



Wellness Practices for Teams

by Mareen Duncan Fisher and Kimball Fisher

Free Resources

TARGET

AUDIENCE—

People who want to know how to prevent common team problems.

RECOMMENDED TRAINING

The Team Development Series

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More often than not, organizations rely on well-functioning teams to serve customers, innovate, and improve productivity. But creating and maintaining effective teams can be a challenge. While teams can provide dramatic improvements over traditional work structures, they often fall short. And given the complex, interdependent nature of today's work, a weak team can put the whole organization at risk.

Create a team charter. Getting off to a healthy start is one of the best preventative measures a team can take. Successful teams have, almost without exception, a shared sense of purpose created at their onset. Those teams that struggle or fail to coalesce, often attribute their ills to an unclear focus. Smart leaders invest time and energy up front to help create a team charter. The charter provides a sense of purpose, clarifies what the team is expected to do, focuses the energies and activities of team members, and provides a basis for setting goals, prioritizing work, and making decisions. It complements an organization's mission statement by providing a context for the work of the group. A management team at a telecommunications firm, for instance, created a charter to "support the sector's mission (in a way that) fosters employee creativity, personal growth, and empowerment." Charter discussions also led the group to an important metaphor for its work: "creating a connection between people," much as cable splicers or call center agents connect customers to the company.

Although a team leader or company manager may facilitate the process, team members themselves develop the charter. No one format is better than another, although most charters include a statement of overall purpose, description of key customers, and key results to be attained. Other elements, such as key alliance partnerships, important deliverables and deadlines for critical technologies, can be added if useful and relevant.

Set goals and measure results. Not measuring a team's performance is like playing a game without keeping score. A key to team wellness is having a clear way to measure performance from the beginning. This is true for either a project team or an intact natural work team. A clear set of well-defined metrics allows the team to manage its progress and fulfill the purpose outlined in its charter. Without a set of measurable goals, teams can easily get distracted by issues not relevant to the success of the project,



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the team, or the team's customers.

Develop operating guidelines. If expectations about behavior and interactions between team members are not clearly articulated and understood, the team is headed for trouble.

Operating guidelines are a set of shared agreements developed by the team which define how team members will interact. For example "we will be prepared for meetings," "we will treat each other with dignity and respect," or "we will follow through on our commitments." Such guidelines provide a conscious alternative to unspoken norms such as "we will defer to management to make all key decisions," or "we will complain about other team members behind their backs instead of talking with them directly." Used properly, operating guidelines can be a powerful vehicle for self-regulation and team well-being.

Define team member roles and responsibilities. Clearly defining team member roles and responsibilities up front is crucial. Begin by jointly articulating what should be expected of *all* team members. Once in agreement on areas of common responsibility, move on to determining individual roles. Review the specific skills and expertise needed on the team given your charter, key projects, major areas of responsibility, and individual skills and strengths. It is also useful to identify the degree to which team members need to learn one another's roles for backup or development.

Develop feedback skills. Each team member's performance affects the work of the whole team. But giving and receiving feedback about needs for improvement requires special skills. To foster effective communication, managers should make three simple principles part of every team's early training:

- Giving feedback is a way to improve the performance of a team and its members, not to make oneself feel better.
- Avoiding critical feedback usually makes matters worse.
- Arguing over others' feelings or perceptions is seldom productive. It is more useful to listen, understand teammates' intent, and ask questions that can clear up any confusion.

Learn to manage conflict. Teams create dynamics that present many opportunities for conflict. One Human

Resources manager's observation applies to many organizations: "Ours is a very polite company, and it's considered impolite to raise uncomfortable issues. That has been one of our bigger struggles - learning to value differences. We need to emphasize the positive side of conflict."

That struggle, if managed effectively, can be a source of strength and creativity. Conflict defines. It forces us to examine our assumptions, ideas, and solutions. But left unmanaged or unresolved, conflict can become destructive, eroding the confidence and trust crucial to a team's ability to work together. Teams should learn how to deal with conflict before it disables them.

Develop good group decision making processes. Teams need to understand their role in the decision making processes of the larger organization, learn different methods of decision making and, perhaps most important, learn to reach consensus on key decisions. Building consensus is a key to building the trust, participation, and competence that sustains well functioning teams. Too many teams confuse consensus with unanimity. If members do not clearly understand and practice the steps to reaching consensus, decision making can be a frustrating, if not futile, effort.

Integrate new team members effectively. Any time a new member is introduced into a team, the dynamics of the team change. Many of the "growing pains" associated with team learning and development will repeat themselves as the chemistry and make-up of the team are altered.

An effective orientation process sets the footing for long-term success. In spite of its significance, however, orientation is too often limited to getting a tour of the workplace and being introduced to colleagues. The arrival of a new member is a major event for teams and their leaders. But planning and preparation will minimize the disruptive impact of a personnel change. The team should establish an orientation process for new team members, create a checklist of key tasks, policies, and practices, and assign team members to work on each item on the checklist with the new person.

Develop a team training discipline. Good training is the best exercise a team can get. Organizations that shortchange their training are shortchanging their future success. Yet training doesn't always have to cost a lot of money. For example, some companies, under pressure to cut expenses, keeps the vast majority of their training in-house and makes training a part of everyone's job. Those

companies employ no professional trainers as such, but make managers and staff responsible for teaching others. Likewise, AT&T has created a series of training modules to support sales techniques, customer service, new product information, and other real-time needs. General managers deliver the modules to their management team in regular team meetings; each manager then trains his or her group in sessions every other week. Your team training plan should include technical, business, and interpersonal skills, and should take advantage of a wide range of learning contexts, including mentoring, on-the-job training, special assignments, job rotation, and project debriefings, as well as classroom training.

In today's business environment every organization will experience occasional hiccups. But leaders cannot afford to wait for trouble to develop and then respond; problems spread too quickly and affect too many parts of the organization. Giving work teams the tools to manage their own future is the way to keep the whole enterprise thriving.

About the Authors:

Mareen and Kimball Fisher are co-founders of The Fisher Group, Inc. They are the authors of The Distance Manager: A Hands-On Guide to Managing Off-Site Employees and Virtual Teams (McGraw-Hill), and The Distributed Mind: Achieving High Performance through the Collective Intelligence of Knowledge Work Teams (AMA-COM). Both are internationally acknowledged authorities on leadership and teams with clients across the US, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Prior to starting up The Fisher Group, they both worked for Procter and Gamble and Tektronix. They are frequent speakers and webconference presenters.



Reprinted from Leader To Leader (adapted)

Recommended Team Wellness Practices

- Create a team charter
- Set goals and measure results
- Develop operating guidelines
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- Develop feedback skills
- Learn to manage conflict
- Develop good group decision making processes
- Integrate new team members effectively
- Develop a team training discipline