Training Work Teams

MANY EMPLOYEES NOW WORK ON TEAMS. BUT WHERE DO THEY GO FROM THERE? HERE ARE TEN STEPS YOU CAN USE TO DEVELOP EFFECTIVE TEAMS IN A VARIETY OF SITUATIONS.

BY PAUL E. BRAUCHLE AND DAVID W. WRIGHT

Many organizations are moving toward a team-based environment. But how do you go about creating successful teams?

The following is a 10-step model of training techniques for developing effective teams, whether they're called self-directed work groups, self-managed teams, or high-involvement teams—and whether they have supervisors or not.

We used the approach at General Electric's Electrical Distribution and Control Division in Bloomington, Illinois. You can adapt it to other industries and settings. (See the sidebar, "When To Use the 10-Step Approach," on page 66.)

The early stages

Step 1: Establish credibility. For you as a trainer, the initial and most important step in helping a team develop is to establish credibility for your knowledge, believability, and approach. First, identify which job tasks and procedures you understand and which you don't.

For example, when we worked with a team of tool-and-die makers at GE, we didn't understand a problem with the exhaust system in their work area. We visited the area, watched several demonstrations, and talked with team members about the machines they operate. In learning about their job environment, we expanded our knowledge and our credibility.

As important as knowledge is believability. Until you earn trainees' respect, your effectiveness is limited. Explain everything to trainees up front. Tell them when and where you meet with managers, and describe the agenda.

A dynamic training approach further enhances your credibility. Try to be energetic. You want trainees to come alive in the training sessions. Your energy should be sincere and spontaneous. Don't force it.

Step 2: Allow ventilation. Make sure trainees are ready for training before you begin. They may be dealing with unresolved issues. You have to talk with them about those issues before you can address certain training topics.

Many trainees share the same concerns. They tend to suspect managers' reasons for having groups become self-directed. They wonder whether they can function without direct supervision. And they worry about how much work they'll be expected to perform. Letting trainees ventilate their anxieties early in the training may prevent frustrations from forming later. Also, trainees are more likely to want to do the training tasks if they've cleared the air.

Step 3: Provide an orientation. To lead work teams, you have to give specific, verbal directions and provide clear models of behavior. A detailed orientation helps trainees move forward with a positive attitude.

At the outset, tell trainees about your training procedures, the way you'll fit in with daily operations, and your goals. Describe your work habits and the way you plan to conduct each training session. Share any conversations you've had with managers. Explain that your main function is to train yourself out of a job.

Step 4: Invest in the process. Early in the training, have each of the trainees' work groups identify its problems and concerns.

At GE, we worked with a team involved in making changes on one of the assembly lines. Team members had to consider such issues as ergonomics, safety, efficiency, production quality, and customer satisfaction. Through a group discussion, they identified a problem with boredom on the job due to each operator's permanent assignment to one job station. The team solved the problem by implementing a rotation system, in which operators perform different job functions each day.

The team now sees, by real-world example, the benefits of investing in the group process.

Trainees buy in

Step 5: Set group goals. Each work group should create, through consensus, its own mission statement. Trainees almost always undertake the task seriously, because they know they have to live with their decisions.

Have trainees identify the goals and guiding principles they think

When To Use the 10-Step Approach

The 10-step model provides trainers with a team-training approach for a variety of situations. Here is a sampling of the kinds of situations in which it might be particularly useful:

▶ when the HRD person in a one-person HRD department begins to work with teams
▶ when new supervisors with little or no training in supervision are assigned to teams
▶ when facilitators who aren't trainers in an organization are selected to lead teams
▶ when a "checklist" is needed of signs that team development and team building are taking place and have been completed
▶ when developing teams are made up of people who haven't previously worked together
▶ in an organizational move away from a traditional management style to one that empowers employees
▶ in helping long-standing teams develop new team-building norms
▶ in the development of team members into effective leaders.

will help them fulfill their mission statements. They also should describe the activities and behaviors they think will help them accomplish their objectives.

Step 6: Facilitate the group process. Trainees need to understand the group process—the way a work group functions—in order to work effectively in teams.

Two vehicles for demonstrating the effectiveness of the group process are the Nominal Group Process and the Paired Comparison. The Nominal Group Process is a four-step procedure in which participants make individual "silent" lists of group issues, create a master list, collapse and combine list items, and conduct a "straw vote" to decide which issues are the most important.

The Paired Comparison uses the first two steps of the Nominal Group Process and then has participants compare each list item with each of

the other items. In the last step, they select the more important one in each comparison.

The end result of either approach is a ranked list of issues, which trainees "buy into." Either approach also can be used to evaluate alternative solutions to problems.

In the orientation step, you told trainees about your training plans and procedures—in other words, the stages they go through during training. We correlated our development stages with Bruce Tuckman's four-part process, described in D.R. Forsyth's *An Introduction to Group Dynamics* (Wadsworth, 1983). Tuckman describes four stages of group development: forming (orientation), storming (conflict), norming (emergence of group), and performing (reinforcement).

Give trainees examples of behavior for each stage, and warn them of frustrations they might experience. When they do encounter difficulties during development, remind them that growing pains are normal and expected. At this point, they'll probably recall that you did prepare them during orientation.

As teams of trainees progress, they usually can identify which stage they're in and whether they've regressed to a previous stage.

It's important for them to resolve each stage fully before going on to the next one. When they don't, conflicts may arise.

For example, a team of machine operators at GE began experiencing interpersonal conflicts and disagreements that kept them from establishing clear goals. They quickly realized they hadn't resolved the storming/conflict stage; they'd temporarily regressed. After working through several issues, they were able to move on to the norming/emergence-of-group stage. Then they could more easily clarify and use team norms to effectively deal with group issues.

Step 7: Establish intragroup procedures. Each work group requires a viable procedure for conducting meetings. Most groups face the same issues regarding meetings, but you should work with each team to establish procedures with which it feels comfortable.

The following meeting format is

commonly used in business settings:

- minutes
- announcements
- reports on previous meetings and assignments
- discussions of problems and issues
- proposed solutions
- action and new assignments.

Once team members have developed some basic meeting procedures, they may take turns facilitating meetings and leading discussions. An agreed-upon format makes team members feel comfortable about sharing duties and being rotated to different groups.

After a while, meeting procedures become second nature. Many of GE's

Teams take charge

Step 9: Change your role. In the later stages of our training at GE, we saw evidence of spontaneous cooperation, synergism, and problem solving among trainees. For instance, a production team began a building project, rather than waiting for the supervisor to start the line. "I couldn't believe it," said the supervisor. "When I got there, they had everything running smoothly!"

As teams become more empowered, the trainer should move from active participation—in which you guide discussion and model behavior—to a more passive role, in which you intervene less. As trainees

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workers, who transfer from job to job, are able to blend easily into new groups, mainly because they've become familiar with the standard intragroup procedures.

Step 8: Establish intergroup processes. When team members reach the point at which they effectively function as a single unit, they still have to interact with other people in the workplace—supervisors, managers, and other teams. Most teams have functional leaders who interact with others on their behalf. Some teams have formally appointed leaders called group leaders or spokespersons.

Get group leaders involved early in the training, and keep them involved. Leaders who become stakeholders in team success are likely to support team decisions.

One of GE's teams has two leaders who serve as liaisons to other work groups. The leaders understand the techniques, technologies, and processes that their team uses, so they can effectively represent it.

Each team should develop its own methods for interacting with senior managers. For example, a team at GE created a training request form that gives managers the information they need to evaluate a situation and make a decision.

progress through the four stages of forming, storming, norming, and performing, the trainer's role—most active during the forming and storming stages—slowly decreases. The final, added stage—adjourning—is when you terminate your duties and reduce trainees' dependency on you.

If problems occur or discussions go off track, you can step in and tactfully place things back on the rails. Otherwise, let trainees take more responsibility for their own activities and decisions.

The trainer who moves from an active role to a passive one creates a vacuum into which the group process can flow and take shape. The transition occurs so gradually that trainees usually aren't aware of it. It sets the stage for the final phase, in which teams are turned loose as functioning entities.

Step 10: Ending your involvement. There comes a time when a group is ready to function on its own. It's ready to set its own agenda, goals, timetables, and methods for interacting with others in the workplace.

Sometimes the final stage is marked by a ceremonial transfer of power, as when GE's plant manager gave a maintenance work group control of its own budget. Plant manager Paul Isabella flashed budget

figures on an overhead projector and then said, "There it is. That's your budget. Spend it, but don't overspend it." So far, reports show that the maintenance team is handling its budget very well. Team members say the ceremony gave them a new sense of responsibility, authority, and empowerment.

Continue to check with trainees periodically to assess their progress and to lead discussions on issues
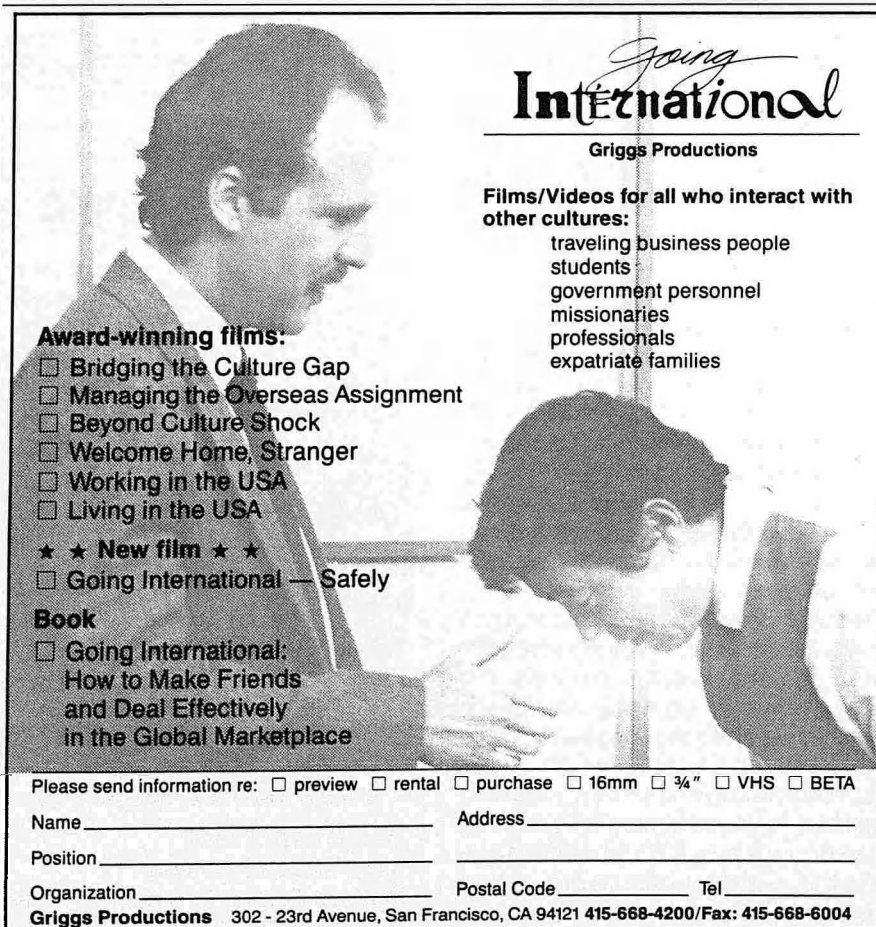
> LET TEAM MEMBERS KNOW YOU'RE NOT ABANDONING THEM

suggested by them. Your goals are to convey your faith in the new teams and to acknowledge that they're ready to function on their own. You also should let them know you're not abandoning them and that you're available if needed—but only if truly needed.

The groups we worked with at GE have grown and flourished as teams. They are made up of dedicated people who enjoy working together, who maintain high standards, and who demonstrate high productivity and commitment to excellence. Their success is due to a combination of factors, one of which is the nurturing effect of a few easily implemented training techniques. ∎

Paul Brauchle *is coordinator of graduate studies for industrial technology training and development, Illinois State University, Normal IL 61761-6901*. **David W. Wright** *is a professor of communications at Illinois State.*