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*Leadership Development, Team Building,  
High-Performance Work Teams*

# Team Leaders: The Key to Quality

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**MANY QUALITY-IMPROVEMENT  
PROGRAMS ARE LED BY TEAMS.  
BUT ARE THE PEOPLE LEADING THE  
TEAMS PREPARED FOR THE JOB?**

Quality is nothing new. In 1989, a Conference Board survey of companies found that 74 percent of the respondents were involved in quality programs. It is safe to say that the number has increased since then. Today, many quality-improvement programs rely on team efforts. But the pivotal role of team leader is often overlooked. For teams to be effective, team leaders need training.

One particular brand of training for quality-team leaders teaches practical, applicable skills. Past participants include operations workers, supervisors, professional staff, and senior managers. Training topics include the team leader's role and style, preparation for assembling a team, team development, meeting activities, team dynamics, and ways to gain commitment to the team's work from people outside the team.

## **The role of team leader**

Team leaders are to quality efforts what first-line supervisors are to business operations. Team leaders are the critical links between the concept of quality and its implementation through employee participation.

If a team leader is competent, his or her team is likely to achieve results that reflect quality-improvement goals. If a team leader is incompetent, the team may disband before attaining any positive results. It all boils down to this: Team leaders are accountable for the success of their teams.

Team leaders should know their own strengths and weaknesses in working with others as well as the best ways to use the skills of team members. Team leaders should be able to teach quality concepts and team dynamics. They should know how to get team members involved. And they need to know how to work well with people in other departments and at higher levels in the organization.

The team leader's role differs from that of a traditional supervisor. Team leaders shouldn't conduct performance appraisals or other evaluations, though they can provide input. They should be experts in team dynamics, but they shouldn't serve their own teams as knowledge experts.

Last, team leaders should know how to get team members to engage in creative problem solving while teams work within time constraints.

Specifically, team leaders need to know how to conduct efficient, effective, highly participatory meetings.

### **Who should be a team leader?**

Team leaders tend to come from two groups in an organization: supervisors and technical experts.

Supervisors who empower people, encourage employee participation, and apply problem-solving processes tend to be viewed as potentially effective team leaders. But even some highly effective supervisors don't have the skills or attitudes necessary to become team leaders. Under pressure, many supervisors are likely to lapse into supervisory behavior rather than team-leader behavior.

Some team leaders are drawn from an organization's pool of technical experts. The organization identifies an area that needs improvement and then calls upon the expert in that area to become a team leader. That approach may seem to make sense, but it can lead to problems.

A team with a technical expert as team leader is a team with a leader/expert and member/followers. What typically happens is that team members try to add value to the expert's ideas but are unable to be full participants. The expert focuses on the technical aspects of the team's work and fails to lead team members or use their knowledge and skills. A technical expert can forget to implement the basic elements of team leadership: time management, team participation, and the use of basic quality tools.

It's almost impossible for technical experts to be neutral, which is necessary in order for them to be effective team leaders. But they also can get so involved in facilitating the team that they neglect to provide their own input. It's crucial for them to separate the role of technical expert from the role of team leader. As team leaders, they should be knowledgeable, but a team member should be the expert. And team members should rely on each other for vital information.

Sometimes the only candidates for team leaders are supervisors or technical experts. Both can be excellent team leaders, but both need to work on their leadership skills through training in team dynamics.

### **Training team leaders**

Many team-training programs focus on team building, which shows team members how to work together, develop norms, and resolve interpersonal issues—but not how to lead. Consequently, team leaders often are on their own. When a team leader is ineffective, team members usually can't help, partly because people are used to bowing to authority. But a well-trained team leader usually can help ineffective team members improve.

Quality-related team training should cover facilitation skills, but it should go further than that. The role of team leader is more manager than facilitator. Typically, a facilitator helps team members develop skills, address issues, and meet goals. A team leader manages the team's work and ensures that the team stays on course.

Organizations can provide skilled facilitators to mentor team leaders

## **IT'S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE FOR TECHNICAL EXPERTS TO BE NEUTRAL**

and help them grow in their roles. But sometimes facilitators aren't available due to other work demands, or team leaders don't know how to find or use them.

Sometimes, a facilitator unintentionally begins to assume the role of team leader. When a facilitator provides leadership, he or she gains influence. At first, the team leader may appreciate the facilitator using skills the leader hasn't yet learned. And team members may be confused about the roles but satisfied just to have the team moving forward.

But eventually, the team may become completely dependent on the facilitator, and the team leader may become just a team member with an awkward role. If the facilitator has to leave the team, it could founder; it may have to start over.

That situation is less likely to happen with trained team leaders who are sure of themselves and their role.

Without appropriate training, team

leaders tend to be either too directive or too passive. They can learn team skills while leading, but it's difficult to resolve dysfunctional team dynamics at the same time.

### **Team structures and charters**

A quality-team leader can be truly effective only when he or she is supported by a quality-improvement committee made up of senior managers and a sponsor. The committee's responsibilities include prescribing the improvement process; selecting areas in which to focus quality efforts; holding managers and supervisors accountable; and setting quality-related strategies, which team leaders implement at the operational level.

The team sponsor is the critical link between the quality-improvement committee and the team leader. The sponsor serves as the team's liaison to higher-level managers and helps break down barriers beyond the team leader's purview.

Quality-improvement teams often have little time to achieve their goals, due to their cross-functional responsibilities; for example, team members who are supervisors still have to supervise day-to-day operations. Typically, the areas targeted for improvement have been neglected for years, and they involve several departments and different groups of workers. Consequently, department heads and employees outside the quality-improvement team have to be committed to making the changes. Team leaders should know how to gain the commitment of others, apply statistical tools, and solve problems.

Overall, a team leader's main responsibility is to help the team develop a charter of boundaries and outcomes. The team leader doesn't have to write the charter, but he or she should help determine whether its goals can be accomplished.

A typical charter defines the quality effort's time frame and resources. It describes ways for the team to gain acceptance from key people. It guides the selection of team members and identifies the process for improvement. The charter outlines the rationale for the quality effort, the scope of the team's work, the project activities, and the expected outcomes. It tells how to gain con-

sensus among team members, reduce variation from team goals, and determine when the team's work is completed.

The development of the charter varies according to the area for improvement, the organization's philosophy, and the project's complexity. It also varies according to the type of team being chartered. In most cases, teams are top down (designated by management) or bottom up (initiated by employees). Top-down teams aim to address cross-functional issues; bottom-up teams aim to make improvements within work units and build employee commitment. Both kinds of teams are important to an overall quality effort.

All charter-development processes require the support of management to provide the necessary resources. In addition, all teams require the enthusiastic involvement and support of team members and employees outside the teams.

In top-down teams, project ideas tend to come from customers and suppliers, people in the organization, and analyses of costs or work activities. Initially, the team leader refines the charter, working with the quality-improvement committee and team members' managers. Eventually, the team as a whole clarifies the charter. In bottom-up teams, team members first develop the charter and then consult with the team's sponsor, the quality-improvement committee, and management.

Some teams want to solve a problem immediately by using traditional methods that are often only marginally successful—a sort of ready-fire-aim approach. A well-defined charter can help curtail the tendency to be too quick on the trigger.

A common pitfall in writing a charter is to define the scope of the team's work either too broadly or too narrowly. For example, "improve quality" is too general; "classify known defects" might be too specific.

Another pitfall is not clarifying the expected outcomes that will signal to the team that its work is completed. Teams need measurable, observable ways to tell when their work is done. Otherwise, they may disband without their ideas being implemented.

or they may drag on long after their job is finished.

### Lighting the way

Once the charter is in place, the team leader proceeds to manage the team's work, most of which occurs in face-to-face interactions between team members. The tenor of those interactions helps determine the team's performance. Typically, teams bog down because the team leader isn't effective in communication, decision making, conflict resolution, and time management.

Early on, team leaders need to share information, establish norms and expectations, clarify roles, and build trust among team members. If team leaders do that, even leaders with only average interpersonal skills can be effective. But if they don't, they'll need exceptional skills.

Team leaders should know how to handle such situations as a lack of participation, disagreements, and disruptive behavior from team members. Team leaders aren't required to be counselors or to solve long-standing discipline problems, but they should know how to recognize and deal with conflicts within the team.

Team leaders can handle disruptive team members in several ways. First, they can apply a sort of "count to 10" approach. Patience and a minor adjustment in a disruptive team member's behavior may be all that's needed. Or, leaders can poll team members on whether they think the disruptive member's idea is worth discussing. The leader also can discuss the problem behavior with the disruptive member, pointing out the effect of such behavior on the team and referring to team norms. Or, team leaders can remove the disruptive member from the team.

Team leaders should know how to use their organization's approach to problem solving and how to implement its strategy for improving quality. They need to know how to apply statistical tools and how to help team members use such tools. If the area that needs improvement is complex, a team leader may need help from an expert on quality. Quality-related computer software also can be helpful.

Team leaders aren't required to be

solely responsible for communicating the team's work to people outside the team. But they should know how to determine which people—such as customers and suppliers—are critical to the team's success. If there is no two-way communication between team members and others in the organization, people outside the team aren't likely to commit to the team's improvement goals.

Many team leaders think that a few well-placed memos can build commitment, but memos are more likely just to add to the existing piles of paper. The best way to gain commitment from people outside the team is to engage in two-way conversations with them about what the team is doing and how its work affects the organization.

Overall, a team leader should give team members a model of a high-performing team. Unfortunately, many people's views of teams are based on their observations of low-performing teams. The model can be used to help assess team performance and identify ways to improve it.

We developed a model divided into two areas: internal and external. The internal goals are for team members to trust each other, work together to solve problems, help enhance each other's performance, and aspire to feel like winners. The external goals are for teams to identify their customers and suppliers, gain commitment from their customers and suppliers, focus on team performance, and project the image of winners.

In providing a model, leaders give their teams a beacon to light the way to success. ■

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