

# Team Management Tips

## 1) 'HOT' TACTICS FOR HEATING UP YOUR TEAM

"Hot teams" improvise, do more work with less supervision and make the extra effort to follow through.

Management consultant Laurence Haughton offers this advice for turning ordinary groups into hot teams:

1. **Don't become rule-bound.** Rules intended to streamline and safeguard work can hamstring your operation when common sense calls for exceptions. Before setting rules, ask if they're needed.
2. **Don't criticize in public.** Embarrassing employees in front of the team will only come back to bite you. Mean bosses think that they're holding people accountable, but what they're really doing is inciting payback.
3. **Show you care.** If you like your people and show it, they'll enjoy helping you when crunch time comes.
4. **Listen.** Make it one-on-one, as well as in groups. Listening helps you correct misinformation, relax barriers, increase trust and let people feel good about what they do for a living.
5. **Make it their mission.** Even when a project is exciting, well you can make the work more engaging. Creating roles for each person, for example, gives people a sense of being special.
6. **Let them decide.** Allowing people to devise their processes boosts morale. Just make sure those processes keep improving.

## 2) BRING THE OFF-SITE ENERGY OF TEAM-BUILDING EXERCISES BACK TO THE OFFICE

The typical off-site meeting is chock-full of PowerPoint presentations, flip charts, and team-building exercises. But back at work months later, what actually changes?

Lead an off-site event that leaves your team energized and focused:

1. Know what victory looks like. How will you know if you've achieved it? When Timberland Co. needed to revamp and add new products, they held an off-site event to jump-start things. They invited designers, engineers, and marketers from the company to spend one week hashing it out, a process that generally takes years. Result: They met their goals. "Having that concrete goal allowed us to walk the line between exploring creative flights of fancy and remaining results-driven," VP Doug Clark said.
2. **Make sure team-building exercises relate to solving a real problem.** During Ford's off-site event, Carolyn Lantz, executive director of brand imaging, gave executives \$50 each and put them on a bus to an Old Navy store. "I told them, 'You have 20 minutes to find and purchase an outfit that you have to wear tomorrow. You are busy people looking for great design at a great price. Those are Ford's customers.'" The exercise made a point: Ford's products need to be well designed, but democratically priced.

## 3) FIGHT OFF TEAM COMPLACENCY: 5 STRATEGIES FOR MAKING TEAM-BUILDING EXERCISES PART OF YOUR DAILY ROUTINE

Soon after a team forms, the excitement often peaks. Teammates dream of big accomplishments, set grandiose goals, and promise to collaborate.

But when the initial enthusiasm dies down, the energetic atmosphere fades, and a more solemn routine emerges. Senior executives who attended the first few team meetings no longer show up. New developments (or crises!) within the organization redirect management's focus away from the group's activities. Some team members start slacking off or immersing themselves in other projects, leaving less time to devote to the group.

If this pattern unfolds at your workplace, step in and breathe new life into your team. Here's how:

- Inject new blood. Invite a few high-energy types to join the team. Please don't put them in charge, or they'll threaten the team leader and the informal hierarchy that's already formed. Instead, ask them to lend their talents and revitalize the group.
- Tape the team. When a lethargic public speaker needs to liven up, a smart speech coach will videotape the individual's presentation and play it back. By raising the speaker's self-awareness, the tape serves as a training tool. The same goes when you want to jolt a team to rise to a higher level. Lecturing a team to improve might fall upon deaf ears, but a videotape of their meetings can show them just how listless they've become.
- Turn your team into trainers. Form a new team, and ask your current group to serve as an "advisory board" to it. Arrange for the veterans to coach the rookies. Encourage them to share their experiences about teamwork and isolate the kind of behaviors that facilitate more effective collaboration. You may want to create a buddy system whereby each seasoned team member mentors someone in the new group.
- Strip away routine. Study how a tired team got that way. Disrupt predictable patterns by having the group meet in new places (a nearby park, a client's facility, your home) and work together in new ways. Instead of having them break into the same small cliques, for instance, juggle the mix so that team members who typically don't work closely together will get a chance to know each other better. Or, instead of having them sit in the same places, rearrange the seating configuration so that everyone's in a circle.
- Host an outing. Invite the team to join you on a weekend hike or family picnic. Schedule fun activities so that participants get to know each other with their guard down. Even if you already tried this early on, do it again now that the team has been together for a while. When the group returns to work, they'll have a newfound camaraderie, which will translate into more trust and teamwork.

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## 4) IS YOUR TEAM STUCK? GET THEM UNSTUCK

The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization by Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, one of the first books to define the team phenomenon, still offers some of the best advice for managing them. Here's how to get a stalled team unstuck:

Revisit the basics. Ask the team to rethink its purpose, approach, and goals.

Achieve some small wins. Even noncritical short-term wins can get a team moving forward again.

Introduce fresh new approaches, ideas, and information. Simply providing new customer case studies or front-line work measures can end the stalemate.

Set up fresh training for the team. It could center on key skills, teamwork, or goal-setting.

Juggle the team's membership or change its leadership. Leaders who were appointed by upper management can seem irreplaceable to other team members. Don't be afraid to intervene and mandate a change.

It's great when the team applies some of these energizing tactics from within, without being asked. But if that doesn't happen, your job as a leader is to intervene and shake things up.

## 5) JOE TORRE'S RULES FOR LEADING A TEAM

Baseball manager Joe Torre has led far more diverse and ego-driven teams than most of us ever will. Yet, Torre's teams have won repeatedly, thanks to these four "rules of straight communication" he has developed over the years:

1. Remember that every player has a particular need for one of these things: motivation, reassurance, or technical help. Determine what that need is and meet it.
2. Deliver tightly focused, positive messages, such as a quick word of praise for a good play. Simple words of appreciation are more powerful motivators than many leaders expect.
3. Work hard to establish rapport with team members from backgrounds that are different from your own. It does take extra work, but the results can be extraordinary.
4. Let team members know that you accept the full range of their emotions, including fear and uncertainty. Unless people admit their fear, they will never be able to confront obstacles and grow.

## 6) HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS EXHIBIT 5 TRAITS

An effective team displays five baseline criteria:

1. Team members trust each other.
2. They deal constructively with conflict.
3. They are committed to doing well.
4. They feel personally accountable for the team's success.
5. They focus on achieving results as a team, not just as individuals who happen to work together.

## 7) TAP INTO CREATIVE, FUN TEAM-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

Have you been put in charge of planning team-building exercises for your eight-person team? To get you started, here are a few ideas from some administrative professionals:

- Bowl your way to tighter bonds. Affordable, low-stress team sports are a good bet for smaller budgets. Another sporty idea for teams: bocce ball.
- Give back to the community as a team. Ideas: Organize a clothing drive, work at a food bank, clean up a neighborhood or volunteer for Habitat for Humanity. A contribution of time, energy, and knowledge to the community will strengthen a team of individuals who share the experience.

## 8) IS YOUR TEAM THE IDEAL SIZE?

Is your team the ideal size? When it comes to the perfect team, more is definitely not merrier. That's according to researchers who study well-functioning teams. If you're finding it tough to accomplish much with a team project you're working on, consider whether you have too many heads on the task.

Each time you add a person to a team, productivity goes up, but so do inefficiencies. For example, coordinating the group becomes trickier.

In 1970, two professors from Harvard University asked large and small teams to do several tasks and then asked them whether they felt their group was too small or too large for the task. Using feedback from the groups, the professors calculated the ideal team size: 4.6.

Bottom line: If you try to include everyone on a team, you might find that the group subdivides itself into cliques. Look for ways to subdivide the group or trim the overall headcount logically.

## 9) HOW TO REFUEL A SPUTTERING TEAM

You think your team needs to push itself harder, but how do you determine that? Look for hard evidence. Ask: What has it accomplished so far?

Here's an excellent exercise to measure your team's progress to date:

At your next meeting, ask each team member to list "what you see as the team's top five achievements so far." Give them no more than five minutes to write down their responses and then collect them. Explain that they don't need to include their names. You're not grading their answers as much as using them as a learning tool.

Share the results with the group. Rank the "consensus achievements," the ones that appear in the most responses. Write these items on a flip chart. Then ask the group whether they're satisfied with their work thus far. Encourage them to discuss the significance of their achievements. Prod them to explore whether they're capable of making a more substantive, lasting contribution to the bottom line.

Another way to tell whether you're managing a sputtering team: Sit in on a few meetings and observe the group's interaction. Then, for each meeting, complete the exercise "[Take a Team Diagnostic Exam](#)."

To refuel a sputtering team, redirect the group's focus away from easy, safe tasks to more ambitious stretch goals. Motivate them to "think big" by dangling new, meaningful rewards for stellar effort. Offer to give each team member a choice of three prizes if the group attains specific, measurable objectives.

Here's an example:

Three months after you formed a team to study high employee turnover, the group hasn't come up with any helpful research or solid recommendations. It started strong but has since stalled. You present the group with this challenge: "If you were the head of human resources, what steps would you take to reduce turnover?" Tell them they have two weeks to devise a practical, doable, cost-effective answer. Promise to give team members a paid day off, a gift certificate to the local mall, or a chance to spend a day shadowing a senior executive of their choice, as long as they come up with an action plan that cuts turnover by 10% over the next six months.

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## 10) WHY CLOSE-KNIT TEAMS DON'T ALWAYS WIN

You've spent lots of time building team closeness and cohesiveness. You might have spent a lot of money on it, too. Maybe that was a bad idea. New findings suggest that close-knit teams are often less competitive than teams in which camaraderie is weak.

Sociologists at the University of California and elsewhere, who have been studying effective teams, see some compelling reasons why friendly teams finish last:

- **Individual accountability is stronger in a "loner" team.** When a player's performance sags, he or she is more likely to say, "It's my problem, and I'll fix it."

That happens more quickly than on teams in which everybody has to talk about problems before fixing them.

- **Arguments are less likely to divide a "loner" team into rival camps.** The battle plays out purely between the combatants. Sometimes, other teammates don't even care who wins.
- **Leadership resides more in each player and less in the coach.** That may be one reason individual leaders are more likely to emerge in a "loner" team.

## 11) DEALING WITH TEAM 'NEGATIVES'

Negative team members are like poison. Left unchecked, they corrode morale through the ranks. They can take many forms, including:

- **Cynics**, whose superior attitude infects other cynics in the ranks.
- **Political players**, who attract other power-seekers to their sides.
- **Laziness addicts**, who attract others who want an easy way to the top.

If you're dealing with negatives like those, keep the situation under control by taking these steps:

- **Take strong action against them**, no matter how popular they are. Giving preferential treatment to someone who's not delivering results sends a signal that you're afraid of him—hardly the message you want to send through the ranks.
- **Avoid politicking against negatives.** It's tempting to try to build consensus against them or express your frustrations to other members of your team. Be careful, since doing so can degenerate into a power skirmish that will erode your integrity as a true team leader.

## 12) CAUTION: 'FUN' TEAM-BUILDING ACTIVITIES COULD LAND YOU IN COURT

In the summertime, corporate thoughts turn to company picnics and outdoor morale-boosting events. But a word of caution: If your team-building exercises go beyond three-legged sack races and into the realm of reality TV, you could be headed for a lawsuit.

Engaging employees in fun and games is fine, but make sure the joke's not at one employee's expense. Stay away from activities that could embarrass, humiliate or injure employees.

**Recent case:** A California security company staged employee team competitions to boost its sales team's unity. Part of the exercise involved spanking members of the losing teams with yard signs. Other "fun" punishments: Employees were forced to eat baby food and wear diapers.

At least one employee's morale wasn't boosted. Janet Orlando quit over the incidents and sued, alleging sexual harassment. A jury awarded Orlando \$500,000 in damages for emotional distress and lost wages, plus it slapped an extra \$1.2 million onto the company's tab for punitive damages. Two supervisors who helped concoct the exercise were found personally liable for \$50,000 each. (*Orlando v. Alarm One*, Fresno County Superior Court)

## 13) LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT: IMPROVE YOUR TEAM MANAGEMENT SKILLS

To strengthen your team's performance, you probably embrace the notion of continuous improvement. By constantly looking for ways to teach your team new skills and holding them accountable for steadily better results, you send a message that you won't accept complacency or a halfhearted effort.

That's a good start, but how about your performance?

Leading a team wisely requires a high degree of self-awareness. You should know how the group perceives you and what strengths or weaknesses influence your ability to lead. Use the "[Improve Your Team Management Skills](#)" exercise to help you elicit feedback from the team about your performance

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## 14) RE-ENERGIZE YOUR TEAM: 6 QUICK TIPS

**Pump up creativity** by scheduling a group innovation strategy session, even if it means coming in on the weekend or setting aside a few hours a week. Let discussions play out and reward effort with, say, extra vacation time, a prized parking space, or a spot on the development team

**Want teams to work together most effectively?** Keep some distance between one member and the rest of the team. When one member is at a different location, it forces the group to be more conscious about including that person. The result, better and more productive communication. When forming a team, think beyond individuals to consider configuration.

**Encourage your team to ask you the hardest questions** they can think of, not the easiest. It's a leadership practice that's worth copying.

**Poll your team members** to find out where they'd like to see your organization next year, in the next five years, and on into the next decade. Post responses on a whiteboard, and use them to brainstorm for a new, shared sense of mission.

**Keep your team motivated** during demanding periods by stressing the personal side. Try a simple statement such as, "Is there anything I can do for you?" It shows you haven't forgotten the "give" side of "give and take."

**Resist the temptation** to keep people who hate each other from working together. Once you begin to cherry-pick the people you put on teams to avoid conflict, you lose the ability to use your best people to your best advantage.