



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Try this Group Exercise to Improve Team Effectiveness

Team effectiveness and cohesion is an area that can sometimes sink a project. Most of you have heard of high-performing teams, and even worked on some. There are some situations where the opposite occurs. You have a group of people who are each good performers in their own right. However, when they get together on the same team, the whole is not as effective and productive as the sum of their parts.

There are a lot of factors that can cause this. There could be personality conflicts. There could be a lack of project manager leadership. There could be poor work processes. There are many ways you can try to combat the situation. A group exercise might help. The value to this exercise is that it allows the team to critique itself in a safe environment, and then help to come up with some potential solutions. One of the big problems with dysfunctional teams is that much of the trouble lies just under the surface. This type of group exercise helps bring those trouble areas to the surface where they can be discussed and addressed.

It would be helpful to use a third-party facilitator in this exercise. An independent facilitator is not mandatory, but it may get people to open up more. If the project manager takes a lead role, the discussion might be more inhibited, especially if the team views the project manager as a part of the problem.

The exercise

1. Participants take post-it note cards, and write down the top five problem areas that they think make the team less than fully effective. This is somewhat of a brainstorming effort, so there are no right or wrong answers. Everyone is presenting ideas from their perspective. You want team members to be open and honest. They should feel safe that any comments made will stay inside the room.
2. The facilitator gathers the cards and posts them on the wall. Problem areas that are related should be grouped together. You should end up with some general buckets like lack of leadership, poor planning, personality conflicts, etc.
3. Next, rank the general problem areas in terms of importance. Since the original list was built through a brainstorming process, now is the time to try to identify those areas that are most important. You will also find that some problems are really symptoms, and they will go away if more fundamental problems are addressed. One way to prioritize is to give everyone five sticky dots that they can place by the problem groups they think are the most important. Then count the total dots by each problem to see its relative ranking compared with the other problem areas.
4. Look at each problem area individually, starting with the most important. The facilitator asks each person to write down a few ways that the problem could be remedied. All of these potential solutions should be constructive, and as practical as



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possible. When possible, they should also be detailed. These solutions are again posted on the wall by the facilitator.

5. The group should discuss the pros and cons of each solution so that everyone understands what is involved. Many solutions may be similar and can be grouped together. Sometimes the solution requires people to think and act differently. Other times, a solution may require getting others involved outside of the immediate team.
6. After everyone understands the various solutions, the team again votes on which recommendation(s) make the most sense to implement.
7. After the recommendations are voted on and accepted, the team should be very specific in terms of the action plan required to solve the problem. There should be a set of activities, people assigned and end dates. It might make sense to create a section on the project workplan to account for this time, if necessary. Depending on the time involved, you can also create the action plan offline, after the meeting.
8. The team should continue with this process until all important problem areas are discussed and solutions put into place. Normally the project manager is responsible for assigning and following up on the work assignments, unless some other process or person is made accountable. Again, the team may feel that the project manager needs to be more hands-off for this effort.
9. The team should set up one or more subsequent meetings to evaluate whether the work is being completed, and whether the team is performing more effectively.

Summary

This problem-solving meeting in itself provides a valuable team building opportunity. When you have a team that is dysfunctional, this type of approach can be used to address the problems and resolve them. You will also find that once you start to address the problems in a safe and respectful manner, the team should feel more and more comfortable addressing the fundamental problems they see. To a certain degree, the exercise is therapeutic. It helps just because it allows people to talk about what is on their mind. However, don't leave it at that. Make sure that the team executes the action plan, and schedule the follow-up meetings to make sure the team is moving toward the performance level they are capable of achieving.