Turn Your Group into a True Team

By Linda Hill & Kent Lineback  |  HBR.org

Are the people who work for you a real team?

It's easy to extol teamwork, but not every group is a team. In fact, most teams we see, aren't — because their managers focus on building the most effective relationships they can with each individual who works for them. They spend their time managing person by person, paying little attention to collective performance. They rarely use their groups to diagnose or solve problems. And when issues arise that clearly affect the group as a whole, they tend to handle them one on one.

In taking this approach, they're overlooking an important management tool: the powerful influence that social dynamics in a real team can exert on the behavior and performance of its members.

What is a team and what makes it potentially such a valuable instrument of leadership? A team is a group of people who do collective work and are mutually committed to a common team purpose and challenging goals related to that purpose.

Collective work and mutual commitment are the key characteristics. By going beyond mere cooperation and coordination, collective work produces more innovative and productive outcomes that exceed the simple sum of individual efforts. Mutual commitment means members hold themselves and each other jointly accountable for the team's performance. They not only think and act collectively, but the social and emotional bonds among them are compelling. They share a genuine conviction that "we" — the potent concept behind every team — will succeed or fail together, and that no individual can succeed while the team fails.

The powerful ties among members of this social structure spring, first, from purpose and goals. A common, worthwhile purpose creates a sense of doing something important together, and specific, challenging team goals based on that purpose create a sense of going someplace important together. Without purpose and goals, no group will become a team.

But they're not enough. Team members also need clarity; about roles, about how the work is done, and about how members interact. When all of these crucial elements are in place, groups become teams: communities that exert strong influence on members' attitudes and behaviors. That's why the ability to transform a group of people into a true team can make you a more influential and effective manager.

One manager we know who discovered these features of true teams called them a "mystic new power." Yet another was happily surprised when he learned how committed people could become to a team and its work once they felt part of it and, through the team, part of something larger than themselves.
These managers came to appreciate the possibilities of managing a group as a whole — that is, creating a team and managing through it. They learned to rely more and more on using team goals and values to stretch performance. They found they could influence individual behavior much more effectively this way. All of us want to do important work, of course, but we’re also social creatures who want to fit in and be accepted as part of a team.

No wonder the ability to create and manage a true team is a crucial management skill — the key management skill, some would argue — whether you lead a permanent group of direct reports or a virtual, highly diverse, widely-dispersed, temporary team created to tackle a specific problem or opportunity.

Have you made your people a real team bound by a genuine sense of "we"? If not, ask yourself — and your group members — these questions to understand what more you must do:

Are we mutually committed to a compelling and worthwhile purpose? Do we know not just which task we must perform, but who will benefit from our work? Do we believe that if we disappeared today, the world would be different tomorrow?

Are we pursuing clear goals based on that purpose, and do we have plans in place for reaching them?

Does everyone know how the team does its work? Does everyone understand their roles and responsibilities? Are work processes clear? Do we share a set of values and beliefs about what we expect of each other and how we treat each other? Does everyone know how we're doing, both as a group and individually?

Finally (and paradoxically) don’t ignore team members as individuals. It’s human nature that we all want to belong to a group and we want to be recognized for our distinct contributions. Get to know and deal with each member uniquely — but always in the context of the team and its work.

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