

## **Team Leadership Can Be a Challenge**

*By Nancy A. Haas*

In today's business world teamwork refers to a form of business management that is the preferred practice among organizations, both large and small. Businesses are realizing how much their success depends on the efforts of their employees and their ability to work together. But what is a team and how can it function best?

A team is defined as a group of two or more individuals, acting interdependently to combine their efforts toward a common goal. In business, there are many opportunities to join a team: as a business leader, you may participate on a committee of your local Chamber of Commerce or trade association; as the company president, partner or CEO, you automatically become a member of your organization's executive team; and as employees, you are sometimes called upon to participate on department, division, or cross-functional teams. It is also more often the case that individuals participate on several teams, utilizing their expertise to help reach a common objective.

Teams can be responsible for creating new products or developing better processes for existing ones; they can include a few people or many, and can be very diverse in cultures and experiences. They can even be virtual, relying on modern technology to communicate and develop solutions. Team members must be good listeners, followers, motivators, and innovators. They must be willing to share their successes and failures, support each other, and maintain professionalism throughout the process, regardless of whether it is a short-term (a week, month or year) or a long-term (involving a process turnaround, or a merger/acquisition) project. Team leaders must do all of the above, and more.

Leading a team made up of different personalities, cultures and perspectives so that they function as one can be a challenge, especially when team leadership is most often cited as the reason for team failure. But it is not impossible if you follow a few key principles of leadership.

There are basically two forms of team leadership – the controller and the enabler. The controller manages the entire process, discourages discussion and differing opinions, and determines how each task is performed and by whom. The enabler may determine the goal and purpose, but allows the team to manage the methods of accomplishing the task. They do not micro-manage the process, but instead set a clear direction, and foster rather than impede teamwork. They also encourage discussion without losing focus or getting bogged down in issues that derail the creative process. A true leader motivates team members to contribute their best, values their contribution, and ensures that their time is not wasted on yet 'another team project'.

Good team leadership also means having the ability to manage conflict, which can have both a positive and a negative influence on a team. When we first mention conflict, our mind conjures up images of disagreements among individuals. But within a healthy team environment, disagreements can result in creative ideas and solutions. Healthy conflict is when members 'agree to disagree', and prevent issues from becoming personal; emotions are kept in check and



team members walk out of the room as team players instead of combatants. On the other hand, a team whose members are hesitant to bring up dissenting opinions may be representative of a team that lacks trust in each other, avoids accountability, and has not committed to a clear plan of action, allowing personal agendas to interfere with team objectives. Conflict between individuals that negatively affects the team is like a virus that destroys productivity and deteriorates relationships, leading to distrust and frustration. A leader knows that unhealthy conflict must be addressed quickly, and in doing so, is willing to make difficult decisions, including replacing some of the team's members for the good of the team.

Warren G. Bennis' once said: "Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality." A true team leader translates a team's vision into reality by encouraging discussion, establishing trust, and developing a true commitment to the task at hand while supporting the efforts of the team. Team leadership does have its challenges, but it also has its rewards when the vision becomes a reality.

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