement can provide powerful documentation about the team's purpose. Creating a mission statement requires team members to think about, discuss and come to agreement on the following questions:

- What is the work we were brought together to do?
- Why can this work best be done as a team?
- What will be different as a result of our working together?
- What will our work create for our organization, our team and ourselves?
- For project teams: What will a successful outcome look like for our team? How will we know we've completed our task?
- For standing teams: How will we measure our success in an on-going way?

A team's mission may be based on a directive from management or others outside the team. But good team discussion about how each member -- and the group collectively -- understands that mission will make the mission statement meaningful and useful to the team. Mission statements may be short; they should be written in everyday language that each team member understands and supports.

2. Goals

Mission statements give a team guiding principles, but goals give the team a real target for their activity. Goals should be something worth striving for -- important results that the team can provide for the organization.

The best goals are S-M-A-R-T goals: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound. "Improving customer service" may sound like a good goal for a team, but it doesn't really meet the S-M-A-R-T criteria. A more effective goal would be "Reduce call-back time to customers to two hours or less within six months." The revised goal is:

- Specific (reduce call-back time to customers)
- Measurable (to two hours or less)
- Achievable (The team would need to decide this. Maybe call-backs need four hours, or maybe the time can be reduced to 30 minutes.)
- Relevant (Again, the team will know - is slow call-back time an issue for the customers? For the team's manager? Is reducing call-back time important enough to merit team effort?)
- Time bound (within six months)

3. Roles and responsibilities

It's particularly important in a team environment that team members know what is expected of each of them. Without these expectations, members can't develop mutual accountability or trust in the team. When a team's expectations are clear and members meet (or exceed) expectations, trust and an increased sense of "teamness" are natural by-products.

Almost all teams at MIT have designated team leaders. Team leaders are the individuals who are held accountable for the team's results by the team's sponsor. The Team leader often serves as a spokesperson for the team and may also be responsible for coordinating the team's work. Facilitators may be a member of the team or a resource person for the team. The facilitator is responsible for guiding the team's process. This might include helping to set agendas for team meetings and running the meetings. Sometimes these two roles are played by one person.

4. Ground Rules

To be effective, teams need to be explicit about the ways they will work together. Ground rules are guidelines for specific behaviors. Teams don't need a lot of ground rules to work together well, but everyone on the team should agree to the ground rules and share responsibility for ensuring that they are followed.

Possible areas for ground rules include:

- How you communicate DURING team meetings (Are interruptions OK? Should the Facilitator call on you before you speak? What about side conversations?)

- How you communicate BETWEEN team meetings (How quickly should you respond to emails? Are there suggested length limits on emails or memos? How do you keep everyone on the team informed of your progress?)
- What constitutes respectful behavior towards other team members?

Some sample ground rules include:

- Be respectful of others -- don't bad-mouth team members within the team or outside the team
- Share your own experiences and opinions; avoid "they say" statements
- One speaker at a time
- Keep discussions focused on topic at hand
- Honor time limits - start and end on time

5. Decision-making

Teams may choose different models for making decisions; the most important factor is that the decision-making model be explicit and understood by all team members. A clear decision making model describes who makes the decision and how others will be involved. (Will decisions be made by consensus where everyone can agree to support the final decision? Will the team leader get input but make the final decision? Will the team vote?) Knowing what decision-making model will be used lets team members know what to expect and what is expected; this can help build support for the final decision.

Good decisions have two characteristics: quality and commitment. Quality decisions are logical, supported by sound reasoning and good information. Steps towards making quality decisions include checking to see if all available information has been gathered and shared, that all team members have been consulted, and that critical input from stakeholders (individuals or groups affected by the decision) outside the team has been considered as appropriate.

Commitment is demonstrated by the active backing for the decision by every team member. Each team member agrees with the decision, is committed to carrying out the decision, and understands their individual role in doing so.

6. Effective Group Process

- *Communication:*
Using groundrules as a starting point, teams need to develop practices for open communication. Examples include:
 - Listen respectfully and respond with positive interest to ideas from team members. If an idea is confusing or seems unconventional or odd to you, ask for more information to understand the idea better. (Saying, "Can you tell me more?" is a great way to continue a conversation.)
 - Help create an environment that encourages team members to share all ideas - even the "half-baked" ones. Most great ideas are built by teams building on an initial thought. Sometimes it's the "crazy" ideas that really spark the team's creativity. Treating every idea as important keeps team members from holding back some "half-baked" thought that could be just what the team needed.
 - Don't hide conflicts; try to surface differences and use them to create better results that all team members can support.

Mutual Accountability:

Each member of a team is responsible for the success of the team as a whole. This is the interdependence that makes teams stronger than the sum of their parts. Working together towards specific tangible results is the best way to start creating mutual accountability. Recognize and celebrate small accomplishments and successes of individuals and milestones (large and small) for the team as a whole. By acknowledging successes, team members can develop an increasing trust in their teammates and the team as a whole.

Appropriate self-evaluation:

It is helpful for team members to "stop action" at regular intervals and check out how the team is working. These self-evaluations can be as simple as a team discussion: "Looking at X, what things worked well and what would we like to improve next time?" or they can be deep and reflective (e.g., "How can we deal with conflict more effectively?"). Regardless of the method or tool used, the real benefit of self-evaluation comes from the team discussion about their assessments of the team.

6 Ways Successful Teams Are Built to Last

Llopis, G. (2012). 6 ways successful teams are built to last. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/glennllopis/2012/10/01/6-ways-successful-teams-are-built-to-last/>

1. Be Aware of How You Work

As the leader of the team, you must be extremely aware of your leadership style and techniques. Are they as effective as you think? How well are they accepted by the team you are attempting to lead? Evaluate yourself and be critical about where you can improve, especially in areas that will benefit those whom you are leading.

Though you may be in-charge, how you work may not be appreciated by those who work for you. You may have good intentions, but make sure you hold yourself accountable to course-correct and modify your approach if necessary to assure that you're leading from a position of strength and respectability.

Be your own boss. Be flexible. Know who you are as a leader.

2. Get to Know the Rest of the Team

Much like you need to hold yourself accountable for your actions to assure you maximize performance and results, you must make the time to get to know your team and encourage camaraderie. In my "emotional intelligence blog," I discuss the importance of caring, understanding the needs of your team and embracing differences and helping your colleagues experience their significance. In this case, gathering intelligence means learning what defines the strengths and capabilities of your team – the real assets that each member brings to the table, those they leave behind and those yet to be developed.

All great leaders know exactly what buttons to push and when to push them. They are experts at activating the talent that surrounds them. They are equally as effective at matching unique areas of subject matter expertise and / or competencies to solve problems and seek new solutions.

Fully knowing your team means that you have invested the time to understand how they are wired to think and what is required to motivate them to excel beyond what is expected from them.

Think of your team as puzzle pieces that can be placed together in a variety of ways.

3. Clearly Define Roles & Responsibilities

When you successfully complete step 2, you can then more effectively and clearly define the roles and responsibilities of those on your team. Now, don't assume this is an easy step; in fact, you'll often find that people's ideal roles lie outside their job descriptions.

Each of your team member's responsibilities must be interconnected and dependent upon one another. This is not unlike team sports, where some players are known as "system players" – meaning that, although they may not be the most talented person on the team, they know how to work best within the "system." This is why you must have a keen eye for talent that can evaluate people not only on their ability to play a particular role – but even more so on whether they fit the workplace culture (the system) and will be a team player.

A team should operate as a mosaic whose unique strengths and differences convert into a powerful united force.

4. Be Proactive with Feedback

Feedback is the key to assuring any team is staying on track, but more importantly that it is improving each day. Feedback should be proactive and constant. Many leaders are prone to wait until a problem occurs before they give feedback.

Feedback is simply the art of great communication. It should be something that is part of one's natural dialogue. Feedback can be both formal and informal. In fact, if it becomes too structured and stiff, it becomes difficult for the feedback to be authentic and impactful.

Take the time to remind someone of how and what they can be doing better. Learn from them. Don't complicate the process of constructive feedback. Feedback is two-way communication.

5. Acknowledge and Reward

With proactive feedback comes acknowledgement and reward. People love recognition, but are most appreciative of respect. Take the time to give your teammates the proper accolades they have earned and deserve. I have seen too many leaders take performance for granted because they don't believe that one should be rewarded for "doing their job."

At a time when people want to feel as if they are making a difference, be a thoughtful leader and reassure your team that you are paying attention to their efforts. Being genuine in your recognition and respect goes a long way towards building loyalty and trust. It organically ignites extra effort! When people are acknowledged, their work brings them greater satisfaction and becomes more purposeful.

6. Always Celebrate Success

At a time when uncertainty is being dealt with each day, you must take the time to celebrate success. This goes beyond acknowledgment – this is about taking a step-back and reflecting on what you have accomplished and what you have learned throughout the journey.

In today's fast-paced, rapidly changing world of work, people are not taking enough time to understand why they were successful and how their success reverberated and positively impacted those around them. I have seen leaders fall into the trap of self-aggrandizement – because of what their teams accomplished – rather than celebrating the success stories that in many cases required tremendous effort, sacrifice and perseverance.

Celebration is a short-lived activity. Don't ignore it. Take the time to live in the moment and remember what allowed you to cross the finish line.

Leaders are only as successful as their teams and the great ones know that with the right team dynamics, decisions and diverse personalities, everyone wins in the end.