

# Getting a new work team off the ground

By Bruce Tulgan

If you are a new leader, no matter how much experience you bring to the table, you're likely to be challenged by the situation you find yourself in now.

You may be transitioning from being a peer to being a leader. You may be coming from the outside to take over an existing team. You may be bringing together a new team, or you may be welcoming a new member to an existing team.

## Organizing a new team

Let's say, for instance, that a brand new team is being formed at your workplace. The team members don't know each other. You did not choose them. And you may not be sure how long the team will exist. This could happen in a start-up company, department, work group or a new project.

Your new team has a lot of work that needs to be done very well and very fast. You may have standard operating procedures to guide you but, for the most part, your team has not yet established habits or norms of interaction.

Everyone on your team will be wondering who you are. "What are your plans?" "How will you manage?" And "What will it all mean for me?"

What do you do? Where do you start? With a new team you have no baggage. You have a rare chance to get things going very well from the onset.

## Some pitfalls to avoid

"Hit the ground running" sounds great. But without coordination, people tend to run off in their own directions. Another strategy is to focus on what team members have in common outside of work. While this emphasis is laudable, it fails to explore how well individuals are likely to work together and confront issues on the job.

Similarly, valuable team building exercises can be a distraction



*Getting to know the members of a new work team.*

in this situation. Everyone needs to get to know each other in terms of who each person is on the job.

So your goal, as manager, is to help each person know where he or she fits into the larger picture with everyone on the same page, ready to move forward as a team.

## The first team meeting

Introduce yourself. Then facilitate an introductory process that focuses on "Who I am at work."

Ask team members to introduce themselves and describe their portfolio of experiences and skills. For example: "This is what I can do. This is how I operate. These are my work habits. And this is the commitment I am willing to make to this team."

These introductions will work better if people have a chance to prepare their own brief self-assessment in advance.

Many organizations use self-assessment tools. So, it helps to ask participants if they've gone through this process before. If they have, ask: "What did you learn about yourself from that assessment that will help others work better with you?"

## More key questions

The next key question: "What do team members need to know about you that will help them work better with you?"

Encourage authenticity, and don't pretend to be something you're not. But present your best self and hold yourself to a high standard.

After team members have offered the group their self-assessment, it can be productive to pair them off in twos (with one trio if necessary). Ask them to interview each other based

on the self-assessments they have just heard. Then ask each pair to introduce each other to the group.

## Next steps

It's a good idea to end the initial meeting with a list of unanswered questions. Brainstorm with everyone at the table: "What don't we know that we need to know to make a smarter plan for our work as a team?"

Everyone should be involved in intelligence-gathering for the next meeting, and the focus of that meeting should be: "What have we been able to learn?"

Your challenge now is to clarify individual roles and responsibilities for each member of the team. Your job as the leader is to figure out how to make the best use of each person and determine how they will work in concert with each other.

This means that you need to do your best due diligence on each team member before you assign roles and responsibilities. Resumes, letters of recommendation and prior project reviews are all useful. In the absence of that kind of information, you might consider an interview style one-on-one with each member of the team between your first and the second meetings.

## Bringing it all together

By your third team meeting, you should be clear as to what role each person is going to play, who is expected to do what—and how, where and when that will happen.

Continue to meet with people individually. Spell out your expectations, follow up, provide feedback, trouble-shoot and correct course when necessary. And keep meeting as a team where there are conversations in which everyone needs to participate. ♦

—Adapted from the author's book *"The 27 Challenges Managers Face: Step-by-Step Solutions to (Nearly) All of Your Management Problems"* (Jossey-Bass).

## As your new team moves forward

Keep meeting regularly with each team member. As you continue to monitor, measure and document, ask yourself these questions:

Who needs to be managed more closely?

Who needs more responsibility and autonomy?

Who needs help with the fundamentals of self-management?

Who needs performance coaching to speed up or slow down?

Who has a great attitude and who needs an attitude adjustment?

Who needs help navigating the complex, ever-changing workplace? ♦