

# **Managing Dispersed and Cross-Functional Teams**

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## Trust Makes the Team Go 'Round

You can have all the procedures and processes in the world, but without trust, your virtual team or operation is going nowhere.

by Judith A. Ross

**T**hanks to the combined forces of globalization and outsourcing, more managers face the challenge of leading employees from afar. The establishment of virtual teams as an organizational way of life has come so quickly that it's left many managers at a bit of a loss. As they have discovered, managing employees virtually is not the same as managing them face-to-face.

Cultural and language differences become magnified, as do conflicts. It is much easier to hide errors and problems, sweep misunderstandings under the rug, and make erroneous assumptions when you are communicating via phone and e-mail rather than in person. Furthermore, such mistakes and mix-ups are more likely to become full-fledged disasters when the group does not feel free to acknowledge and address them openly.

This is not to suggest such problems are inevitable. They are not—as long as team leaders remember to focus on one critical element as they build and manage their virtual operations: trust. While trust is a critical element in any team or operation, it's particularly important when you are managing teams or operations that are geographically and culturally dispersed.

Trust begins with you. You must be as responsive to your virtual team as you are to colleagues down the hall.

A November 2005 study by The Conference Board on the challenges of offshoring found that of the elements needed for successful collaboration between onshore and offshore teams, trust is among the most crucial. “The development of trust is quite often the single most important tool in overcoming barriers and obstacles,” says Sid Milstein, a principal at Princeton, N.J.-based consulting firm Argea, which conducts workshops and Webinars on outsourcing for The Conference Board. “Effective communication, goal attainment, and service attainment are possible only in an atmosphere of trust.” This point is relevant not only when outsourcing but when managing any kind of geographically dispersed team or operation.

And whether you are managing an offshore operation,

a recent acquisition, or a global team, trust begins with you. You must be as responsive and committed to your virtual team as you are to colleagues sitting right down the hall. They have to know that your door is open, even if they can't see it. You must be clear about each member's role and know his strengths and weaknesses. And you must go out of your way to accommodate cross-cultural differences—even if that means changing a few of your own habits.

Building on this, *Harvard Management Update* polled several experts and practitioners to put together these six steps to boost trust in dispersed operations and virtual teams.

### 1. CREATE FACE TIME

Even a small amount of face-to-face contact goes a long way toward creating trust among coworkers. For that reason, Stanford Graduate School of Business professor Margaret Neale strongly recommends a physical launch when starting work with a virtual team. “An initial in-person meeting not only allows people to interact within the context of the team and the task, it allows them to sit together at lunch and get to know each other,” she says.

Accenture HR Services routinely schedules in-person meetings of key personnel before a new outsourced function goes live. These meetings ensure that there is agreement around goals, service metrics, the live date of the function, and the criteria that must be in place for it to take place. They also are an opportunity for the team to bolster its working relationships. “These meetings allow onshore and offshore team members to get comfortable with each other's communication style while focusing on the matter at hand. This is critical to establishing a trusting, professional, business relationship,” says George Valaika, global geosourcing director for Accenture HR Services.

When meeting face-to-face isn't possible, Neale suggests creating a “yearbook” for the team that includes a photo and brief paragraph about each team member. “It seems like a small thing to know what a person looks like, but that is what makes them seem much more human,” says Neale. Sharing a little information about team members' backgrounds and interests gives them some

## BUILDING CONTRACTUAL TRUST

Trust experts Dennis S. Reina and Michelle L. Reina's recent book, *Trust and Betrayal in the Workplace: Building Effective Relationships in Your Organization* (Berrett-Koehler, 2006), focuses on the concept of contractual trust, which the authors describe as a mutual understanding that people in a relationship will do what they say they will do. Contractual trust is important to the success of any operation or team, but it is absolutely essential in virtual and highly dispersed operations. Here Reina and Reina outline the behaviors necessary for leaders to establish contractual trust:

- **Manage expectations.** Both explicit and implicit expectations regarding the work must be clear. In addition, managers must set realistic goals. Stretch goals with appropriate support demonstrate a leader's trust in people's abilities.
- **Establish boundaries.** Roles and responsibilities must be well defined, and the parameters and direction of the project must be clearly mapped out. "Establishing and maintaining clear boundaries provides a framework for accountability in an organization," write the authors, and thus plays "a strong role in developing contractual trust."
- **Delegate appropriately.** When giving employees responsibility, you must also give them the necessary authority, resources, and voice to accomplish the goal. Individual objectives must also be "clear, explicit, visible, and mutually understood," write the authors. "When leaders and employees work together to define mutually agreed-upon checkpoints and follow-up procedures, it helps develop people's trust in themselves and the organization."
- **Encourage mutually serving intentions.** You want your team members to share the attitude that they are all in one boat and together can pull through any storm. "When they support each other's intentions and are aligned in their purposes, contractual trust is reinforced and people's trust in each other is enhanced," write Reina and Reina.
- **Be consistent.** Even when adapting your strategy to the demands of a constantly shifting business environment, your behavior should be based on principles and values rather than on expediency. Employees will find you unfair and untrustworthy if you play favorites or keep changing your expectations.
- **Keep agreements.** If you must break an agreement, renegotiate promptly. "When we break agreements with others," write the authors, "we disempower the relationship and compromise the trust between us."

common ground when communicating by phone and e-mail—important for developing rapport, which can be the first step toward building trust. "The more we know about somebody, the more we are willing to let them engage in a wide range of behaviors before dismissing them," she says.

### 2. SET CLEAR GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS

Clear goals and expectations are fundamental to building and maintaining trust. "In your launch meeting, you should have an explicit discussion about what you want to accomplish and how you will know you have gotten there," says Neale. "The team can handle divergence without it eroding trust if everyone has the same goal."

For example, let's say your team is charged with

implementing a worldwide corporate standard for monthly financial reports. The first stage is to select the best software. With the team leader guiding the discussion, stage one is completed with relative ease. But now the team must develop an implementation plan and time line. There is a great deal of disagreement about the right approach. The head of accounting in Warsaw favors a stage-by-stage rollout that will achieve uniformity in nine to 12 months; his counterpart in São Paulo argues that it would be easier to manage the changeover in one fell swoop, which would mean it could be accomplished in less than six months. They may argue over the details, but they are focused on the same ultimate goal: establishing financial uniformity. This kind of argument does not erode trust; in fact, it may even reinforce trust

by cementing a shared belief among team members that they are all in this together and focused on achieving the same thing.

Whatever the project, once expectations and initial plans for your virtual team have been established, you must keep the team on task. Valaika keeps the offshore teams he works with focused through regular telephone calls. Immediately after a function goes live, Valaika talks to the team on a daily basis; as time goes on, he tapers communication to two or three times a week. His calls focus on how the team is performing against its metrics. In the case of the accounting team in our example, such metrics might include completing training by a certain date or generating beta reports using the new software. If the offshore team isn't hitting its goals, members can discuss why and get help to work through the problem. "These meetings ensure that they are delivering what they were trained to deliver and are communicating any issues," he says.

When you are managing from afar, cultural differences stand out.

One way to make sure the phone calls themselves enhance—rather than hinder—trust is to put each team member in a separate room whenever possible, rather than have groups clustered around one phone in some locations. This levels the playing field for each caller and helps encourage equal focus and attention from every member of the team. "Putting everyone in separate rooms is really counterintuitive," says Neale. "But when you have some who are face-to-face and some who are virtual, the virtual people fade. The folks who are face-to-face start talking in shorthand that the virtually connected people can't follow. They eventually get frustrated, put the meeting on mute, and go about other tasks." Such disengagement hampers trust for those at both ends of the phone.

### **3. MAKE THE WORK VISIBLE**

Another roadblock to trust occurs when team members don't know whether their distant colleagues are taking care of business. Ton Heijmen, senior adviser to The Conference Board for outsourcing and offshoring, says that one company he works with created its own collaborative software for managing outsourcing projects. It includes detailed steps to be checked off by employees at various levels as a project moves forward. But this isn't just about documenting progress: the software provides

space for users to document learning and best practices around each activity so that team members can help one another boost performance.

At Accenture, offshore HR teams use a Web-based program to document weekly performance. If there is a metric on which the offshore team has fallen short—say they haven't identified the targeted number of potential candidates with a particular skill set—they can record an explanation in the program's issues log. "For example, the note might say that some members of their team have been out sick, so they have been playing short-handed," says Valaika. This ongoing view of each other's challenges not only increases understanding and boosts trust, but it also promotes collective problem solving as these "issues" become part of the team's regular telephone discussions.

### **4. PROVIDE ONGOING FEEDBACK**

Managers who are perceived as fair and trustworthy are usually those who provide feedback to subordinates on their performance. Just like your team down the hall, your virtual team needs regular input on how it is doing. Valaika makes a special effort to give his offshore teams feedback—both good and bad. "E-mails that say, 'We had a great week,' or 'Great job solving that issue,' go a long way toward establishing trust and good relationships. When things don't work out, make sure that feedback gets delivered as well," he advises.

When an offshore colleague managing an HR call center didn't voice concern about high call volumes and high attrition among the center's customer service representatives, the situation quickly escalated from a minor challenge to a full-blown service-delivery issue. Once the problem was addressed and the dust had settled, the team had an open discussion about not being afraid to share bad news.

According to Stanford's Neale, this kind of reinforcement is particularly important when the organization's culture is adversarial and lacks an assumption of trust or benevolence.

### **5. SHOWCASE TEAM MEMBERS' COMPETENCE**

When managing a virtual team, you must make sure each team member has a clear understanding of her role and, just as important, the roles of her teammates. You must also take special pains to highlight each individual's expertise for the rest of the team.

Having confidence in the competence of one's teammates is an important component of trust, asserts Neale. "You have to believe the other people can do the

task,” she says. As a manager, it is up to you to have a good handle on each member’s strengths and experience. “That way, during the course of a meeting, you can point out the ‘go to’ person on any particular issue,” she says, and give people the opportunity to put their expertise on display.

## 6. FOSTER CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

When you are managing from afar, cultural differences stand out. Virtual teams must often overcome language barriers and diverse ways of doing business. When those kinds of differences aren’t addressed and understood, it is very easy to dismiss or come to distrust a virtual colleague.

For example, Valaika was recently approached by a local team member who was perplexed by the spiritual message at the end of an e-mail from a colleague in India. “I explained that Indian culture tends to be more open about spiritual life,” he says. “Then we discussed whether the message was harming anyone or disrupting business. As a leader, it is my job to promote an environment of understanding.”

Neale notes that the e-mail behavior of Americans, who tend to go immediately into the task, often is experienced by people from other cultures as rudeness—a definite inhibitor to trust. Says Neale: “Once this was pointed out to me and I began using pleasantries at the beginning of my e-mails, I found, as an American working with Europeans and Middle Easterners, that my e-mails were much better accepted.”

Conference calls in which everyone is speaking English

with a different accent can be a minefield for the kinds of cultural misunderstanding and missteps that can create distrust. During his meetings with offshore operations, Valaika makes a point of asking others to slow down or repeat when he doesn’t understand what they are saying. “The more often you do it, the less shy others will be about asking when something is not clear,” he advises.

Remote meetings can be especially difficult for non-native English speakers, who may feel intimidated and thus remain silent, depriving the group of their input and ideas. To counteract that tendency, a group of managers at Hewlett-Packard instituted a “warm-up” at the beginning of every meeting. They asked each participant to check in with a two- to three-minute anecdote about a recent event in their life—either work related or personal. “That warming-up period goes both ways,” says Neale. “It not only gives nonnative speakers a chance to get in the swing of speaking English, it also helps the local team get their cultural sensitivity into place—such as avoiding the use of jargon.”

In addition to tightening the lines of communication, this exercise also gave the team the opportunity to learn more about each member’s skills and interests—just the thing for creating that all-important reservoir of trust. ♦

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# Building Effective Teams in Real Time

by Jerry Garfield and Ken Stanton

**N**ow as never before, managers are finding themselves having to create effective cross-functional teams on the fly. New projects emerge that require a diversity of expertise not found within a single department; mergers and strategic partnerships thrust together new groups of people for the first time. Whatever the foundation for their existence, each of these one-off teams shares a common trait: it must begin producing results right away.

Managing a team that's been created under such circumstances presents a distinct and ever more prevalent leadership challenge. It's hard enough to guide the disparate mix of talent found in long-standing groups; when you are required to focus the efforts of people you may not even know and who may not know one another—and to do it immediately—the challenges are multiplied.

In striving to help managers address these challenges, we have developed an approach called *rapid team building* that is based on many years of organizing and leading interdisciplinary project teams, both as managers and as consultants. We have successfully applied this approach in a variety of organizational settings in which the need to achieve critical goals quickly and effectively with newly formed teams was essential. The approach comprises six tools to help managers form a group of employees into a unified team and get them right down to work.

## 1. SHARE PERSONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Asking team members to share personal histories by having each talk to the group briefly about his work history and experience can achieve two important things: it conveys information about everyone's individual competencies, and it can generate respect for those competencies within the group. It also fosters cooperation by giving team members a sense of shared history that serves as a substitute for the actual shared history experienced by members of long-standing teams.

You can help the process along by asking open-ended, work-focused questions that allow team members to tell their own stories, such as: "Would you tell us about the types of project teams in which you have participated?" or "Tell us about some of the biggest challenges you've faced on other teams and how you dealt with them." If you

are already acquainted with a particular team member, you can tell that person's story as a way of acknowledging prior acquaintance and professional reputation.

## 2. ASK TEAM MEMBERS WHAT WORKED FOR THEM IN THE PAST

When you ask team members to discuss what has contributed to the success of their past teams, you are making use of a powerful tool for achieving both engagement and commitment.

By encouraging team members to share their views, you signal respect for their competence and judgment. You also are likely to learn new and useful information from people who are both skilled and experienced.

Describe the deliverable in concrete terms, so that everyone understands what the final product will look like.

One cautionary note: even as you encourage team members to share their ideas on how to be successful, you need to make it clear that you are not inviting group decision making. Without overtly accepting or rejecting any one person's ideas, you can select from among all the ideas in formulating a plan of action. This demonstrates that you are open to the team's ideas, a core element in building the team's engagement with the assignment, while also signaling that you retain ultimate responsibility for making decisions.

## 3. DESCRIBE HOW THE TEAM WILL WORK TOGETHER

To rapidly engage the team in the task at hand, you must impart a clear vision of the team's purpose and how team members will work together. This requires more than just giving out assignments.

State clearly why the team has been formed; explain the problem to be solved or the improvements that will result if the team is successful in its efforts. Then, articulate the desired outcome of the team's efforts vividly and precisely. It's important to describe the deliverable in concrete terms so that everyone understands what the final product will look like, whether it is a report or a "go live" date for a new

### THE RAPID TEAM BUILDING TOOLKIT

Leaders can build teams rapidly and effectively in real time using the following six tools:

**1. Share personal histories**

Personal stories reveal competencies, generate respect, and foster cooperation.

**2. Ask: “What has worked for you in the past?”**

This signals that past experiences are valued as potential contributions.

**3. Describe how the team will work together**

Clearly state the team’s purpose and plan, and describe each person’s role within the team.

**4. Optimize individual team members’ strengths**

Make realistic assignments that take advantage of each team member’s individual strengths.

**5. Establish norms for making decisions**

Let team members know what types of decisions they are expected to make on their own and what types of decisions will be made by the team leader.

**6. Establish a process for giving and receiving feedback**

This allows information to be exchanged quickly, easily, and in all directions.

service or product.

Next, provide a detailed plan of action so that each team member will know exactly what must be done and when. Give the due dates for the deliverables and for the critical tasks that must be accomplished along the way.

Finally, you must make sure that each team member knows exactly how her role—and the roles of others—will contribute to achieving the team’s goals.

#### 4. OPTIMIZE INDIVIDUAL STRENGTHS

Optimizing strengths means determining the best assignments for each member by taking account of individual team member’s experiences, training, and proven performance. The right assignments align team members’ skills and aptitudes with the team’s goals, improving the likelihood of success in accomplishing the tasks at hand.

Achieving this “goodness of fit” demonstrates that you were listening when members shared their experiences and that you have engaged in whatever other discussion

was necessary to ensure that each member of the team is in the job most well suited to his skills. When you show this kind of attention, it increases the likelihood that team members will respond in kind and that they will be willing to communicate openly as the work progresses.

Finally, care in making assignments demonstrates your intention to enable all team members to succeed in their work. To fully optimize the skills at your disposal, you must be clear and precise about expected work outcomes for each position on the team and for the team as a whole.

#### 5. CLARIFY HOW DECISIONS WILL BE MADE

You can improve the effectiveness of your team by articulating how you approach decision making and deal with conflicts. You should briefly outline the scope of decision making for each position on the team, letting team members know that decisions affecting the functioning of the team or its ability to achieve its mission should be brought directly to you. For example, you should make all decisions that will affect the final outcome of the team’s work, the overall timeline, or the work of other team members.

Rapid team building requires information to be exchanged quickly, easily, and in all directions.

Conversely, you should refrain from interfering in decisions that appropriately should be made by individual team members. Insisting that team members check with you before prioritizing their daily activities or carrying out routine tasks increases your own work and reduces the effectiveness of the team as a whole. To the extent that the team is made up of people with demonstrated experience and competence, you should be able to limit your decisions to those that affect the team and its mission as a whole.

#### 6. ENSURE A FREE FLOW OF INFORMATION

Rapid team building requires information to be exchanged quickly, easily, and in all directions. You need to establish clear processes for communicating within the team, including arrangements for written, electronic, or face-to-face communication for different aspects of the team’s work.

For example, voicemail and e-mail may be useful for

some communications between individuals who have different schedules or who work in separate locations. Problem-solving discussions may require face-to-face or telephone interactions in real time—although agreements and decisions should be documented. Information required by the entire team, on the other hand, is best shared in written form, whether on paper or electronically.

The most important aspect of team communication, and the true test of effective communication, is the giving and receiving of feedback. Give positive feedback frequently and enthusiastically, and identify the results achieved. For example, responding to suggestions by saying, “Great idea; that’s a practical solution to our problem,” or to completed tasks with, “Well done; that’s just what we needed,” will help motivate team members to excel in their work.

Negative feedback is essential for course correction and quality improvement, but it should be given without

criticism or rancor. Saying, “That didn’t work; what can I do to help you?” or “This doesn’t meet our needs; let me explain why,” allows negative feedback to become an important part of the team’s culture and ensures that critical information will not be hidden or minimized.

You can establish a culture of effective communication by accepting negative feedback with gratitude, giving negative feedback sparingly and without condemnation, and finding opportunities to give positive feedback to every member of the team. ♦

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# Are Your Global Team Members Miles Apart?

by Howard M. Guttman

**C**reating a high-functioning team is challenging under any circumstance. But when the team crosses national boundaries, time zones, and cultures, how do you meld individuals' different talents, temperaments, cultural expectations, and communication styles—not to mention egos—into a superperforming whole?

If you manage a global team, you face greater challenges than those who lead teams that share the same time zone, or at least the same corner of the world. Complicating your task is the probability that you're playing for higher stakes: a company's brand, expansion plans, customer base, supply chain, and distribution network all can be compromised when its cross-border teams fail to function effectively.

In the consulting work that my colleagues and I have done with numerous teams from global Fortune 1000 companies, we have found that achieving alignment—or common agreement—in the following three areas is critical to creating a team whose performance transcends the limits imposed by culture and geography:

1. Strategic and operational goals
2. Roles and responsibilities
3. Decision-making protocols

In this article, I'll share how global teams from diverse companies in diverse industries have achieved alignment and unleashed their full potential to drive value.

## 1. ALIGNING STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL GOALS

Strategy is an organization's definition of its future. Disagreement about future product lines, market emphasis, key capabilities, financial targets, and growth expectations creates fault lines that can undermine the very foundation of the business.

Several years ago, the North American and European senior teams of a global consumer goods corporation that my consulting firm was working with convened to set a worldwide strategy. The North Americans championed the new strategy that emerged. Their European counterparts seemed to be in agreement, but they never really bought into it. When the meeting concluded, members of both groups headed back to their respective offices—the North Americans with one set of strategic assumptions, the

Europeans with another. Not surprisingly, the product development and marketing plans that emerged differed considerably, taking the company in two different directions.

This company learned the hard way that the appearance of agreement isn't the same as agreement. The resulting misalignment set off fierce competition for resources and hobbled product innovation and development. Within 18 months, the company's new-product pipeline was empty and time to market lagged 30% behind the industry standard.

Agreement is easy in the abstract. To test whether your global team is truly aligned with your company's strategy and understands what implications that strategy will have on operations, ask team members questions like these:

- What does our strategy tell us about:
  - The products and services we will (and will not) offer and the relative emphasis we will place on each?
  - The markets, customer groups, and segments we will (and will not) serve and the relative emphasis we will place on each?
  - Future requirements for human and capital resources?
  - Future financial and growth expectations?
- To what extent do our annual and long-range plans and budgets reflect our strategic and operational goals?

Have each team member write down his answers and then open the floor for discussion. This can be a time-consuming exercise, yes, but its ability to surface misunderstanding and misalignment makes it one that's highly worthwhile.

## 2. ALIGNING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The likelihood that roles and responsibilities will overlap rises exponentially within a global team. The vice president of global human resources for a major consumer health company with which we worked witnessed firsthand the problems that arise from lack of alignment in this area.

"Regional players can be very territorial," the VP observed. "They believe that the best way to drive global growth is by growing their own region. Yet the people

who run the global category are the ones who have responsibility for driving global growth. The global head of oral care, for example, needs to decide where to invest, which product lines to grow, [and] how to balance the portfolio and allocate resources across regions. But the regional head is likely to believe that this is his role because he's closer to the action.”

We helped teams at this company understand the extent of each member's responsibilities by having them do a role-clarification exercise. We began by asking team members: “How clear are you about your role and responsibilities on the team?” and “How clear are you about the other team members' roles and responsibilities?”

Then we got specific and asked each team member to define her job for the rest of the group, including the activities she carried out and the results she was responsible for. Then we asked the rest of the team members to comment. Did they agree? Did they have a different perception of that person's role and responsibilities? During the discussion that followed, several disconnects became apparent.

We have found that this exercise often results in redefining team members' roles—to the benefit of all.

### 3. ALIGNING AROUND DECISION-MAKING PROTOCOLS

There is often major confusion among team members regarding who will make decisions and how they will make them. The resulting bottlenecks retard the team and the organization. To increase the speed and efficiency of its decisions, every team must develop and agree on rules of engagement for decision making:

- Will decisions be made *unilaterally*—by one person with no input from others, for example?
- Will decisions be made *consultatively*—by one person after soliciting input from the fewest number who will add value?
- Will decisions be made *by consensus*—by gathering everyone's input, having the majority rule, and having those in the minority agree to live with the outcome?

Team members need to know which decision mode applies to which situations; otherwise, confusion, hard feelings, and subterfuge will result.

When setting rules for decision making, teams often find it useful to list all the decisions they are responsible for making and group them into categories: staffing decisions, budget decisions, marketing decisions, decisions related to new-product launches, and so on. They then should

decide how each category of decisions is best made.

In addition to determining how decisions will be made in a particular circumstance, team leaders need to establish who will be making them. For instance, before becoming CEO of Kinetic Concepts (San Antonio), Catherine Burzik spent two years as president of Foster City, Calif.-based Applied Biosystems (AB), where she established these decision-making protocols for her team of 15 VPs: “All strategic-level decisions were made by the full team,” she says, “but lower-level decisions were made by subteams. We operated like a board of directors that has committees to which it delegates fact finding and decision making.”

The likelihood that roles and responsibilities will overlap rises exponentially within a global team.

One of Burzik's most effective subteams was her Division Presidents' Council, which comprised the presidents of AB's four global businesses. Limiting the council to those who shouldered direct responsibility for results enabled decisions to be made faster, to be made by the people closest to the action, and to be informed by a variety of valuable perspectives—without wasting the time of other team members. The council soon came to be viewed by the larger team as one of the most effective ways in which issues common to the global businesses were raised and resolved.

Team leaders may find it helpful to impose a “no hands from the grave” rule: once a decision is made, there's no second-guessing it or trying to get around it. When such a rule isn't in place, chaos and conflict ensue.

We once worked with a large Paris-based international company that consisted of nine European apparel companies, each of which was a freestanding business that often competed with the others in the marketplace. The regional head instituted a “no hands from the grave” rule in response to a situation he repeatedly encountered in his early days as leader of the executive committee.

He would walk out of a meeting of the nine company presidents believing that the committee had agreed which styles each company president would offer, only later to receive a frantic phone call from one of the company presidents accusing another committee member of violating the agreement. When the regional head spoke to the one who had breached the agreement, that person

invariably complained that abiding by the agreement would stunt his company's profitability.

So the regional head persuaded the executive committee to abide by the principle that a decision made was a decision made—period. From then on, the company presidents didn't leave the room until a firm agreement had been reached on the issues and recorded in meeting minutes. There was to be no second-guessing and no ex post facto finessing.

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Alignment is more than a buzzword; it's an essential ingredient of teams that execute effectively. The exercises I've described here have delivered results for many global teams and ratcheted up their performance by making their goals, responsibilities, and decision-making processes explicit. Achieving alignment in these three key areas—strategic and operational goals, roles and responsibilities, and decision-making protocols—results in teams that devote their talents and energies not to turf wars and subterfuge but to forwarding their companies' goals. ♦

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# Give Your Team a Challenge They Can't Resist

by Lauren Keller Johnson

It's not easy pulling a group of diverse individuals together to work as a team. Barriers abound in the form of fierce territoriality, incentive systems that reward individual rather than collective achievement, and mistrust spawned by an acquisition, merger, or major internal restructuring.

Yet at a time when companies are increasingly relying on cross-functional teams at every level to generate innovative ideas, it's more crucial than ever to tap the fresh thinking that teams can provide.

So how do you overcome barriers to teamwork and turn colleagues into collaborators? Present them with an irresistible challenge, advise management consultants Patrick J. McKenna and David H. Maister, authors of *First Among Equals: How to Manage a Group of Professionals* (Free Press, 2002).

Team challenges can take numerous forms—including a high-profile project, a process-improvement crusade, or a chance to become the “winning underdogs.” A crisis and pressure to complete a daunting task in a tight time frame (launching a new IT system, initiating a brand campaign) represent additional types of challenges. “A burning platform or aggressive deadline leaves team members no time to stall, hide, or point fingers,” says Allan Steinmetz, CEO and founder of Inward Strategic Consulting, an internal branding firm in Newton, Mass.

Regardless of the many forms team challenges can take, they share a purpose: fulfilling the deep need that most people have to be part of something larger than themselves. But defining a challenge and then inspiring your team to meet it take real savvy. “Managers must first be genuinely interested in helping people excel,” says Maister. “They also have to understand that shifting from individual work to teamwork isn't an intellectual process; it's an emotional one. You have to seduce people step by step into collaborating as a team.”

Effective managers use the following five tactics:

## 1. SHARE AS MUCH INFORMATION AS YOU CAN

Share with your team as much information as possible about why their effort is so important to the company. “People want to be in the know,” says John Coleman, CEO and founding partner of The VIA Group LLC, a marketing services firm in Portland, Maine. “I make

our people feel like insiders by telling them about our company's challenges.”

Judith Glaser, CEO and president of New York City-based Benchmark Communications, encourages her clients to “open up your company's closets. Put the brutal facts on the table—whether it's ‘We slipped this quarter’ or some other difficult news. You'll make people want to protect your company.” Sharing information in this manner can spur teams to rally together and establish a shared vision for what they need to accomplish.

Malvern, Pa.-based Siemens Medical Solutions USA took information sharing a step further in 2004 when then-senior organizational development consultant Katie Buckley challenged business-unit leaders at her organization to develop a graphic depiction of the company's new competitive strategy. The team's effort resulted in a diagram that lays out the cause-and-effect links required for the company to leave rivals scrambling.

## FIVE HIP-POCKET TIPS FOR BUILDING TEAM EFFECTIVENESS

### 1. Share information

When people really understand the challenges the company faces, they are more likely to rally to help solve them.

### 2. Balance freedom and guidance

Effective leaders give their teams the freedom to solve problems while providing just enough guidance to keep them on track.

### 3. Give people room to stretch

When smart people are freed from the confines of their everyday responsibilities, some very creative ideas will surface.

### 4. Have some fun

This doesn't come naturally to some executives, but it can be well worth the effort. Teams require a sense of camaraderie to function at their best. A few laughs can go a long way toward building it.

### 5. Make the challenge visceral

When you and your team can really *feel* an issue, it takes on a whole new meaning.

The diagram and the effort required to create it united the team. The business-unit leaders realized that they had to balance allegiance to their units with their allegiance to the company and “put their ‘enterprise’ hats on,” Buckley says.

## 2. ASK FOR THEIR INPUT

Invite team members to share ideas for surmounting challenges. Glaser advises clients to “help people articulate the unique contributions they can offer. Ask them: ‘What are your ideas? What innovation can you bring to this effort?’”

Brian Zanghi, president and CEO of Nashua, N.H.-based Pragmatech Software, took this approach with his executive team soon after he joined the company. The challenge he put before them was to find ways to work across functions in what was a hierarchical culture. The ultimate goal? To gain customers and market share.

Complicating the task was the fact that half of the executive team members were new to the company and still feeling their way, and several “old guard” members were uncomfortable with the idea of collaborating with those outside their units.

To overcome these barriers, Zanghi asked team members to draw on their own expertise to generate ideas for cross-functional initiatives. “I don’t micromanage; that kills creativity and collaboration,” he says. But he did provide some necessary structure to their brainstorming by testing ideas with such questions as “How will this idea get customers to use our products faster than before?”

## 3. STRETCH YOUR PEOPLE

Draw people into a challenge by offering them the chance to use skills they don’t normally exercise in their day-to-day work. By stretching beyond their skill set, people gain experience by thinking in fresh ways—a key ingredient in effective team collaboration. They also can become a great source of innovative ideas.

Stacy DeWalt, vice president of marketing at Stamford, Conn.-based Pitney Bowes, took this approach with her team. She brought 25 people together who had deep expertise in different areas—advertising, public relations, and the Web—to brainstorm ideas for how to change the perceptions of the firm’s target audience and to elevate the importance of its products and services to the C-level audience.

DeWalt then assigned people with different expertise to subgroups and challenged them to generate ideas

outside their normal sphere of responsibility. Mass communication specialists, for instance, were charged with developing suggestions for direct-response marketing programs.

## 4. MAKE IT FUN, ACTIONABLE, AND VISIBLE

To put team collaboration into overdrive, inject fun into your team’s challenge. DeWalt, for instance, designed her team’s brainstorming session to mimic the TV series *The Apprentice*, in which developer Donald Trump presents aspiring businesspeople with a challenge and then “fires” mediocre performers. “Our CMO played Trump,” DeWalt says. “He told the group we were out to ‘fire’ our competitors.”

But DeWalt made it clear that there was more to the exercise than just fun. “We told the team that the company would fund their best ideas, so people knew their brainstorming was actionable.” Participants also discovered their work would be visible. After the session, the groups gathered the easels on which they’d recorded their ideas and carried them to the boardroom on the sixth floor. “All the VPs and the CMO were there,” says DeWalt. “People realized they had the executive team’s endorsement.”

DeWalt’s reward? Four of the team’s best ideas have found their way into corporate or business-unit marketing plans. Moreover, participants have begun collaborating more to seize advantage of one another’s perspectives. One young woman enamored by “makeover” series on TV suggested a “mailroom makeover.” Intrigued by her pop-culture perspective, some of her brainstorming partners have invited her input regarding other programs to get more of her ideas.

## 5. HELP PEOPLE FEEL THE CHALLENGE

Design exercises that let team members experience their challenge viscerally. Consider the tactics used by executives in General Motors’ Saturn division, when they recently challenged retailer teams to generate new ideas for fulfilling Saturn’s purpose: to “surprise and delight” customers. “We wanted them to experience surprising and delighting at a gut level,” says Chris Bower, manager of retail strategy and customer experience for GM. So the company designed a core-values training course in which each retail team built a bicycle to learn how best to work together. Next the teams had to design a “delivery experience” meant to surprise and delight the new bike owners.

After the teams developed their strategies, facilitators

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## Give Your Team a Challenge *continued*

brought children from the local community into the room and presented them as the new bike owners. Neither the youngsters nor the Saturn teams knew of the plan ahead of time. “The teams not only surprised and delighted the kids,” says Bower, but they experienced those feelings themselves.

Team members thus gained a visceral understanding of what they were trying to achieve. The “surprise and delight” they themselves experienced during the exercise proved a powerful motivator to solving the challenge they had been presented by Saturn’s leaders. ♦

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