Mavericks Ride Again

BY LYNN SUMMERS AND BEN ROSEN

Most work teams have at least one maverick—"an independent individual who doesn't go along with the group," according to Webster's dictionary. This wild breed runs loose, eludes the authorities, and drives teams asunder. Here's how to corral and tame mavericks so they can become productive team members.

"Every work team has a maverick." We asked a team member, Roger, to clarify his statement. "Mavericks are team members who aren't 'with the program,'" he explained. "They do what they think are their jobs, but they don't do crosstraining or help anyone. They care only about themselves, not about the team. And they aggravate other team members."

Roger is one of 372 employees we surveyed in two industrial plants with 61 self-managing teams. The survey was part of a research project on empowerment, supported by a grant from the Center for Manufacturing Excellence at the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise, University of North Carolina. Our findings indicate that mavericks abound in team environments, that they elude top management, and that they wreak havoc on teams.

The good news is that mavericks can become team players, with the appropriate training.

Identifying the species

Many supervisors in the survey said every team had people whom teammates considered uncooperative and a hindrance to teamwork.

Our research pinpoints the main characteristics of mavericks, based on the opinions of team members. Mavericks are unwilling to compromise, to help others, to be trained on jobs other than their own, and to initiate actions. They don't contribute to problem solving. They're stubborn, independent souls who follow their own agendas at the expense of the team's common good. They are often disliked by teammates.

Typically, teams have little power over mavericks and don't know how to deal with them. One plant in the survey had a lot of trouble with mavericks, even though employees had received extensive training in interaction skills and group processes. The employees also had five years of experience with teams and had ironed out many rough spots in the transition from traditional management to team management. Yet the plant's teams were just as flummoxed by mavericks as were other teams in the survey with less experience and training.

Adding to the problem is the fact that team members tend to think mavericks are the responsibility of supervisors. Supervisors tend to think mavericks are the responsibility of teams. So the two groups pass the problem back and forth as if it were a hot potato. No one takes responsibility. In the meantime, mavericks flourish.

The breeding ground

We've been discussing mavericks in terms of teams, but they aren't unique to team environments. And they're not a new phenomenon. Supervisors have always had problem employees. In fact, a lot of training in supervisory skills is about handling employee performance problems. Supervisors learn how to describe performance and behavior problems to employees, how to convey the need to change, and how to get employees to commit to a course of action in making the necessary changes.

In the plants we studied, supervisors weren't in the habit of confronting problem employees; they tended to let them "ride."

When their organizations introduced self-managing teams, top-level managers thought that the teams would handle problem employees. The managers reasoned that because team members had to work shoulder-to-shoulder with mavericks, they would confront them when necessary. Even so,

some managers admitted that passing the buck wasn't appropriate. Said one, "A lot of the blame comes back to us. Supervisors didn't handle problem workers back in the old days, and we never made that a priority. Now, we expect the shop-floor people to do what we couldn't do and didn't try to do for years."

Eventually, the teams had to take responsibility for managing employees, mainly because of the scope of supervisors' jobs. Plant supervisors oversaw more than 70 employees divided into about 10 teams. The supervisors could hardly be expected to have firsthand knowledge of every employee's behavior on the job.

In one plant, we conducted a two-hour intervention with a 24-person team that did assembly work. The initial survey indicated that the team had a serious problem with mavericks. Several mavericks hadn't been crosstrained, and they resisted bringing their skills up-to-speed to meet production demands. Their recalcitrance made the team inflexible in meeting some work demands.

Team members thought that crosstraining the mavericks would lessen the animosity and turn mavericks into team players. So the teams created a schedule for crosstraining. But other priorities postponed the training, and the mavericks didn't initiate any crosstraining on their own. Months later, a follow-up survey showed that the team did improve in some ways. But team members attributed the improvement to a change in supervisors. Team members still had animosity toward the mavericks and still felt unable to handle them.

Immovables and renegades

Sometimes, one can't get to the heart of an issue without mingling with the troops. After the assembly-team intervention, we talked informally with team members. We found two kinds of mavericks:
- immovable mavericks
- renegade mavericks.

Their behavior may be the same, but their motives are different.

We discovered a subgroup of employees on the assembly team who had more seniority than other members. The senior employees were quite comfortable in their strictly defined jobs. They had established their identities over the years through their specific job assignments. Now, those familiar arrangements were history. It had been years since the senior employees had felt challenged. Suddenly, more was expected of them. In reaction, they became mavericks. We call them "immovable" mavericks.

The senior employees became immovable mavericks in order to protect themselves from perceived threats. Overall, they feared they would lose their jobs or have to learn new jobs. Some mavericks held out hope that the company would return to the traditional ways of operating. Most were reluctant to speak openly about their anxiety, but one said, "I've got three years until retirement. I just want to hold on long enough to make it."

Self-protection isn't the only factor that causes people to become immovable mavericks. Some people just don't want the responsibilities that come with being on a team. Self-managing teams make decisions without waiting for permission or direction. They troubleshoot and solve production problems, using technical staff as resources instead of shutting down and waiting for the technical staff to take charge. Self-managing teams interact with other teams, customers, and suppliers to solve problems, coordinate work, and improve processes.

In the survey, we rated plant employees on a "want control" scale, which measures the amount of control an employee desires over his or her work. We found that the assembly team, even with all of its mavericks, had less need for control than most of the other teams. We theorized that immovable mavericks don't want control over their work, so they can continue in their traditional roles in which little is expected of them.

Another kind of maverick we identified is the "renegade" maverick. In working with the fabrication team in one plant, we found that members showed a strong need for control over their work, according to the want-control scale. But a maverick member was making teamwork difficult and was clashing with other team members.

In discussion, we found that most team conflicts centered around the maverick. Team members said they traded a lot of humorous put-downs and mock threats with each other, which weren't always meant jokingly in the case of the maverick. We talked about how the maverick's personal attacks were hindering the team from solving problems.

The maverick acknowledged that his behavior hurt the team's performance. He'd pull pranks, agree to do something and then not do it, leave the shop without explaining his absence, and generally cause mischief. In fact, he behaved like the immovable mavericks on the assembly team. He was stubborn and unwilling to help or participate. The difference was that he was a maverick by design rather than to protect himself. Renegade mavericks deliberately go against the grain and even delight in their mischievousness.

Immovable and renegade mavericks may engage in many of the same maddening behaviors, but they have different motives. Immovable mavericks are trying to protect themselves from perceived threats to their self-esteem and job security. They're trying to lessen their anxiety. But renegade mavericks intentionally try to make things easier for themselves or even screw things up for others. Their behavior is a way of demonstrating their independence.

Whether they are immovable or renegade, mavericks can drag down productivity and employee morale.

Coralling the mavericks

Getting mavericks to fall into line can be difficult. Here are some training tips for turning mavericks into team players.

Clarify expectations. As supervisors transfer the responsibility for managing to teams, team members should clarify how that responsibility will be shared in terms of work processes, safety, quality, and administration.

In addition, all team members should expect to participate fully in the team's work. No one should be allowed to work in isolation, even if he or she has worked alone for years. Everyone must walk together

out of the hierarchical past into the self-managing present. Team members should expect to manage themselves and problem employees. Simply put, when people don't know who is responsible for handling mavericks, mavericks don't get handled.

Trainers can help supervisors and teams to clarify the expectations through such tools as a responsibility chart, which assigns each team task or duty to a specific team member. Another effective tool is a team-norms list. Through brainstorming, team members develop a list of acceptable behaviors. The mavericks are likely to question the move toward teams, so it's important that team members and supervisors be able to explain the change.

Select nonmavericks first. Organizations can use readily available assessment instruments in the hiring process to determine who is likely to become a maverick. Then they can make hiring decisions accordingly. Or they can assess current employees and exclude the mavericks from teams.

The plants in the study created their teams with existing employees. So problem employees whose behaviors hadn't been "handled" became maverick team members.

Handle mavericks differently. Immovable and renegade mavericks should be handled according to their different motives. Remember that immovable mavericks are just trying to protect themselves; renegade mavericks are operating according to their own agendas.

Immovable mavericks should be nudged, supported, and encouraged. When they are new team members, they should be given nonthreatening tasks at first. They should receive team and skills training, with the goal of bolstering their self-esteem. If they're properly nurtured through the initial learning, they just might shed their defensive skins—unless the trainer is confrontive. Forceful trainers tend to make immovable mavericks even more defensive, even though the trainers may only be trying to deal with the mavericks' resistance.

In team situations, immovable mavericks may refuse to work with the group to solve problems, or may refuse to work in areas other than

their own. As a result, other team members can become frustrated and hostile. They may angrily confront the immovable mavericks, or they may simply withdraw. Neither reaction is helpful. Team members must use persistence and encouragement to get immovable mavericks to step out of their traditional, sheltered roles.

We recommend getting immovable mavericks to move a little at a time.

As for renegade mavericks, they should be goaded and confronted. Unlike immovable mavericks, renegades are self-confident. Often, they withhold their skills from the team. Renegade mavericks should be challenged into taking on new tasks.

In traditional work settings, renegade mavericks who have been written off as losers begin to bloom when given new responsibilities that make use of their particular expertise. Why shouldn't that approach work in self-managing teams that have plenty of responsibilities to go around?

Teach interaction skills. Most team training in soft skills is about how to listen, interact one-on-one, solve problems as a group, and contribute in meetings. But such training doesn't tell people how to deal with problem team members.

A behavior-modeling approach can show team members how to handle mavericks. For example, team members can view a videotape of a team successfully dealing with mavericks. Through observing effective techniques, the team learns how to identify the problems and motives associated with mavericks. The training shows how to confront mavericks, describe problem behaviors, express team members' disappointment, and reiterate role expectations.

It's important to get mavericks to explore ways to correct their behavior problems. Once they decide on and commit to a solution, the team should encourage and support immovable mavericks, or goad and challenge renegade mavericks. That group process should take place in

Profile of a Maverick
The typical team maverick:
▶ is stubborn
▶ will not help teammates
▶ won't initiate action
▶ won't participate in group problem solving
▶ won't participate in crosstraining for new skills
▶ performs poorly on tasks he or she doesn't want to do
▶ avoids taking on new responsibilities
▶ links self-identity to the job (immovable) or has a reputation for mischief and independence (renegade)
▶ sees his or her new role on a team as a threat (immovable) or a challenge (renegade)
▶ reacts to the new role with anxiety (immovable) or defiance (renegade)
▶ is motivated by self-protection (immovable) or self-gratification (renegade).

team-on-maverick meetings rather than in one-on-one meetings. A team-on-maverick meeting is more in keeping with the spirit of self-managing teams, but it creates a challenge for training. It isn't easy to develop a realistic model of a team-on-maverick meeting.

Train supervisors. It's important to instruct supervisors in facilitation and mediation. Some supervisors have difficulty playing a facilitative role. In fact, most of the teams in the survey didn't describe their supervisors as facilitative.

Survey respondent Sue Jones, a supervisor who practices facilitative supervision, says, "Every time employees come to me with a complaint about someone, they expect me to handle it. I ask why they're complaining, to get them to deal with the specifics. I ask them if they've talked to the person. And I remind them of the interaction-skills training they've had."

Jones says it's tempting for supervisors to take charge and handle the problem themselves. "But as soon as I say, 'I'll do it for you,' I absolve them of responsibility."

Supervisors also need to know how to play the role of mediator. Teams can't solve all maverick problems. In situations in which a team has exhausted all reasonable solutions, team members should be allowed to request intervention from a supervisor, without surrendering full responsibility.

A supervisor can act as an intermediary in the communication between a maverick and other team members. The supervisor should use the team's expectations as an anchor by pointing out that team members agreed on and committed to meeting certain expectations—such as production goals, responsibility assignments, or the company mission. Supervisors should remain mediators rather than slide into the role of arbitrator. Arbitrators behave like traditional supervisors, making and imposing decisions. Mediators help warring factions arrive at mutually agreeable resolutions.

Mediation is a sort of realistic last resort. When a team can't resolve the problems created by its mavericks, the next step is for the supervisor to act as mediator. The team may have already tried mediation principles to gain cooperation from the mavericks. But mediation through the supervisor is likely to have more effect because of the power of the supervisory position.

Expunge incorrigible mavericks. If every effort to corral mavericks fails, then release them. In other words, fire them. In one plant, senior managers tried to place unreformable mavericks into "loner" jobs that were independent of other operations, but they found there weren't many such jobs.

Generally, top managers have led the move to self-managing work environments, while their management practices (and HRD) have lagged behind. To catch up, organizations have been beginning to try new approaches to job design, group compensation, and performance appraisal. And HRD has been pressing many programs into service to meet training needs.

Here is what one plant manager told us:

"If we want to remain competitive as a business, we've got to deal with the mavericks. Before we had teams, we didn't pressure our supervisors to handle problem employees. Now that we expect the teams to handle them, we've got to make that a priority. We have to give teams the necessary skills, and get supervisors and human resource people to support them. The bottom line is that mavericks have to get with the program."

If mavericks don't get with the program, their companies may have no choice but to help them ride off into the sunset. ■

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