

MAKE YOUR GOOD TEAM GREAT

By Judith A. Ross

High-functioning teams make companies click. The ideal team merges individual talents and skills into one superperforming whole with capabilities that surpass those of even its most talented member.

Yet, in reality, many teams fail. People disengage, wires get crossed and time and money are wasted.

What distinguishes top teams from the rest? Research shows that high-performing teams achieve superior levels of participation, cooperation and collaboration because their members trust one another, share a strong sense of group identity and have confidence in their effectiveness as a team. In other words, such teams possess high levels of group emotional intelligence, or EI.

Group EI has to do with an awareness of emotions and the ability to manage them in a healthy, productive manner, says Vanessa Urch Druskat, an associate professor at the University of New Hampshire and a pioneer of the concept. A two-year study in which Druskat and Steven B. Wolff, a research consultant at Hay Group (Philadelphia), examined cross-functional drug-development teams at Johnson & Johnson revealed that group EI was the biggest predictor of team success.

Implementing the following three practices will get your efforts to build your team's EI off to a solid start, say Druskat, Wolff and other experts:

1 Make time for team members to appreciate each other's skills. Interpersonal understanding is critical to trust, which, in turn, is critical for the flow of ideas and information. The group must be aware of each member's skills and personality. When a group is first formed, it's smart to hold a launch meeting that has time built in for introductions and socializing. Members can get acquainted with one another as they start hammering out team goals and creating a shared vision of success.

Once a team is established, taking five minutes at the beginning of regular meetings for members to share work progress and personal reflections helps fortify the group's understanding of each individual and how together they all contribute to a common goal.

"People on teams where people knew one another better were more efficient and got more work done," Druskat says.

2 Surface and manage emotional issues that can help or hinder the team's progress. It's important to establish comfortable, group-sanctioned ways to express the inevitable anger, tension and frustration that arise in a team endeavor and to positively redirect that energy.

Both humor and playfulness can be helpful tools in defusing conflict and relieving tension. One team at the worldwide innovation consultancy Ideo (Palo Alto, California), says Druskat, tossed soft toys over cubicle walls when feelings ran high. Besides lightening the mood, this action served as a reminder that the group had established norms for expressing difficult emotions, thereby making them feel less threatening to individuals and to the group as a whole.

In another approach, the Xerox team members wrote down their gripes, clipped them to play money in denominations from \$1 to \$100 depending on how serious they felt the issue to be, and dropped them into an “opportunities” jar. Their gripes were discussed at meetings, starting with problems attached to larger denominations.

The process increased trust by fostering openness and decreasing the temptation for members to express their frustration in destructive ways. Those with complaints saw them dealt with fairly and positively.

3 Celebrate success. Building the EI of a team also requires the expression of positive emotions, such as gratitude for going the extra mile or pride in a job well done. Recognizing individual and group achievements not only strengthens a team’s identity, but it also spotlights its effectiveness and fuels its collective passion for excellence. For instance, Xerox Canada created a “Wall of Fame” to honor members of the Sarbanes-Oxley team.

An added bonus

Xerox Canada’s Sarbanes-Oxley team achieved its objective of 2004 compliance, attracting positive attention from the entire organization in the process. Its celebration of its members’ accomplishments, its recognition of other teams’ contributions, and—above all—its success at meeting a very challenging goal gained it such widespread attention within the company that it is now inundated with applications when a job is posted.

This is not surprising, says Druskat. “People want to belong to something that they think is effective.”

Judith A. Ross is a freelance business writer based in Concord, Massachusetts.