

Leading successful teams

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Abstract

In today's agile world, managing teams is quite a challenge. The pandemic has added another dimension to the problem: Remote work. A blend of management experience and skills are necessary to successfully manage teams in the current scenario.

This paper is an attempt to help current and future managers and leaders gain some of these necessities. The paper talks about the various aspects to be considered to build and manage successful teams along with real-world instances to support them. This approach is based on the various experiences of the author in his management journey as well as some learnings from observing other teams and management styles. In this paper, we discuss key aspects of successful teams: Hiring, Build Trust, Always-in-sync, Ownership, Freedom, Career Path, Leadership, Celebrate and Separation.

Team management is never straight forward, approach that works for one team might not work for another. However, the basic framework remains valid across teams and this paper aims at providing the framework for current and upcoming managers and leaders.

Biography

Vadiraj has more than 18 years' experience in Software Quality with a master's in quality management from BITS Pilani. He is working in Trellix as QA Director, driving Software Quality for the Enterprise SaaS solution. He carries more than 8 years' experience in managing teams. He presented papers at PNSQC in 2012 and 2014 and a poster paper in 2015. He was also involved with PNSQC as a paper reviewer since then for 3 editions of the conference.

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1 Introduction

“A team is defined as a group of people who perform interdependent tasks to work toward accomplishing a common mission or specific objective.”

Each team is unique, with individuals from diverse backgrounds, skills, strengths and weaknesses. So, what does it take for a team to be a high performing successful one? The onus of sharing the vision, motivating the team members, bringing in a culture, resolving conflicts and creating an environment for them to thrive and excel lies with the leader.

Managing teams is an art as well as science. Leaders must apply their knowledge and experience to develop the skill of managing teams. The approach each leader adopts depends on their style, beliefs, values and intentions. Leaders should ensure the team marches towards the common goal and at the same time, they need to ensure the individuality of each member is preserved and utilized in a positive way to achieve the goal. Success of teams depends heavily on the members as well as the leadership.

Leaders face many challenges in successfully managing teams:

- Hiring the right people and bringing them up to speed and ensuring productivity plays a key role.
- Diversity brings in a lot of advantages to a team. However, diverse backgrounds and beliefs can pose challenges.
- Keeping employees motivated constantly is one of the most sensitive and difficult tasks. Another important factor is to build and maintain trust with employees.
- Along with the organization’s goals, a leader has to focus on employee development and balancing both requires a certain skill.
- Organizational changes bring in uncertainty and might also impact the focus and motivation of employees. Handling this is important for a leader.
- Technology changes are constant and it brings up issues of skillset mismatch. It also results in attrition as people might look at opportunities to work on newer technologies.
- Changes in trends in the job market impact employee retention which is one of the toughest challenges to face as a leader.

2 The Approach

While there are a lot of challenges in managing teams and ensuring success, there are best practices or recommendations that help address them. Each team and each team member are unique, and their challenges are also unique. Hence, the same approach might work well in some cases whereas it might need changes in other cases.

In this section, a common set of guidelines or recommendations are described which match many scenarios but minor tweaks might be needed based on the dynamics of the organization. This paper is based on the experience of the author in managing teams as well as some of the best practices learnt from other leaders and research and analysis.

2.1 Hiring

“Hiring the best is your most important task” – Steve Jobs, Former CEO of Apple (Jobs, n.d.)

Building a team starts at hiring. Hiring the right resource with right attitude and skillsets is crucial. Even one wrong hire can impact the entire team. So, this is an important process and the first steppingstone to success.

Some important aspects to be considered in hiring are:

2.1.1 Attitude

“Ability is what you're capable of doing. Motivation determines what you do. Attitude determines how well you do it.” – Lou Holtz (Holtz, n.d.)

This quote about attitude speaks volumes about its importance in successful people. The same applies to hiring as well. Looking for people with the right attitude goes a long way in ensuring success of the team. Technical skills, communication skills, experience, problem solving skills etc. are quite important while looking for a right fit, but the attitude of the person is even more important. An intelligent, skilled and experienced person might not benefit the team if attitude is not right. On the other hand, if the person has a great attitude and there is a slight shortfall in the other hiring criteria, it would be fine to go ahead with the hire. With some learning and hard work, the person can bridge the gap soon.

The responsibility of a leader is to look for people with the right attitude.

In my experience: Conducting interviews for more than 10 years, I have seen instances where technically strong candidates with a wrong attitude failed to add value to the group and on the other hand, new hires who had decent technical knowledge but had the right attitude proved to be an asset to the team.

2.1.2 Inclusive hiring process

Diversity and Inclusion are two important aspects while building teams. Diversity ensures different experiences, skills, knowledge and thought processes are brought to the table. Diversity maximizes productivity, creativity and loyalty within teams.

To hire the right talent, the leader should ensure:

- Hiring process needs to be inclusive and inculcate diversity.
- Starting with the job advertisement, the content should not offend any group of people and at the same time should attract diverse talent.
- The interview panel should also be diverse. There should be an adequate representation of all diverse groups within the organization. This also plays a major role in attracting diverse talent.
- The interview and evaluation process should be totally unbiased and should not favor any group(s).
- The compensation and benefits should not have any discrimination as well.

2.1.3 Employee referrals

It is a proven fact that one of the most effective ways to hire is through employee referrals. Employees know the pulse of the organization, many times they know the requirements of the hiring group and more importantly might have their friends and ex-colleagues with related skill sets. The other advantage of referrals is that it helps save costs incurred with engaging hiring agencies.

Whenever there are job openings created within the team, the first people to be informed should be the members of the team itself. They know best about what kind of people are required in the team, both in terms of skills and attitude. And people within the team are also mindful of the fact that the people they refer would mostly end up working with them in the future. They naturally look for the best candidates. In this way, the understanding within the team would also enhance and help the team work as one unit. So, the leader should encourage referrals.

In my experience: Most of the successful hires have been through employee referrals, many times from people working within the same team. There have been instances where we have found the right candidate within few days of opening the requisition, all due to excellent employee referrals.

Statistics: Only 25% of workers recruited through job boards stay for more than two years, whereas 45 percent of employees obtained through employee referrals stay for more than four years. (Apollo Technical, n.d.)

2.2 Build Trust

“A team is not a group of people who work together. A team is a group of people who trust each other.” - Simon Sinek (Sinek, n.d.)

Bonding within any team is built on trust. Transparency, trust and mutual respect are like three interlinked pillars. Even if one of these links is broken, the team would be destined to fail.

It is important for the leader as well as team members to spend significant time establishing trust. The leader leads the way here, by propagating the idea of trust and taking measures to ensure the team starts trusting the leader as well as themselves. Along with that, the leader should walk the talk: conduct in a way such that the team begins to believe in the leader.

Some aspects to consider in order to build an atmosphere of trust are:

2.2.1 Friendly atmosphere

An important aspect in building an atmosphere of trust is to promote a friendly atmosphere without any fear or bureaucracy. When a friendly atmosphere exists, team members can communicate freely, express ideas and collaborate which eventually leads to the establishment of trust.

- Leaders should build a friendly environment within the team through informal meet ups like eating together, celebrations general discussions and so on. In the current scenario where most people are working online, some of these could be done online although not as effectively as in person.
- Leaders should get involved in the informal team activities as well.
- Leaders should be approachable at all times and not be an occasional visitor. The sense of approachability also brings about a friendly vibe.
- Leaders should also structure one-on-one discussions such that topics not related to work also get discussed, maybe a common area of interest or some issue outside of work. These discussions if managed properly build a great rapport and also develop trust.

In my experience: In the time when we used to work from office, I used to regularly have lunch and tea with the team. I participated in the small celebrations and also ensure team outings and lunches happen. I also shared a workstation with teammates instead of sitting in my cube which was separate from the team area. In the online work model, I made sure to organize informal meetups and also find innovative ideas to celebrate. All these really helped me maintain a friendly relationship with the team and also ensure a friendly atmosphere in the group. This helped in the long run.

2.2.2 Involvement

Team leaders plays an important role in driving trust through involvement. The leader should be involved in key sessions which could be driven by someone else in the team but the leader's presence in the session gives a reassuring feeling to the employees and gives them more courage to move ahead. This also builds in a trust factor with the leader. Common examples could be, when there is urgent work being done post office hours or an unavoidable weekend activity. The presence of the leader creates a sense of involvement with the team.

The other aspect of involvement is about involving the team in decision making. The leader should take steps to involve the team in discussions and decision-making process wherever applicable. In some scenarios, the leader could involve senior members of the team where involving all members might not be feasible. This creates a sense of involvement in the team and they feel valued. This also enhances the trust factor within the team and with the leadership.

2.2.3 Transparency

This is one of the most important aspects of building trust. A leader should be transparent wherever feasible and also encourage the team to practice transparency. Whenever there is information to be shared like management goals, company directives or any other information applicable to the entire team, the leader should communicate in an open manner and also encourage people to raise concerns or questions. When there are decisions made which impact the team, the leader should explain the rationale behind the move in an open team setting, if that is something to be shared. All these actions create a level of trust with the leadership. The leader should also ensure that the team members know what each one is working on and also encourage ideas to do things in a better way.

Another area where the leader should exhibit transparency is in the performance feedback or one-on-one sessions. The leader should give candid feedback and also seek suggestions and feedback from the employee. The goals should also be set clearly and reviewed from time to time. The leader should not collate all feedback towards the end of the appraisal cycle, rather give them as and when it is needed. This instills transparency and trust.

2.3 Always in sync

“No one can whistle a symphony. It takes a whole Orchestra to play it.” – H E Luccock (Luccock, n.d.)

It is important for the entire team to be in complete sync with what is going on with the deliverables, the company and the team. Only then will the team be able to work well together and deliver success. It is not enough if the team is in sync, its leader should also be in sync:

- Attend the standup meetings regularly to be updated about the day-to-day work that is in progress. The leader should be careful not to get into a micro-management mode and that would not be scalable as well. However, emphasis could be on providing guidance wherever needed and helping in resolving impediments. The main job of a leader should be to facilitate the team to work better without distractions.
- Attend any other team discussions as much as possible to stay up to date.
- Regular one-on-one discussion with team members which should cover the regular work as well as the employee development aspects.
- The leader should connect informally with the team, join them in informal chat sessions, lunch etc. This persistent connection creates a level of comfort and that enables team members to discuss openly with the leader.
- The leader should be well versed with the work done by each team member. The daily sync up and other meetings should give vital inputs. The one-on-one sessions also help understand the work done. The leader should be able to assess the performance of each employee even before the yearly performance review discussion with the employee.
- The leader should also ensure that the team spends time on team building and fun activities. That keeps them energized and engaged.

All these measures not only improve the bonding between team members but also ensure a good rapport with the leader. This goes a long way in the success of the team.

In my experience: As a leader I try to attend standup meetings as much as possible. In addition, I have regular sync up meetings with the team trying to always stay in sync with the happenings. Regular one-on-one meeting also helps me stay in sync with what each team member is working on, their concerns, their feedback etc. As a result, I end up reminding many team members about achievements they missed mentioning in the performance review discussions. This has a positive influence in my relationship with them and also elevates the trust between us.

2.4 Ownership

“Responsibility equals accountability equals ownership. A sense of ownership is the most powerful weapon a team or organization can have” – Pat Summitt, Former Tennessee Women’s Basketball Coach (Summitt, n.d.)

An efficient leader delegates work to team members. A smart leader delegates ownership to team members.

If team members own a part of the product or deliverable, it drives a sense of responsibility and accountability and eventually keeps them motivated. This approach makes each team member think of their area as an owner, devise plans and strategies, drive the execution, showcase the results and constantly try to improve. This will not only result in team excellence but also enable the leader to concentrate on other strategic aspects to take the team to greater heights.

Some key aspects to consider here:

2.4.1 No micromanagement

One of the most important guidelines for a leader is to avoid micromanagement. It is tempting to get into the finer details of each work happening within the team and dictate terms. That gives a deep sense of control and also makes the leader feel valued. But that is like slow poison, for the leader as well as the team.

Micromanagement makes the team feel less valued. It brings in a feeling that the leader does not trust the employees and their work. It makes the team members restrict themselves to whatever the leader asks them to do and in the longer run, it leads to frustration, stagnation and eventually attrition.

Micromanagement also has a negative impact on the leader. It consumes a lot of time and can also drain mentally. This means that the leader would not have much time to think beyond the day-to-day work which can hinder the growth of the team as well as the leader. It also diminishes the trust factor.

Leaders should drive the ownership model in the team culture, encouraging each team member to own and drive initiatives.

This approach releases a lot of time for the leader which can be used in strategic thinking and decision making for the team and project. That also enables leaders to scale up and start moving towards higher levels in their own career. It also builds in a deep sense of passion and commitment within the employees eventually leading to consistently successful teams.

In my experience: Each member in my team owns one or more components depending upon their experience and capability. Whenever a new member joins the team, the natural progression path set for them is to start owning at least one area or component within 3-4 months. Regular sync up with the owners helps me stay up to date and also ensure things are moving as per plan. This approach has helped all team members grow in their career and also helped me grow.

2.4.2 Ensure visibility

Another important aspect of driving the ownership model is to ensure visibility in two ways:

- Along with delegating ownership of components or projects to team members, it is very important to give them the visibility of the impact of their work on the organization’s goals. They should understand how their work is directly or indirectly contributing to the organization’s goals. This gives them an idea of the importance of the work they own and also drive commitment and responsibility.
- The other aspect of visibility is to provide opportunities for team members to showcase their work in larger forums like demos to executives or demos at organization level. Wherever possible, they

should represent the work they own such as sending status reports or presenting in meetings. This will not only give them the experience of bigger forums but will also give others visibility of the work and ownership that the team members exhibit. This will increase their credibility at the organization level and eventually contributes to their growth.

2.4.3 Build next level leadership

“Leaders don’t create followers, they create more leaders.” – Tom Peters, author, speaker, management expert (Peters, n.d.)

One key aspect of leadership is to build successors. A leader should always have the next level of leaders groomed and ready to take responsibility in absence of the leader. When a leader is on vacation, or otherwise occupied, the next level leaders should be capable of handling the situation and continuing the work. This can only happen if the next level leaders are identified, groomed and given ownership with the freedom to execute and take decisions.

Some key things to do as a leader:

- Identify people in the team who are passionate, responsible and capable of managing additional responsibility.
- Groom them by providing them opportunities to drive small projects or own components.
- Make them visible outside the team, showcase them as owners or SMEs.
- Keep in constant touch with the next level leaders, have frequent discussions, discuss strategy, consult them on decisions etc.
- Encourage them to find their way of driving things, do not restrict them.

Last but not least, a leader should be selfless. The leader should always think beyond oneself, about their successor even in the event of the leader leaving the organization. A successful leader always prepares the next level of leadership in such a way that when the leader leaves the organization, the next level can continue the work with minimal or no disruption.

2.5 Freedom

“The ultimate freedom for creative groups is the freedom to experiment with new ideas.” – Daniel H Pink (Pink, n.d.)

The sense of ownership among team members eventually requires freedom for them to experiment and drive in their own way. It could be freedom in technology, process and even some individual aspects. The leader can show the way and the employee should think and devise the plan to achieve it, manage the execution and own the result. Leaders should always be available for any kind of guidance but should not interfere in the way unless something is terribly wrong.

This approach has a certain level of risk, there might be small failures or delays as people learn to drive things in their own way. The leader needs to support the employees so that the employees can think and experiment without fear of failure.

Some key aspects to consider here:

2.5.1 No Fear of failure

Fear of failure constrains creativity. They hesitate to try something new and always try to stick to the same old methods to get the work done. Imbibing freedom to think and experiment brings out creative ways and many times generates amazing results. There may be some cases of failure, but the leader can step in at the time and guide.

The most important thing is that in failure scenarios, the blame game should never happen. When there is an issue, the primary focus should be on how to fix the issue rather than trying to find the person at fault.

Even after the issue is fixed, there should be an analysis on cause of the issue with the intention of preventing that from happening in the future. The moment a culture of blame game creeps in, people will get defensive and fear to take up responsibilities and that hinders the success of the team.

In my experience: I have seen leaders on both sides. I have worked with leaders who never pinpointed at anyone in case of a failure but brought together the whole team to work out of the issue. Those leaders went on to create successful teams and rose to higher positions in their career.

On the other hand, I have also come across leaders who always tried to achieve perfection by driving in the fear that a particular person or group would be responsible in case of issues. And in such situations, they even went to the extent of placing the blame on people and acting against them. Such teams have always diminished, and such leaders faced more and more of such issues in future as well.

2.5.2 Employee Leaves

Although this topic might seem trivial, it can have serious implications. Employees earn their leaves and possess the right to avail them.

As a leader, employees should be given the freedom and responsibility to decide on their leaves. Eventually, if any employee is prevented from taking leave, they would definitely not have the concentration and involvement at work and would eventually lose the motivation. Instead of this, allowing them to take leaves allows them to address their priority and come back more committed and motivated to complete the work on hand.

There might be occasional delays that occur due to leaves taken but that should be managed by the leader. The long-term benefits of providing freedom in this aspect is far more rewarding than the short-term drawbacks.

2.5.3 Flexibility

This is another important aspect, especially after the COVID pandemic. The pandemic introduced the unknown concept of complete work from home. This brought up many challenges and one of them was on work-life balance. People had to manage their personal work and their professional work such that neither suffered. At times, personal work had to be addressed in between office work sometimes leading to conflicts.

Flexibility is the key in such situations and even in the work from office situation as well. Again, this is linked to ownership and freedom. Leaders should drive in the concept of owning the work and delivering it as per schedule. But how they pace their work, what timings they follow etc. should be left to the discretion of the individuals. Each individual might have their own work patterns and leaders should allow them the freedom to follow. However, the leader should find ways to ensure a minimal overlap such that all team members could attend the important discussions.

In my experience: I have practiced the above approach towards leaves and flexibility in my teams and it has provided amazing results. In some rare occasions, there were delays but that was something I handled as a leader, sometimes seeking additional time and sometimes seeking help. But this approach has inculcated so much commitment and motivation in the employees that in times of crisis, they have worked extra time and extra days to meet the deliverables. And the most important thing is that even after all the extra time, they ended up being even more motivated and engaged.

2.6 Career Path

Organization goals, strategy, teamwork, leadership etc. is quite important to make teams successful but employees' career path and growth is equally important. Employees who have a clear career path remain engaged for a longer time. Along with organizational goals, achieving career goals of employees is equally important.

Some key aspects to consider here:

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2.6.1 Career path of employees

A leader should balance organizational goals and employees' career path. The career path of an employee should be in sync with the organization's strategy or roadmap and at the same time should enable the employee to gain and improve skills to grow in the direction of their choice.

Clarify the employee's long-term goals or plans. The leader should discuss with the employee on how to move ahead. The analysis of where the employee stands at present is important. Based on that, the leader can help the employee devise a career growth plan to reach their intended goal.

Another thing that the leader should do is to identify a suitable mentor for each employee to take them along in their career path.

2.6.2 Higher education

Another important aspect of career growth is higher education or certifications. Leader should encourage employees to explore new certifications or higher degrees that they could pursue to grow in their career. Organizations might have policies to provide financial assistance to employees to pursue their education. Leaders should be aware of this and encourage employees to make good use of the facility. Mentors would also add a lot of value in this aspect. They can guide their mentees on what new certification or higher education to pursue.

Higher education helps employees grow in their career, gain confidence and contribute positively towards the growth of their team and organization. Such employees are also more likely to be motivated and loyal towards their organization. All this in turn results in higher employee engagement.

2.6.3 Alternate career opportunities

However good a leader is, a situation might arise where they might have to make compromises to achieve something good. Leaders might do everything to keep their employees happy, engaged and motivated, but situations might arise when some employees or their aspirations might not fit in the team. Situations such as:

- Employees might desire a role which is not available in the team
- Employees might want to switch to a different career path
- Employee's skills might not be needed in the team or suitable work might not be there

In such situations, trying to keep the employee within the team impacts the employee's career and aspirations and over a period of time the employee loses motivation and quits. In such circumstances, the leader's efforts should find a suitable role elsewhere in the organization that might suit the employee's desire and should also recommend for the role. It is better to lose an employee within the organization than to completely lose the employee from the organization.

This might be a compromise or loss in terms of the leader's team but, it is a win for the organization and the employee.

In my experience: I encountered one situation where I could not offer a role that one of my team members desired because the role did not exist in the team. Since the employee had trust in me, the employee approached me with an open position in another team and the role offered was the role the employee desired. I helped the employee prepare for the role and also recommended the employee to the hiring manager. That helped the employee advance in his career and at the same time the organization benefited from the change. Infact, my trust level with the employee moved up.

2.7 Leadership

"Leadership is the ability to guide others without force into a direction or decision that leaves them still feeling empowered and accomplished." – Lisa Cash Hanson (Hanson, n.d.)

A leader is as important as the team itself. Leadership has a major say in how the team performs. Although a good leader cannot make the team succeed without the team's commitment, a good leader can facilitate, inspire and guide the team to that level of commitment. Hence the famous quote: *People leave managers, not companies*".

2.7.1 Facilitation

Leadership is not about controlling, it is about facilitating. One of the main responsibilities of a leader is to ensure that the team can do their work seamlessly.

- The leader needs to handle the dependencies and roadblocks that the team might face and work to get them resolved. Sometimes, these could be people or company related as well.
- The leader should work on getting more clarity on the scope of work and first see if that can be taken up later. Similarly, scope creep should also be handled.
- Leader should handle the communication and set realistic expectations with external groups.

Organizing skills, negotiating skills and communication skills of the leader come in handy while facilitating for the team.

In my experience: When I became a manager, one of my old managers called me and congratulated on my promotion. The first thing he said was that a leader should always be part of the team, never should the team feel they are under their leader. The leader should always work for the team, the team should never feel that they work for their leader. This advice has helped me throughout my managerial journey.

2.7.2 Do not dictate

One key point to remember for a leader is that leadership is not about authority, it is about being humble, empathetic and tactful. Leaders should never think of the team members as subordinates, rather the leader should be one among the team. That is when the team members feel comfortable to work with the leader and share their candid feedback, thoughts and concerns.

Rather than communicating decisions to the team, the leader should involve the team or senior team members in decision making whenever possible. This gives the leader a broader idea pool to consider and the team also feels included and valued. This enhances the commitment of the team and inspire them as well. This would eventually result in success of the team and deliverables.

In this aspect, a leader's patience, listening ability, inclusive nature and humility are put to test.

2.7.3 Managing conflicts

Conflicts occur everywhere, even in well-oiled teams. Infact, a certain degree of conflict is healthy for any team as long as it is constructive and within control. Conflicts bring out new ideas and, in some cases, avoid mistakes. Healthy conflicts within a team indicate the freedom of thought in the team.

- The leader should be well aware of conflicts in the team and intervene before it gets bad.
- If the conflict is between team members, the leader could mediate as a neutral person, avoid bias and maintain confidentiality.
- If any team member has a conflict with the leader, the leader should first try to understand the concern, listen to the employee with an unbiased mind and if needed seek help of other leaders to mediate.
- In any case, the leader must ensure to the employees that raising concerns is rightful and they should not hold back any concerns. This will happen only if the leader has established adequate trust with the team and also established credibility.

Here, the leader's patience, morals, conflict resolution techniques and unbiased decision making are key.

2.7.4 Reward and Recognition

This is important for any team. Recognizing and rewarding deserving people goes a long way in motivating them. Motivated and self-inspired team members go out of their way to deliver the desired outcome. Such people also come up with new ideas.

Team leaders play an important role in recognizing and rewarding team members:

- Needs to identify the deserving candidate. Not rewarding a deserving candidate can be disastrous but rewarding an undeserving candidate can send the wrong signals.
- Needs to reward at the right time. Delay might demotivate people.
- The leader should be in sync with the team's activities.
- Some rewards which should be kept confidential, like a spot bonus or a stock grant. In such cases, the leader should ensure the confidentiality is maintained
- Sometimes, normal reward process might not be possible due to budgetary constraints or maybe the contribution might not be big enough to qualify for a normal reward. The leader should come up with creative ideas to reward and recognize in such scenarios like granting a special leave, face time with executives, taking out for lunch and so on.

The leader's creativity and transparency are key traits needed here.

In my experience: Our company has a peer recognition program where each employee gets some reward points to give to peers for good work done. Those points expire each quarter. So, I started a recognition meeting towards the end of each quarter where each team member lists out the names of peers who helped them or overachieved. And if they wish, they could also reward them with some points. This received a positive response and team members feel good about this exercise.

2.8 Celebrate

"Every win is a celebration not because it's a win but because of all the hard work that went behind it."
(Pinterest, n.d.)

All work and no fun would make anyone dull and sad. It is the same with teams. However, engaged or motivated a team is, lack of fun at workplace eventually begins a downward trend. Fun and celebration at workplace are important and as a leader, the emphasis should be to continue that even in critical situations. It is easy to shrug off the topic saying that everyone is too busy and there is no time for fun. But that can easily become a habit and excuse to defer fun activities. As a leader, one should make sure that does not happen. Leaders should not only worry about the health of the project but also about the well-being of the employees. And fun and relaxation is the step in the right direction.

2.8.1 Fun in Day-to-Day activities

It is true that parties and celebrations cannot happen every day and it should not happen as well. Those lose their value if they are done every day. But there are other ways to bring in life into the day-to-day schedule like

- Go together as a team for lunch. Make sure nothing work related is discussed there.
- Take coffee breaks as a team whenever possible. Again, keep it informal
- Meetings can begin or end with a light element to relax the group
- As a leader, make sure you are informal in interactions with the team. Make them feel comfortable and that help relax them.
- Find innovative ways to give relaxation time, like a short walk, or a short exercise break, for example.

One thing to keep in mind is that such relaxation should not be seen as a waste of time. Infact, a little bit of relaxation can bring about new ideas and new energy into people.

2.8.2 Celebrating occasions

Occasions are not to be missed. Be it a birthday or work anniversary, it deserves a small celebration at least.

- Celebrate on the same day as much as possible.
- Maintain consistency so that there is no feeling of differentiation.
- Celebrate larger occasions with an outing or lunch/dinner.

In the post-pandemic world where many people work remotely, such celebrations could be done online, like a video call. If the company policy allows and it is safe, team outings or lunches could be organized occasionally.

These celebrations not only add fun into the stressful work-life but also bring people together. In such occasions, the bonding between team members improves thus contributing to team's success.

In my experience: In the two years of pandemic, we figured out innovative ways to celebrate. For Diwali which is a major festival in India, we shipped dry fruit boxes to each employee in the group. And for major work anniversaries like 5, 10 or 15 years, the leader sent sweets or chocolates to those employees with a Thank You note. Although this was work to organize and execute, the end result was pleasant. Everyone on the team liked the gesture.

2.9 Separation

Even the best of leaders have to face attrition at some point in time. However, the important thing is to positively utilize the situation. Although a member leaving the team is a negative development for the team, there are a few positives that can come out of these circumstances as well. As a leader, staying calm and composed in these situations is quite important.

2.9.1 Seek feedback

As a leader, the first thing to do when you learn of a resignation is to talk to the person. Try to find the reason behind the move and try to find what change might help retain the employee. In most situations, retaining an employee is more profitable than hiring a replacement.

The trust factor plays a huge role here. If the employee has trust in the leader, some of these conversations would have happened during a one on one itself. This conversation would not happen after resignation in most circumstances.

Anyways, such a conversation can help retain the employee, especially when the employee is looking for a different role or has an issue at work. In cases where compensation is the reason, this conversation could help gather the information. Then, depending on the ask and feasibility, an offer could be made.

2.9.2 Try to find another role

In situations where an employee might be looking for a different role or different kind of work, the leader can think whether that alignment could happen within the team itself. If the leader and employee have a good trust relationship and regular one-on-one meetings, such requests would have come up there itself.

In some situations, the role or type of work desired by the employee might not be feasible within the team. Then, the leader should look for alignment elsewhere within the organization. Although the team might lose a resource, the organization benefits.

2.9.3 Offer help

When all efforts to retain the employee fail, the leader can offer help to the employee with the next job. It could be like providing a recommendation, or providing a reference through contacts, offering guidance

for the new role and so on. Although this might not benefit the organization in any way, it enhances the trust factor which might come in handy in future situations when the employee might look for a change.

2.9.4 Blessing in disguise

In few situations, the resignation of an employee might come in as a blessing in disguise. There might be employees who are not performing well or they might not be engaged with the team. Despite many efforts if the behavior does not change, it might not be in the best interest of the team. At some point in the future, such employees might go through a forceful exit. But, if such employees decide to quit on their own before that, it benefits the team. One classic example of how a negative development could sometimes prove beneficial.

In my experience: One employee in my team decided to quit to explore a new role. Despite many efforts to retain, the employee decided to go ahead with the decision. But the employee had a strong trust relationship and was leaving on a positive note. Few months later, the person reached out to me and expressed interest to come back into the company and the team in particular since the new job was not as per expectations. This turned out to be a win-win situation for both.

3 Exceptions

The approach described above covers majority of situations that occur in teams. However, outliers will always be there. Leaders have to consider those outliers and devise innovative approaches to tackle them. Following is a list of exceptions that could occur but however this is not a final list. It could differ according to the scenario.

- Micromanagement in crisis: Though it is always advisable to give a free hand to team members to own the product/component and drive independently, there might be situations where leaders have to intervene and ensure that the deliverables are met. It could be an urgent customer escalation or a critical time bound activity. In such cases, the leader would have to be more involved and track the minute details to ensure the expectation is met. One or more team members could be given responsibility to drive it but the leader should also follow up closely and micro-manage to some level.
- Abuse of Freedom: Though it is recommended to allow freedom to team members to drive their owned components, there could be rare situations where team members could misuse the freedom and negatively impact the deliverable. If the leader is in constant sync on all the work in the team, intervention is needed in such situations and corrective action needs to be initiated by the leader.
- Retention only as needed: Though leaders should try to retain employees, this might not apply to some cases in attrition scenarios. There might be members who might have performance issues or might not be a good fit in the team. Despite repeated feedback, if the behavior continues then retention of such employees might not be desirable.
- Reward judiciously: Just like not rewarding is dangerous, over-rewarding or wrong rewards might be even more dangerous. So, the leader should be vigilant to ensure that the deserving people get rewarded appropriately at the right time. Any reward or recommendation that the leader feels might be inappropriate should be brought to a halt.
- Transparency / confidentiality: Although transparency in the team and transparency from the leader is important, there are situations where confidentiality has to be maintained. Like performance and compensation related topics, some company confidential topics like strategy organizational changes, important decisions and so on. In such situations, the leader should be careful not to violate confidentiality and share information only on a need-to-know basis.
- Hiring through referrals: Though hiring through referrals is mostly beneficial, it could at times lead to groupism, especially if the referral is from an existing team member. In such situations, gauging the attitude of the candidate, the intentions of the referring team member and team dynamics becomes important. If the leader feels that the team could be negatively impacted due to the referral, it should be rejected or not considered for hiring.

- Pandemic changes: All the concepts discussed consider normal work environment, however in some situations the effect of the pandemic is also considered. As the pandemic evolves, there might be changes to the approaches and that should be taken up on a case-by-case basis. And some of these might be company specific as well.
- Company policy: Although majority of the topics discussed here apply to all companies and industries, there might be exceptions in certain industries which have to be considered on a case-by-case basis. For instance, the work environment, freedom and transparency in a military defense organization might be more rigid and the approaches have to be altered accordingly.

4 Conclusion

Managing people is an art as well as a science and it requires patience, sensitivity and creativity. Challenges differ from team to team and from organization to organization. Accordingly, leaders should adapt and innovate new ways to tackle the situation and ensure success. This paper is an effort to highlight key aspects to consider while managing teams. This is just a framework that leaders can use, improvise and achieve success within their groups.

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