

Cross Functional Teams

Building a team from scratch has the advantage of meaning you are not stuck with those that do not contribute to the team activities and outcomes. At the same time building a team takes time; which may detract you from other activities. Assuming leadership of an existing team brings its own challenges, in particular relationship building.

When a team works together it is as if each member of the team is holding a piece of a jigsaw; without cooperation and collaboration it can be difficult to bring all the pieces together. An effective team works together towards a common goal. Cross functional teams introduce another dimension in that each member of your team also reports to someone else in another part of the organisation. The work they do as a part of your team may conflict with the demands of their other work. Cross functional teams introduce multiple stakeholders and require a more robust communication process.

It is important to have the right mix of personalities and skills in any team. These must be aligned with the team activities and outcomes. Equally, you need a balanced team. Having a team full of 'challengers' – those who rock the boat or with 'judges'¹ – those who are down to earth, practical and logical, can lead to an imbalance, where more of some activities and less of others get done.

Remember any one person may bring a variety of characteristics to your team and when managed appropriately, be able to assume different roles at different times. Balance can be achieved also by creating subgroups charged with specific tasks or activities.

According to Belbin teams undergo phases of development. Belbin refers to these as forming, storming, norming and performing. At the forming stage excitement is high, everyone is enthusiastic but there is little structure or direction. During the storming phase roles are assigned, personalities begin to mesh or clash and careful coaching is required to facilitate relationship building and defuse potential conflicts. The aim at this point is to work towards creating an environment where team members can trust each other. The team reaches the norming phase when people begin to feel safe, comfortable and respect each other for their contributions. Finally an effective team reaches the performing phase where everything gels and the pieces of the jigsaw begin to fit together. Understanding these phases of team development can provide you with a guide to appropriate management strategies and techniques as you move your team through the phases.

Individuals, even in well performing teams each have their own priorities. This can lead to members of the team pulling in their own direction. Alignment is critical. Achieving this becomes a key outcome for any team leader. There are a number of strategies you may employ. For starters never

¹ Belbin team roles, characteristics and functions. www.belbin.com

allow negative or counterproductive behaviour to go unchallenged. Take time with people displaying these behaviours to explore their thoughts and feelings and get to the core of their issues.

Create a learning environment. What this means is that people are not judged or punished for making mistakes; instead everything is considered a learning experience. When someone makes a mistake, move from judgment and punishment to exploration and understanding, from a focus on the past to a focus on the future. Equally important, create an environment where all activities, all lessons learned, positive and negative, are shared collectively with everyone else in the team – in a supportive and non-judgmental manner.

Ensure multi-directional and free-flowing information. Be prepared to share anything that is not confidential. Information empowers people to work together collaboratively. The more information people have the less likely they are to fill in the gaps with rumours. With information people are able to make factual and informed judgments. Provide constant feedback, both positive and negative. People can change their behaviour or improve their performance only when they are provided with feedback. Spend time individually with team members and also plenty of team conversations. Create an environment where your team members work together where practical. Be a role model and show by example how to engage in active communication – where people listen, ask questions and listen some more.

Ask those on your team what motivates them and what demotivates them. Look for those demotivators in your work or project. Focus on how you can maximise the positives and minimise the negatives.

Remember you bought this team together for the experience and skills those on the team have. Make use of this experience. Engage all off your team members in the planning and decision making at the earliest opportunity. Don't disrespect their wisdom and knowledge. Delegate tasks, engage them, involve them and value them.

As a team leader your role is to facilitate, to enable the team to function collaboratively, to cooperate and work together. You need to be able to guide them as they move through the various phases of team development and as they establish the team direction, structure, roles, processes and outcomes. Your role is to monitor progress and seek feedback and then provide feedback to each person and to the team as a group. You are not the team – you are a part of the team.

This management tip has been brought to you compliments of John Coxon & Associates. We have developed an Integrated Management Process (IMP), including a suite of diagnostic tools, designed to help you develop the potential of your management group and align their effectiveness with your mission, strategy and outcome. We work with management teams and managers in the health sector and not for profit sector in Australia and New Zealand. Telephone Australia (03)5561 2228 or NZ (0272) 583232. Email john@johncoxon.com.au or go to our website at www.johncoxon.com.au or www.johncoxon.co.nz. Please feel free to pass this information onto anyone you feel may benefit.