

# How to Lead and Facilitate Teams

By David Antonioni, Ph.D.

**O**RGANIZATIONS are increasingly relying on teams to produce results. Many different types of teams exist, ranging from specific short-term, problem-solving teams to longer-term project teams. Many of these teams are cross functional, drawing on the diversity of functions within the organization. By their nature, teams require members to attend frequent meetings that tend to last between one and two hours.

Meetings must be productive or team members will lose interest. Meetings that go nowhere are stressful because individuals must complete work related to their job positions in addition to being on teams that are unproductive. This situation is particularly problematic when individuals are expected to serve on many teams.

A recent study, conducted with 240 managers who attended continuing education courses at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Business, indicated that individuals serve on an average of three teams. In some cases, they can even serve on up to 12 teams at a time.

But even with the potential problems, some companies have benefited greatly from using teams. Proctor & Gamble reduced manufacturing costs by 30 to 50 percent by implementing teams. Aid Association for Lutherans experienced a 20 percent increase in productivity, and slashed case-processing time by 75 percent. Shanandoa Life reduced case-processing time from 27 days to five days. Westinghouse Airdrie reduced cycle time from 17 to five days.

Obviously, there are many teams in other companies that have also produced significant results. Productive teams have one thing in common: they are properly led and facilitated. How should a successful team be led and facilitated? Read on.

## Ingredients for success

How a team performs depends on the management of two major factors: performance and process. The performance factor focuses on what results are expected of the team. It also deals with the structure of the team's tasks. The process factor focuses on how the team interacts in meetings, as well as maintenance of the team. Team leadership revolves around team performance, while team facilitation addresses team process.

## Team Leadership

The team leader is responsible for providing the team with the essential structure for completing tasks. Team members usually need the following guidelines from their team leader:

- ▶ Clarity on the team's mission and goals
- ▶ Clarity on the roles of team members
- ▶ Ground rules for working with each other
- ▶ A map for access to information within the organization
- ▶ Boundaries for making decisions
- ▶ Clear guidelines for accountability

The team leader is responsible for handling personnel issues related to team members and for preparing manageable agendas for team meetings. The leader must also ensure that the team has the information it needs during meetings. Generally, the leader is the spokesperson for the team with the team's stakeholders, and plays a critical role in motivating the team throughout the lifetime of the project.

Team leaders play a critical role in helping team get off to a good start. They are also important in guiding the team through the team's first stage of development. Results of the previously mentioned study indicate that significant problems arise when goals are unclear. This is frequently the case

when a team is pioneering work in a new area. I once worked with two new re-engineering teams whose mission was to redesign the company's procurement process. Team leaders established a goal of reducing procurement costs by at least 10 percent. This goal was based on a best guess estimate, and it gave the teams a challenging and realistic target. Team leaders made sure the goal was meaningful by clarifying the relationship between the team's mission and the organization's business plan. The teams focused on their mission and found over five million dollars of non-value added activity (expenses) in their procurement process.

Teams need relevant, useful and timely data and information to produce results. Team leaders need to create a map detailing the team's path to information. Team leaders are responsible for establishing an information network within the organization. Members need to know how to use information to make decisions.

Teams need decision-making boundaries that usually include parameters of specific costs, time and congruency with organizational goals. It is important that team leaders clarify boundaries for team decision making. Not all decisions must be made by team consensus, and it is important that the team understand the criteria for decisions made by the team leader as opposed to the team.

Team leaders ensure teams have developed relevant and acceptable ground rules that will provide structure for interpersonal team behavior during the team project. These ground rules let each member know what is expected in team meetings, and clarify desired interpersonal behaviors. Common ground rules include attendance at team meetings, guidelines for relating to each other in team meetings, expectations about completing team assignments, how to deal with conflicts between team members, and

the decision making process that the team will use.

Team leaders are responsible for preparing and conducting team meetings. Another result of the University of Wisconsin-Madison study indicated that the most successful team leaders have a variety of ways they prepare for and conduct team meetings. Some of these include:

- ▶ Preparing manageable agendas that are sent out prior to team meetings
- ▶ Clarifying the purpose and desired outcomes of the meeting
- ▶ Assigning various team meeting roles, such as meeting facilitator, scribe (writes team's ideas on a flip chart), time-keeper, and meeting minute recorder (documents team assignments and decisions)

At the beginning of the meeting, team leaders also check with the team for agreement on the amount of time to be allocated for each agenda item. The best team leaders make sure they spend adequate time preparing for each team meeting, and they work their way through the agenda with someone else facilitating the meeting.

## The Facilitator

Team facilitation is essential for helping teams address the process used during team meetings. Specifically, the process includes how team members participate, discuss, exert influence, solve problems, make decisions and manage conflicts. The benefits of team meeting facilitation come from enabling individuals to make observations of team member participation. The facilitator must ensure that no one dominates and controls team discussions, while assuring that the team engages in civilized debate in order to create breakthrough ideas. The underlying function of the facilitator fosters both interdependence and self-reliance. Therefore, the facilitator does not give direct instructions, but observes and asks relevant questions to help prevent dysfunctional team meetings. Successful facilitators know how to show consideration for the team by encouraging participation of all members, and they know how to manage team discussion through the divergence and convergence of ideas. In addition, facilitators know how and when to suggest effective

creativity, problem solving and decision-making tools to the team. Finally, teams learn how to evaluate their own meetings by watching how a facilitator performs through difficult issues.

Facilitators add value by optimizing the team members' abilities to think through and discuss the problems they have been charged to solve. It is important to remember that teams come into existence because the problems they address are too complex for one individual to solve in a timely manner. When individuals work on a team, there should be a significant increase in cognitive power (critical thinking that produces ideas to solve or prevent problems). However, the aforementioned study indicated that only 40 percent of the respondents felt their teams engaged in useful discussion and that team members built on ideas generated by others on the team. These results suggest teams are not effectively using the thinking abilities of more than 60 percent of their team members. This does not happen in well-facilitated teams.

Teams or team members experience conflicts when they perceive they cannot attain their goal because of the actions or intended actions of someone else. Another finding of the study indicated that team members tend to engage in accommodation or avoidance conflict-resolution strategies. If the conflicts are not facilitated properly, team members can experience frustration, which can affect their performance. Teams can experience two types of conflicts: dysfunctional and functional. Dysfunctional conflict occurs when team members personalize conflict, cut off information flow, reduce involvement with one another and stop open communication. On the other hand, when team members get more involved, share more information and maintain open communication, conflicts serve a functional purpose.

Facilitation is essential in helping teams learn how to use a collaborative conflict-resolution strategy instead of avoidance. Because open discussion of conflicts tends to produce some "heat" during meetings, the facilitator's goal is to help the team use the "light" coming from the heat. When properly handled in the meetings, assertive

conflict resolution leads to solutions that solve important problems, and it may even stimulate needed change.

There are two sources of facilitation for a team: external and internal. External facilitation is usually performed by individuals from a human resources training department. Internal facilitation is performed by the team leader or team members. External facilitators should have strong human relations skills, a conceptual understanding of team development and group dynamics, excellent observation and interviewing skills, and knowledge of team-discussion and problem-solving tools. It is generally a good idea for new teams to use external facilitators when needed. By doing so, team leaders and members are permitted to observe the external facilitators and learn from them as models. In addition, external facilitators can observe and coach team leaders after and before team meetings. In organizations using multiple teams, external facilitators can serve as liaisons and coordinators among multiple teams. External facilitators are also in good positions to recommend specific training for teams because of their observations.

Internal facilitators usually are the team leaders and need skills similar to those of external facilitators. Team leaders who also facilitate meetings need to learn how to manage the competing roles between leading and facilitating. Team leaders who simultaneously lead and facilitate can experience role overload. As a result, facilitation can frequently be overlooked. Some teams rotate the primary facilitator role every team meeting. Some appoint a primary facilitator for a specific number of meetings, and others select someone permanently who is good at facilitation. In any case, it is important to teach all team members to be secondary facilitators through the modeling of external facilitators. The goal is to have responsible team members willing to speak up when they see non-value team meeting behaviors. This approach increases self management and reduces the dependency on the primary facilitator.

Becoming a good internal team meeting facilitator is not easy. A number of things can prevent effective internal facilitation. Team leaders or appointed facilitators

tors have a tendency to get wrapped up in team discussion and forget about facilitation. Facilitators need to make sure they are taking time to observe the team's behaviors. Then, based on their observations, they need to intervene by asking good questions or making reflective comments. The intervention should result in improvements in team behaviors and team outcomes.

Perhaps the most challenging part of the facilitator role is learning to be courageous and assertive in commenting about dysfunctional team behaviors. During these challenging interventions, it is important for all team members to be active secondary facilitators and lend support to the primary facilitator.

## Conclusion

With the emphasis on teams in business today, it is important to have strong team leaders and facilitators. With more meetings occurring as a result of teams, team leaders and team facilitators play major roles in making team meetings worthwhile and productive.

## For further reading

Graham, M.A., and M.J. LeBaron, *The Horizontal Revolution—Reengineering Your Organization Through Teams*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1994.

Wellins, R.S., W.C. Byham, and G.R. Dixon, *Inside Teams—How 20 World-Class Organizations Are Winning Through Teams*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1994.

**David Antonioni** is an associate professor of management for the School of Business at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is the Director of the Mid-Management Development Program and the Project Management Program.

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