

Articles for Managers

Kickstarting a Brand New Team

by Ian Cook



Ian Cook, trainer, consultant, keynote speaker and Principal of Fulcrum Associates Inc., helps managers and supervisors get more from their people and teams through modern leadership approaches. Contact Ian to discuss the ideas in this article or to find out about related training programs, facilitation and coaching services, and keynote presentations for your organization.

Do you remember the last time you attended the initial meeting of a new task force or project team at work? No one could agree on the goals. A couple of people complained about all their other work demands. Someone was pushing a personal agenda to become the team “leader.” After a couple of hours of struggle, with the “team’s” wheels totally spinning, you began to ask yourself why you were here.

In high performance organizations with project-oriented environments, ad hoc teams are becoming the norm. Examples are companies like Levi Strauss, ABB, and 3M.

Temporary teams differ from permanent teams. Most importantly, they have *high demands placed on them to produce results quickly and then disband*. Their mandate and authority (e.g. can they make final decisions? can they implement them?) are often unclear. And if the team is also cross-functional, it will have complex goals affecting many parts of the organization and beyond.

“What skills, knowledge and experience do [members] bring?”

And then there are the team members! They come with varying degrees of commitment, different agendas, functional backgrounds, perspectives, and loyalties. But they all wonder whether their efforts here will be rewarded at performance review time.

The ad hoc team faces a unique challenge. It must sort out its human dynamics issues early, get everyone aligned on a common mandate, and build the genuine commitment of all members to that goal quickly! These teams seldom have enough time to

devote to the project. They need to get on with the task-asap!

Yet, again and again experience has shown that *when team members do not address the human dynamics part right at the beginning, team performance suffers seriously later on.*

“How will the team make decisions?”

So, what should your project or ad hoc team do to maximize its performance? Its first meeting is crucial. Plan to invest just one day, up front, on its “process” issues. This initial session should be facilitated by a skilled person who is not a team member. As a guide, here is what my one-day “kickstart” program typically covers:

Purpose/mission

Why was the team created? What goals and deliverables (e.g. design a process to reduce wastage by 18%) are expected of it? Ensure that all members understand and accept these objectives and their related time-lines.

Champion(s)

To which manager, board or steering committee does the team report? What support has this champion promised? What information/updates do they expect from the team? How will the team liaise with the champion?

Team Members

What skills, knowledge, and experience do they bring? Identify and discuss each person’s hopes, desired benefits, expectations, concerns, and initial degree of commitment to the team. Make it OK not to be committed at the outset.

Operating Guidelines

Determine how leadership will operate within the team. Is there one leader? What is his/her role? How will the team make decisions? How often will they meet? How will they communicate amongst one another? What is expected of each member? Can someone miss a meeting? What happens if someone fails to meet a commitment?

Next steps

Now it is time to turn the group to its task. Here members start developing a plan of action and assign responsibilities. The day should end with this underway.

The above fills a very productive day. A facilitator will fast track the team to

performance by:

1. providing structure and leadership
2. training members on group dynamics
3. helping them through the startup energy-draining issues around power
4. ensuring that they stay focused

A good facilitator will leave the team with tools and techniques to address interpersonal issues whenever they obstruct team performance downline.

What about your temporary teams? Can they afford a slow acceleration to maximum performance?

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