

Leading a Team of Strangers

Most teams now are diverse or virtual.

By Glenn Parker

The world and the world of business are changing. Individualism is out, teamwork is in. Job specialization out, a new-style generalist in. Rigid organizational lines are out, fluid collaboration is in. Power is out, empowerment is in. Hierarchical organizations are out—replaced by network organizations, adaptive organizations, informational organizations, and horizontal organizations. Smack in the middle sit cross-functional teams of experts ready to move quickly and flexi-

bly to adapt to changing business needs.

Leroy Zimdars, director of supply chain management at Harley-Davidson, says, “Cross-functional teams are at the heart of every motorcycle produced at Harley-Davidson Motor Company.”

Research scientists are meeting with marketing professionals, design engineers are working with suppliers, cost accountants are teaming up with operations managers, and software developers and business managers are serving to-

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gether on systems development teams. In many organizations, eight or more disciplines are working together on cross-functional teams to bring a new product to the marketplace, develop a next-generation computer system, design a new layout for a factory floor, produce an important new drug, engineer a complex telecommunications network, prepare a long-term corporate strategy, or implement a procedure to upgrade service quality in a government agency.

Wanted: a new breed of leader

Leaders of cross-functional teams must manage a diverse group of people with a wide variety of backgrounds, cultural values, languages, team player styles, training, and interests. In addition to the people management skills required, a team leader must also follow often highly technical and scientific team work. Frequently, that must be accomplished without the authority usually associated with a team leadership position in a functional organization. An additional leadership challenge is the cross-functional team that operates in a virtual world where members communicate electronically and may never meet face-to-face. Team members may be dispersed around the world, making even a teleconference meeting of the full team impossible because of time zone differences.

Would you apply for or accept this assignment? Your job as leader of a cross-functional team is to manage a group of people from different departments, functions, countries, and cultures who have little or no experience working together and, given the choice, would probably choose not to work with these strangers. You'll be given little or no authority over their performance, but you'll be held accountable for the team's success. You must have sufficient knowledge of the team's tasks to follow the discussions and reports, and you should have the group process skills to facilitate the

participation of team members, resolve conflicts, and gain a consensus on key issues. Much of the facilitation will take place electronically using various technology-based tools that you'll need to master.

So, it's a tough job. As a result of our experience, we've developed a list of the top 10 issues that can cause sleepless nights for leaders of cross-functional teams.

1. Core team members consistently arrive late to team meetings; some leave early.
2. Your boss starts to attend your team meetings because "I just want to get an overview and keep on top of the project."
3. The most-respected technical person on the team has angered most of the teammates by consistently criticizing their work as incomplete and inadequate.
4. A department manager replaces an important representative from that discipline with someone with less experience and expertise.
5. Senior management moves the deadline for a key project deliverable up a month without consulting you.
6. One day before the team is scheduled to implement a key project decision, your boss overrules the decision despite knowing the decision was being considered at team meetings for the past four weeks.
7. During team teleconferences you hear a lot of clicking, indicating that team members are multitasking.
8. During the past two team meetings, you had difficulty understanding a number of technical discussions.
9. An important team member complains that her (or his) manager "devalues and gives very little weight" to her participation on the team. Consequently, she didn't receive appropriate credit on her performance evaluation for contributing to team goals.
10. You have a barbecue party at your home to celebrate the achievement of an important team milestone but few team members attend.

How to get a good night's sleep

Ensure attendance. When key members start to come late and leave early, move quickly to speak with each person privately. Try to determine whether the problem lies with the team or within the recalcitrant members' departments. Is the team meeting time no longer convenient? Have they taken on additional responsibilities that make participation on the team difficult? Point out the negative impact of their behavior on team morale. Offer to change the meeting time or day, or offer to speak with their managers about their responsibilities to the team. Be open to their feedback about the team; their disruptive behavior may be a sign of frustration.

Address your boss's concerns. When your boss attends your team meeting *and* you notice a significant change in team climate (for example, open communication and member participation dramatically decrease), you must speak with him or her. If your boss really does just want to get "an overview," offer to provide regular updates in whatever format is preferred. If, on the other hand, your boss has some concerns about the team and your leadership skills, you need to discuss that. Be open to the feedback, and be ready to present other ways your boss can support your development as a team leader.

Abate team conflicts. When a key technical person criticizes other team members in a destructive manner, you need to handle that quickly but carefully. You need the technical input that person provides, but you should point out that the nature of his or her comments aren't having the desired effect. Strongly suggest that he or she present the comments in a positive way. For example, rather than characterize work as "incomplete," suggest that feedback focus on ways the work can be improved, and either offer to help or recommend resources.

Deal with a change in players. When an important team member is replaced with a

less experienced person, speak with the department manager. First, make sure he or she understands the importance of your project. Then ask whether there's another expert in the department who can be the replacement. Also ask if the experienced person can be available to the team on an ad-hoc basis or as an adjunct team member. Last, offer to go with the department manager to speak with senior management about what may be a resource issue. If the manager does want to cooperate in any of the above actions, go to your senior management sponsor for help.

Deal with changes to schedule. If senior management moves up the schedule for a key deliverable, go back with a tight presentation that points out the effect of that change and a proposal that outlines what you need to meet the new deadline. One team with that problem said, "If you can live without this feature, we can meet your new schedule. But if you must have all of the original features, we'll need an additional person for three months."

Respond to authority. If your boss overrules a key team decision at the last minute, you need to respond in two ways: short-term and long-term. Immediately go back to the team with the news presented in the context of "I recognize that we all spent a lot of time on this, but this is how it is now, and we need to figure out a way to implement the new decision." You may have to let team members unload their frustration first. The long-term issue concerns the role of your boss and the relationship with the team. You need to have a serious discussion with him or her about such actions and the impact on team effectiveness. Together,

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you need to come up with a way to avoid similar situations.

Discourage multitasking. When you become aware that team members are multitasking during meetings, you need to refer back to your team norms. If you don't have a norm about multitasking, engage the team in an exercise designed to develop guidelines for that and other disruptive behaviors common to multiple-site teams.

Address technology issues. When you have difficulty understanding some technical presentations or discussions, other team members are probably having the same experience. As the team leader, you're not expected to understand everything completely, but you should model desired behavior by asking questions when you don't understand, and encourage other team members to do the same. Some team members may be technologically savvy but lack the ability to communicate information effectively. It might be useful to establish a norm that encourages the more technologically literate team

members to use jargon-free and nontechnical terms when possible.

Communicate team value. When a department manager doesn't value the contributions of team members on their performance evaluations, it's important to address that issue. Approach it directly. Speak with the department manager, and offer to provide an assessment of the team member in any format desired, including the corporate performance management form. You may want to make the same offer to all managers who have employees on your team. Propose a change in the organization's HR process to

require input from team leaders.

Don't take it personally. If only a few members attend your barbecue party, get over it. Recognize that many team members see such an event as another workday rather than the fun activity you had in mind. It's possible they just prefer to spend time off with their family and friends. Still, a celebration is a good idea. Next time, ask a subgroup of the team to plan the event. That way, team members will get to do something they want to do.

Eliminate the obstacles and leading a team of strangers can be a rewarding learning opportunity.

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