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Make your good team great

Know tips to build groups that click, researchers say

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EXECUTIVE

BRIEFING 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.

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.

In a two-year study of drug development teams at Johnson & Johnson, Dr. Druskat and Steven B. Wolff, a research consultant at the Hay Group in Philadelphia, found that group EI was the biggest predictor of team success.

Implementing three practices will help your teams build EI, Dr. Druskat and Dr. Wolff say:

Make time for team members to appreciate each other's skills. Interpersonal understanding is critical to trust, which 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 formed, hold a launch meeting that has time built in for introductions and socializing.

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

Uncover and manage emotional issues that affect 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.

Humor and playfulness can relieve tension. One team at the consultancy Ideo in Palo Alto, Calif., tossed soft toys over cubicle walls when feelings ran high.

Celebrate success. Recognizing individual and group achievements not only strengthens a team's identity, it also fuels passion for excellence. For instance, Xerox Canada created a "Wall of Fame" to honor its Sarbanes-Oxley team.

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