Effective
team building
Best practices lead to
improved results

Truist Leadership Institute

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The development of high-performing teams is often undervalued in business because it does not seem to directly impact the bottom line. However, failure to build teams with intention can lead to minimally acceptable performance at best, with less than optimal bottom line results. At worst, it can produce hard feelings and diminished trust, both of which undermine future team performance and significantly undercut long-term results because team members are contributing well below their potential.

In today's business world of highly matrixed organizations, increasing numbers of geographically disperse and virtual employees, and volatile, uncertain and complex conditions, it is more important than ever to pay attention to team development.

A team development model

An effective team-building process (sometimes called team optimization) can help a team improve its performance significantly. It is fundamental for a team to know its purpose within the organization. Team members must understand their roles on the team and how their work supports the larger purpose. The team needs to understand where it is in its development process. And the team should be able to identify what is and what is not working in its group processes.

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It's also vital to understand how the team perceives its strengths and opportunities for improvement, as well as how others perceive them. It's useful to understand how individual personality preferences and characteristics influence the group dynamics, too. With this solid foundation, teams can create a growth plan that addresses their specific development opportunities.

These imperatives coalesce in the classic framework and team-building sequence conceptualized in four phases by the late educational psychologist Bruce Tuckman.

All teams have the opportunity to move through all four stages of development. Unfortunately, many teams stall out somewhere between storming and norming. Few teams actually reach the performing stage or beyond. Avoiding the pitfalls requires understanding and knowing how to anticipate and recognize them. Here are the main culprits that hold teams back.

Forming

A team is formed to consider opportunities and challenges and to establish goals. In the team's earliest stages, members tend to act independently and focus on their own perspectives.

Storming

Personality conflicts and disagreements occur and threaten the effectiveness of the team. While this phase doesn't always occur, it is very common. If not managed effectively, the team can derail at this stage.

Norming

Personality conflicts are resolved or simply accepted. Team members begin to cooperate and willingly take on responsibility to support team goals.

Performing

At this stage, team members have learned to work together and are able to operate autonomously. They no longer need much supervision from a leader and are working effectively toward achieving their goals.

Exceptional teams that deliver superior results don't just happen. Even with the best, brightest and strongest talent, great results are not guaranteed. Why? Because group process and group dynamics matter, too. Lack of group processes and challenging group dynamics will undermine a team's performance and prevent it from reaching its potential. This paper offers insights into effective team building, based on principles embraced by the Truist Leadership Institute[1].

Upgrading team effectiveness after a reorganization

When it is clear a team isn't performing effectively, what can you do to remedy the situation? Here's an abbreviated case study to provide some insight.

Original situation: A company had three teams, each with six to eight members. Teams A and B reported to Ann. A third team (C) reported to Bill. Teams A and B worked with C but had a challenging relationship with C and vice versa.

New situation: Following a reorganization, Team C was directed to report to Ann, the same as A and B, so all three teams would be tied more closely together. A team-building process was initiated to build better working relationships among the three teams.

A three-step team optimization process was undertaken:

1 Each team, with the support of professional facilitation, conducted a self-examination to assess its strengths, weaknesses, motivations, conflict triggers and conflict management approaches.

2 Following the self assessment, each team reported its findings to the entire group of three teams. Among other findings, the self assessment process revealed:

- Opportunities within each team to increase cohesion and collaboration
- Gaps in each team's approaches to problem-solving and decision-making
- Symptoms of conflict within and between individual teams

3 With the insights learned from the previous step, the three teams worked together in a facilitated process to improve their interactions. Specific changes resulting from the process included:

- Enhanced communication between teams regarding expectations and needs
- Improved ability to manage conflict productively instead of ignoring it or escalating it in unproductive ways
- Optimized use of resources and capacity across all three teams
- Greater ability to positively influence teams in other parts of the organization

To ensure the gains achieved by the team-effectiveness improvement process are sustained, the teams agreed to:

- Request informal feedback on a consistent basis regarding what's working and not working in team interactions
- Proactively address symptoms and causes of conflict between individuals and teams as they occur with the people involved in the conflict; all members of the teams have permission to initiate the conversation
- Negotiate and compromise to create solutions that are acceptable to all teams involved in any given situation

Pitfalls to avoid

A common pitfall is allowing group processes and group dynamics to happen by chance. The result: teams miss opportunities to develop, be intentional about moving through the development stages, collaborate effectively and find synergies.

Teams sometimes also forget to reset when there is any type of change, such as when someone joins or leaves the team, the team is given new responsibilities or a new team leader is assigned. Such events typically send the team back to a previous development stage, often all the way back to the forming stage.

Another common challenge is when teams appear to exist in name only, based on formal reporting lines. Members of these teams may work in functional silos, coming together primarily to share information. They may not recognize the need to work together effectively to yield desired results for the larger organization. In particular, these teams often miss the opportunity to manage the team-oriented aspects of their work, such as providing direction and strategy to the downstream organization.

Finally, teams sometimes believe development is a once-in-a-while or once-a-year activity. The problem with that approach is team dynamics are always in play, so team building needs to be an ongoing process. Teams that pay attention to their group

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processes and dynamics on a consistent basis, and get support for appropriate interventions, can move more intentionally through the stages of development.

Seven critical steps

Overcoming these and other pitfalls to build the best teams possible requires following seven crucial steps:

1. **Define the team's purpose.** The more concretely the purpose can be defined, the more successful the team is likely to be. If the team will remain in existence indefinitely due to ongoing responsibilities, it can be helpful to state the team's near-term purpose in addition to its long-term function. When appropriate, the description of a team's most immediate purpose can include a deadline. Ordinarily, the team's purpose definition will be subject to review and concurrence by all team members, instead of entirely dictated by someone who will not be an active team member. It will be difficult for a team to grow effectively and reach its potential when team members cannot agree on a statement of purpose.

2. **Determine high-performing characteristics needed to deliver on the team's purpose.** Different team strengths may be required for different team purposes. For example, a team charged with developing a vision of the organization's products or services a decade into the future will demand different strengths than a team charged with finding ways to cut the company's expenses during the next six months. Or consider a team whose purpose is to write an analysis of a diversified company's competitive strengths and weaknesses. It might require members, each having a unique field of expertise, who can produce their own section of the report without a need for much interaction from other team members. Such a team might not require the same collaborative skills as the team envisioning the company's future. Having an appropriate model of high-performance team behavior can provide essential guidance for ongoing team development.

3. **Assess current team development needs and team performance against high-performing team characteristics.** This assessment should address stage of team development, group processes and dynamics, and performance against high-performing team characteristics. This provides a basis for comparison so a team can determine how well it's doing and how it can improve.

4. **Understand the perceptions of others: foster 360-degree feedback**. Even with the benefit of a high-performance benchmark, teams can lose their way. Feedback from above is expected and generally provided. Honest feedback from others, including immediate and downline direct reports – in addition to business partners, customers and suppliers who witness the team's functioning or have other interactions with the team – is also vital to keep the team on track.

5. **Clarify gaps.** Gaps come in many forms – knowledge, skills, will, capacity and performance. It is important to identify both what kinds of gaps exist and how the gaps are impacting the team's ability to deliver results. When teams are established, there's almost always a missing element – whether that's specific expertise, interpersonal skills, authority to make certain decisions or something else. Recognizing and filling such gaps on the fly may be essential to the team's ultimate success. The same principle applies to unforeseen gaps in the steps a team needs to take to accomplish its mission.

6. **Prioritize opportunities.** The broader the team's mandate, the greater the risk of it failing to meet its core objectives. Just as individuals with complex jobs must establish priorities, so must effective teams. Equally critical is having the self-awareness to recognize when the team has failed to prioritize.

7. **Create an action plan and monitor progress.** Even the most effective team's efforts to accomplish its purpose will come to naught without a carefully developed plan to make it happen. In addition, an action plan can prescribe a formal (yet simple) process to regularly monitor the team's performance, both in its operational effectiveness (group processes and dynamics) and its track record on achieving specific milestones and goals.

Thoughtfully executing these steps can maximize performance and create success. Building effective teams is an intentional process and often a mindset shift. It's not a quick fix, but it can deliver big results for organizations and team members willing to put in the effort.

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Truist Leadership Institute

During the past half-century, Truist Leadership Institute, and its predecessor firm Farr Associates, have developed and refined approaches to business leadership through collaborative work with clients throughout the United States. The Truist Leadership Institute provides organizations with a leadership development partner who helps create dynamic and effective leaders, increase employee retention and improve the bottom line.