

How to Build a Conflict-Competent Team

Shawn McVey, MA, MSW
 McVey Management Solutions
 Austin, TX

Is it every person for himself or herself at your practice? Working in teams can be a much more efficient way to get things done. Learn how to build teams from the ground up and keep them running smoothly.

After this session, you will be better able to:

- Design teams by analyzing required tasks and assigning the appropriate people to those tasks
- Identify roles for each team member
- Define the process for team interaction
- Optimize team performance and deal with performance problems

There are three major considerations for building a team: the tasks, the people, and the relationships. We'll cover each of those in turn.

The material for this presentation is from *Making the Team: A guide for Managers* by Leigh Thompson. We reference the chapters titled, "Building the Team: Tasks, People, and Relationships" and "Performance and Productivity: Team Performance Criteria and Threats to Productivity."

Phase I: Tasks

The first step in building a good team is to analyze the work that needs to be done:

- What work needs to be performed?
- How much authority does the group have over its own work?
- What is the focus of the work?
- What is the degree of interdependence in the team?
- One solution or several possible solutions?
- Are the team members' interests aligned?

When the team has more authority, there is more involvement and motivation, the manager has less control, and the teams' objectives may not be aligned with those of the larger organization.

Focus of work

Broad Objective	Dominant Feature	Process Emphasis	Threats
Tactical, e.g. surgery, military	Clarity	Focused objectives Role clarity Well-defined operational standards Accuracy	Role ambiguity Lack of training Communication barriers
Problem-Solving, e.g. disease control	Trust	Focus on issues Separate people from problem Consider facts, not opinions Conduct thorough investigation Suspend judgment	Failure to stick to facts Fixate on solutions Succumb to political pressures Confirmatory information search
Creative, e.g. HBO	Autonomy	Explore possibilities and alternatives	Production blocking "Lumpy" participation

There are several degrees of task interdependence. With pooled interdependence, group members work independently and then pool their work (e.g., department store). With sequential interdependence, there is a classic assembly line or division of labor. Those down the line are more dependent on others (e.g., a car manufacturer). Reciprocal interdependence is the highest level of interdependence. Every member is dependent on others at all levels (e.g., a rowing team).

Is there one solution or several possible solutions? A demonstrable task has one correct solution (e.g., building a house conforming to a blueprint). A non-demonstrable task has no single best answer (e.g., a consulting team). There is a chance of considerable disagreement if the indices of performance are not decided.

Are the team members' interests aligned, and how are they compensated? A mix of cooperative and competitive interests works best, where there is an incentive to work with one another and compete with others. In this case, there should be rewards for both individual and team performance.

Phase II: People

The second step in building a good team is to analyze the people:

- How many people should be on the team?
- Who is ideally suited to do the work?
- What skills are required?
- What type and level of diversity is optimal in the team?

Pick the right number of people for the team. Managers seem to have an overstaffing bias, and smaller teams are rare. But they tend to work harder on a wider variety of tasks. They assume more responsibility for team performance. Oversize teams, though are less cohesive. Members are more self-conscious and avoid serious topics with frivolous conversation. In addition, the equality of member participation decreases. Managers seriously underestimate how coordination problems multiply when team members are added.

How do you know who is ideally suited to do the work? The more you know about the task, the better you suit people to it. Does it require technical or functional expertise? Task-management skills? Interpersonal skills? A well-rounded team member is a statistical rarity. Rely on self-reports, past accomplishments, and 360-degree reports to determine how well suited a person is to a particular task.

What type and level of diversity is optimal in the team? Diversity is beyond gender, race, or disabilities. You need diversity in terms of functional skills. The advantages of a diversified team include multiple viewpoints and better decision-making, which gives you a competitive advantage.

What do you diversify based on? Social category (age, sex, race)? This isn't very constructive. Informational diversity (education, work experience)? These team members debate constructively. Values diversity (work values, goals)? They are likely to engage in destructive conflicts.

How much diversity? If the team is too diverse, it's difficult to get anything done. We experience some level of interpersonal congruence, which is the degree to which we see ourselves as others see us. Usually, the more diverse the group, the conflict there is. There is task conflict (due to different functional backgrounds) and emotional conflict (due to race, age). A person who is the only member of his/her social category feels isolated and may experience role entrapment.

Phase III: Relationships

The third step in building a good team is to analyze the relationships:

- How do team members socialize with each other?
- What roles are negotiated among team members?
- Which norms are conducive/harmful?
- Is cohesion in the team important?
- How is trust developed, threatened, and rebuilt among the team members?

When there is a newcomer in the team, everyone completes an evaluation—a cost-benefit analysis, as it were. Teams evaluate the newcomer and vice versa. Is the new person beneficial to the team? Is the team beneficial to the new person? How committed is the individual to the group and the group to the individual?

Everyone goes through a role transition from nonmember to quasi member to full member. Once on the team, each member has a role. Roles and negotiations are not explicitly talked about. Rather, people engage in actions designed to take on that role, which are accepted/rejected by others. Task masters take the role of managing the team in terms of the work to be done. They are the team leaders. Others take on the role of socio-emotional master. This person's focus is on satisfying the emotional needs of the team. S/he manages the people aspects of a team and restores harmony and cohesion.

Status systems develop within minutes after teams are formed. There is a process by which people acquire authority to be the task master or the socio-emotional master. Team members intuitively take note of one another's personal qualities that they think are indicative of ability. Real status characteristics are qualities relevant to task at hand, e.g., experience. Pseudo status characteristics are factors like sex, age, ethnicity, and cultural background.

Team norms are not the same as rules. Norms make it easier for people to respond appropriately under new or stressful conditions. Norms add structure to the team. They reduce threats to productivity. Norms are left to natural processes and interaction patterns. The disruptive, least self-conscious people set unfavorable norms. Team Norms

At times, norms may also be in conflict. Something that is right in one department may not be so in another. What happens when someone regularly breaks norms? Try to correct them for a long period, else practices like ostracism persist. Long-term habits of breaking the norms are detrimental to both organization and the individual.

In terms of cohesion, the relationship between team cohesion and performance is primarily correlational rather than causal. Cohesion is also known as solidarity, morale, community, and fellowship. It is a crucial ingredient for team viability. Cohesive behaviors include: showing signs of mutual affection, displaying coordinated patterns of behavior, giving enough credit to team members, and participating in team activities.

Trust is confidence one person places in another that the other will honor all commitments. Not everything can be covered in a contract, so we need trust. There are different types of trust, including incentive-based trust (e.g., bonuses), trust based on familiarity, trust based on similarity (e.g., alumni of the same school), and trust based on social networks.

Implicit trust is trust in others in the absence of any rational reason or obvious similarity. We attend to some subtle signals in a social interaction, and we are not aware of their influence. Examples are flattery, instant attitudes (intense likes or dislikes for a novel object), mere exposure (“He grew on me.”), schmoozing (“Let’s have lunch sometime.”), and mirroring, called “social contagion.” This is copying one another’s posture, facial expression, tone of voice, and mannerisms.

Team performance criteria

There are essential conditions for team success. Team members must:

- Bring adequate knowledge and skill to bear on the task
- Exert sufficient motivation and skill
- Coordinate activities and communication

In terms of knowledge and skill, the person must have average cognitive ability, interpersonal skills, and decision-making skills. Interpersonal skills include openness and self-disclosure, knowledge of each other, ability to predict other’s reactions and responses, and capacity for conflict and evaluation.

Coordination is the combined synchronization of all strategies of team members. Coordination problems increase with team size. We recommend single-digit teams. Have an agenda. Train team members together. Practice. Minimize links in communication. Set clear performance standards.

Here’s a team performance equation you can use:

- $AP = PP + S - T$
 - AP = Actual Productivity
 - PP = Potential Productivity
 - S = Synergy
 - T = Performance Threats

There are four factors to consider when analyzing the performance of your team: productivity, cohesion, learning, and integration.

Productivity

- Does the team have a clear goal?
- Which objective performance measures will be used to evaluate results?
- Who are the legitimate clients of the team?
- Under what conditions should the goal change?
- What sources of information should the team consider to assess whether the initial goal should be changed?

Cohesion

- Does the team enjoy working together?
- What conditions could lead to feelings of resentment?
- What conditions could prevent team members from working together in the future?
- How are team members expected to accommodate to changes, such as additions to team, growth, and turnover?

Learning

- How can team members best learn from one another?
- Do the individual team members grow and develop as a result of team experience?
- Do team members have a chance to improve their skills or affirm themselves?
- What factors and conditions could block personal growth?
- Are individuals’ growth needs understood and shared by group members?

Integration

- How does the team benefit the larger organization?
- Are the team’s goals consistent with those of larger organization?
- What other groups, departments, and units are affected by the team?
- What steps has the team taken to integrate its activities with those of others?

Action plan

- This week, I will:
- The outcome for me is:
- The outcome for the organization is:

- This month, I will:
- The outcome for me is:
- The outcome for the organization is:
- The outcome for the organization is: