

TRENDLINES

The Employers' Association's monthly whitepaper on essential Business/Human Resources practices

The Employers' Association (TEA) delivers reports for businesses that contain relevant and up-to-date information based on our work with hundreds of employers each month. TEA is known to produce a number of essential benchmark survey reports every year and we also compile data and observations that provide organizations practical perspectives on important business trends.

Building Effective Workplace Teams

What you should know

“No member of a crew is praised for the rugged individuality of his rowing” – Ralph Waldo Emerson.

“My model of business is the Beatles. They were four guys who kept each other's negative tendencies in check. They balanced each other and the total was greater than the sum of the parts. That's how I see business: great things in business are never done by one person. They are done by a team of people.” – Steve Jobs.

A team is defined as ‘any group of people organized to work together interdependently and cooperatively to accomplish a purpose or a goal’. Shared responsibility for a common goal defines successful teams. Teams create a framework to help individuals easily work together, improving decision-making, problem-solving, and organizational agility.

Teamwork ensures that resources are well-managed and less time is needed to complete projects. Good teamwork can contribute to better utilization of resources, improved project outcomes and ultimately higher profits while increasing employee satisfaction and encouraging healthy employee engagement.

What we know

Teams have become the core of how business is conducted providing for a continuity when conducting business, managing projects and coordinating interdepartmental activities. Modern work is increasingly more team-based with up to 75% of an employee's time spent communicating with colleagues. Successful organizations invest in teams, putting the optimal mix of diverse yet invested people together in the right environment (that provides them with responsibility and accountability) and creating support structures to help them excel.

Two critical issues identified by almost every one of The Employers' Association Engagement Surveys is that individual departments do not always communicate well with each other and Leadership (at all levels) either tell employees EXACTLY what to do and how to do it or fail to listen to employee suggestions so communication becomes one way. This lack of cross communication negatively impacts productivity, leads to the formation of self-serving silos, creates an “us vs. them” mentality and wastes time as individuals are busy creating defenses for their actions rather than working together to create effective and innovative solutions. In order to remedy this critical employee and productivity issue, The Employers' Association consistently

recommends the use of cross functional teams (designed and developed intentionally AND provided with the appropriate tools, training and resources to make them work).

Companies have recognized the need, benefits and efficacy of having and using Teams to the extent that offices are often organized in pods of team members to increase interaction, communication and efficiency. Teams have become such a critical part of an organization's functioning that experienced champions are frequently hired specifically to manage their efforts, activities and interactions. Project managers know that team member cooperation boosts productivity and enables projects to run smoother, helps project teams anticipate and overcome obstacles and speeds up the achievement of assigned or established targets.

What it means

Some of the critical benefits of fully embracing and incorporating teams into an Organization's culture and fabric would include (but are not limited to) the following. Effective Teams:

1. **Promote Creativity** – People generate an environment of creativity when they work together. Creativity happens naturally when there is brainstorming and a mutual sharing of ideas. Each team member provides a unique set of perceptions and ideas providing synergies for completing projects and should be encouraged to contribute.
2. **Encourage Risk-Taking** –Taking risks can improve projects and shorten time lines. Working as a team encourages risk-taking because it minimizes individual risk (which might create potential personal and professional consequences of failure) replacing it with shared risk. Functioning as a team, there is support from other members in case things fall apart. The knowledge that everyone wins if you succeed and if there is a problem everyone shares the responsibility and will work together to find a solution increases the willingness to take more risk.
3. **Help to Improve Conflict-Resolution Skills** - A team is made up of unique individuals. This diversity helps in project success but can also lead to disputes. Project managers, team leaders and team members must step in to resolve the conflicts that, in most cases, will not involve senior management. Building conflict resolution skills in this way (within a “safe” environment that was established when the team was formed) helps others in the unit do the same.
4. **Build Trust** - Teamwork requires close interpersonal relationships that can only be built by trusting each other. With trust, team members feel free to share ideas. Trust within a team gives team members the space to support and encourage each other. A trusting relationship leads to high productivity – an environment of suspicion or distrust will destroy most of the potential good that a team can provide.
5. **Bring Together Diverse Strengths** - Teamwork takes advantage of individual strengths. One team member may be good at planning, another might be talented in coordinating while someone else is good at creative thinking. The synergistic whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts. When you bring together various strengths, this can lead to more successful project outcomes. Each member brings their talents to the table AND each table must be expected to recognize and engage the diversity represented within the team.
6. **Increase Accountability** - There are days when you do not feel like giving it your all when working alone. Working on a project as a team helps you feel more needed and accountable. It is the informal peer pressure – the feeling that you do not want to let your colleagues down – that keeps team members “on their game” all day long. When you are working with people you respect, you do not want to disappoint them (and do not expect them to disappoint you).
7. **Increase Project Momentum** - Teams speed up projects and shorten overall time lines. Teams allow for concurrent activities to take place where an individual has to do things sequentially. Additionally, individuals may not have all of the skills required to successfully complete a project. With the right

people, and the right attitudes (experience and personality strengths), deadlines that seemed insurmountable are suddenly achievable.

8. **Identify Solutions to Complex Problems** – Unexpected, unanticipated and complex problems are encountered in throughout the accomplishment of a project. Teamwork brings different skills to work together to better generate an acceptable outcome. Again, a synergy of different perspectives and talents will provide simple solutions to complex problems AS LONG AS the team has been provided the tools and training to engage all members of the team and to act when needed (rather than overthinking the problem to the point that a solution is never found).

What you can do

Every project is different so each team will be unique. The composition of all teams are essentially the same, however, as are the expectations and desired results. The design of a fully functioning team is achieved by:

1. **Accurately defining the goals and objectives of any project that requires a team.** Generate a Scope of work that clearly defines project requirements, expectations, scope of responsibility and timeframe so that anyone can understand what needs to be accomplished.
2. **Identifying the critical functional areas necessary to successfully complete the project.** Which areas are necessary to represent all of the critical functions needed to successfully accomplish the objective? Identify stakeholder groups to create the most “buy in” to any solution that is developed then develop the team “on paper” (without identifying the names of those representing the functional areas) before creating it in practice.
3. **Obtaining a resource from each of the critical functional areas.** Requesting a resource from the management of a specific function builds buy in from that management and helps cross functional understanding of a project. Make sure that the “suggested member” has knowledge that will be helpful and the required personality attributes that they can realistically make a contribution.
4. **Identifying personality traits and characteristics that compliment rather than conflict with or mirror each other when building a team.** All teams need leaders, “doers,” researchers and “questioners” to vet their solutions prior to implementation. A team of “leaders” may not have the resources (or patience) to investigate, implement and follow-through a solution while a team of “researchers” may not have the initiative to implement a plan.
5. **Assigning a Project Leader to oversee all activities and resources.** The project manager is responsible for the overall project delivery and the management of the team resources. Make sure that the Manager is equipped to lead and facilitate discussion within the team, encourage all members to participate and is capable of sharing the credit for a job well done (or assuming the blame for shortcomings that must be corrected).
6. **Identifying a Project Sponsor.** A project sponsor is an individual in a senior leadership position and acts as the line of communication between the team and upper management when necessary. The project sponsor is also a mediator or tie breaker when a team cannot reach consensus on a critical issue but should not be the “my way or else” vote should a team put together several workable solutions.
7. **Empowering the team.** Allow a team to work independently to make critical decisions and develop project directives (within realistic guidelines that should be detailed prior to letting the team work) without the approval of upper management.
8. **Training team leaders and team members in the tools they need to function well within a team setting.** Some necessary trainings are, Effective Teams, Risk Management, Mediation and Negotiation, Project Management and Project Scheduling. An effective team must identify a problem, determine what needs to be changed (and why), gather information about current and past practices, discuss and draw out discussion from fellow team members, formulate a workable plan (including the negotiations to refine and enhance the idea) then take intentional action to put the plan in motion (while

monitoring results). An ill-equipped team left to its own devices will typically produce dictated or mandated results which are not well-received and may be marginally effective.

Teams are a powerful tool in accomplishing company goals and deliverables in a reasonable time frame and can improve company culture, improve morale and productivity, discourage silos and compartmentalization while strengthening communication between departments. Get the most from the teams you put together by focusing on the “pre-work” so that the “post-work” results will be exceed your highest expectations.

