

IS TEAM SUCCESS DETERMINED BEFORE YOU START?

"Team builder" and "team player" are popular phrases in the workplace and we often list them as skills we look for in effective managers and leaders. We've known many a candidate in the interview process who could talk a good game about building effective teams yet were not very successful at making it happen.

So the question is, "Why is it so hard to develop high performing teams?"

High performing teams are a product of many factors. We believe many of these factors can be addressed **BEFORE** the team is formed in order to create an environment that is conducive to high performance. If not, a team can be doomed to fail before the first team meeting. I'm sure you've had this feeling at least once in your career if not many times.

For the purposes of discussion, We'll be referring to project teams assembled for specific initiatives instead of a functional or departmental team engaging in day to day operations. However, the same factors apply to standard operations but are part of a continuous process vs. a project team set up.

Let's talk about these factors by asking some good questions.

Why are we doing this? - Before a team is ever put together, it should be "crystal clear" as to the reason for the project and how it helps to achieve organizational objectives. Ask questions for clarity before agreeing to be on or lead the team. If no one can effectively articulate the connection to the objectives and long term vision then run for the hills!

Who has skin in the game? - Most projects are assigned some sort of executive sponsor. Many times these roles are figurehead roles who aren't involved in the project and do very little to support its success. In most cases, they are assigned to the project because it is required to have a sponsor. They don't have skin in the game and don't feel like there are consequences for failure.

Projects need active executive sponsors who:

- believe in the value of the project
- know they will be held accountable for results
- are invested in its success

If these success factors are in place, the sponsor will remove barriers that hinder the team and will clear paths to ultimate team success. We do want to make something perfectly clear. Just because the sponsor is invested in the project's success, DOES NOT mean they should micro-manage it! The sponsor's role is to keep the team on track from a distance and only step in when the team asks for support with situations that require action or resolution that exceeds team authority.

What team attitudes do we need? - This is often overlooked in team formation. You want people that want to be on the team and are excited about the value of the project if done well. DO NOT assemble a team of "warm bodies" just because they are available. This is a recipe for disaster. A team of people with average skills with passion and enthusiasm for a project will run circles around a team of skilled individuals that are indifferent. Look for passion, excitement and energy in team members. They will come up with the most innovative solutions to problems and will have the energy to implement them.

What skills do we need? - We are not going to say skills and experience aren't important because they are. However, we don't believe they are as important as passion and energy. Be intentional in the formation of your teams to make sure they have a balance between the basic skills and experience needed and fresh perspectives and skills from other unrelated disciplines.

We are constantly amazed how many times organizations assemble a team of people to solve a problem that the team themselves created. Fresh skills, perspectives and independence from the existing problem most of the time are key to finding a new solution.

For example, a CEO assembled a team of engineers to solve a manufacturing problem that the engineers had created. For months they met and got nowhere. The CEO said we needed new blood and fresh perspectives. He added people from HR, IT and Marketing to the team. The engineers scoffed

at this. How could these people possibly solve this complex engineering problem? After two meetings, the marketing person came up with a simple idea to solve the problem and it worked!

Do we have these people? - Notice this is the last question! After defining and aligning the project to objectives and determining the desire, skills and unique perspectives needed, THEN you find these people. If the project is important (which you've defined first), then you will free up the right resources to be on the team. DO NOT settle!

Much like in recruiting employees, you would rather wait to find the right resource than to settle for something below the standard in order to get someone in the org. chart box quickly. This is why passion and desire is so important. If employees are passionate about the project, they will find time to get involved.

Do we have the right team lead? - Although this is part of the last question, it's important enough to have a separate discussion. Your project team lead is key to team success. Besides the standard project management skills which are necessary for success, a critical skill needed is the ability to effectively facilitate discussions with a diverse group of team members.

Since we are encouraging disagreement based on assembling a team with different views, experiences, thought processes as well as passion for the project; we are encouraging conflict. This is fantastic if managed effectively. It is also a train wreck if managed poorly.

Make sure your team leads are skilled at encouraging passionate discussions while respecting others and keeping focus on the shared objectives. The team lead needs to be skilled in what I call "focused creativity" in order to strike the balance between "what if" thinking and meeting deliverable deadlines according to the plan.

Doing all of these things does not guaranteed that each and every team will deliver amazing results. It does, however, greatly improve the likelihood of it happening. Create environments that are more conducive to success and you are much more likely to have success.