

TEN ACTIVITIES FOR STRONG TEAM LEADERS

David E. Hartl

Many organizations are changing from a traditional administrative-bureaucratic style to a participative-team style in order to achieve greater flexibility and higher levels of performance. As part of this change, many traditional leaders make the mistake of thinking that if they give up their strong command-and-control leadership practices by ceasing to give orders and expecting compliance, people will spontaneously participate more, develop individual initiative, and work cooperatively together as team members. Experience shows that this is hardly ever the case. Usually, when leaders cease giving orders, people who have become accustomed to them just wait until they start again. Given a long enough waiting period, the whole organization can grind to a halt. This, of course, justifies leaders with a command-and-control bias to return to the old leadership approach and once again mire the organization down in the traditional and inflexible system that gave rise to the need for change in the first place.

The change to a participative-team organizational style, with all of the attendant benefits, is a leadership-intensive process just as the old command-and-control style was. Team leaders must be just as active and strong as in the traditional organizational style; maybe even stronger. Their leadership style, however, must be strongly directed in different ways, using different activities to produce different results – participative-team results. Here are ten activities for strong team leadership that will help to produce team results.

I. CLARIFY MISSION AND VISION

Become clear in your own mind about what you deeply believe the mission of the team to be. Create first in yourself the ability to articulate the essential purposes of the team. Develop a detailed picture in your mind of what the situation will look and feel like when the mission is completely fulfilled.

II. COMMUNICATE

Help everyone on the team to understand clearly what the mission of the team is -- its purposes and goals. Vividly describe your vision of what conditions will be when the mission has been fully achieved. Give people a detailed image to relate to. Help them to see their individual roles in accomplishing the mission. Be sure to secure their active agreement to pursue the team's mission (alignment) before enabling them to use their power and giving them the authority they need to fulfill their responsibilities (empowerment).

III. CHART THE COURSE

Engage the team to participate in defining the major strategies and tactics that will be used to pursue the mission. Solicit input from all involved to assure that all possible options for action are fairly considered. Develop a course of action that will take maximum advantage of the full capacities of every team member. Develop charts of the team work schedule (critical path charts, work flow charts, time-lines, etc.) to help guide team activities.

IV. COORDINATE

Identify and develop linkages with others that are needed to support the work of the team. Show how each team member's work affects the work of others and of the whole team. Identify benchmarks to assess progress. Use a consensus decision process whenever appropriate and possible to agree on plans and approaches that must be effectively implemented by team members.

V. COOPERATE

Recognize that competition is the “default” or automatic behavior style of most people that must be overcome by the leader’s strong emphasis on cooperation if teamwork is to be successfully achieved. Foster an attitude of mutual helpfulness by setting cooperation as a standard for team behavior and recognizing/rewarding team members for helping each other. Regard all unit boundaries as easily transcended. Insist that all team members recognize and accept a total team system perspective even while focusing on their own individual tasks. Help each team member to see how their individual actions affect the total system both “up stream” and “down stream.”

VI. CONNECT

Allocate time and resources to help team members understand each other beyond their ordinary work functions. Support their developing interpersonal relationships of mutual respect and trust. Share personal information about yourself and facilitate their sharing information about themselves that goes beyond the ordinary "name, rank, and function." Have fun together as well as work together.

VII. COACH AND FACILITATE

At all times maintain a sharp focus on the goals and strategies the team is pursuing. Set high standards that call for team members to stretch themselves. Help to define clear performance expectations and responsibilities of team members. Manage problem-solving and decision-making processes that actively involve all team members. Offer training and support for perfect practice in order to achieve expectations. Regard honest mistakes as learning opportunities. Provide the tools and resources necessary for them to be effective. Provide both group process structures to help team members share ideas among themselves as well as offering highly targeted individual coaching. Expect to lead by example in all you do.

VIII. CANDOR

Tell the truth. Communicate information freely and in a timely manner. Team cooperation requires maximum information. Encourage and listen to the team's candid feedback and accept it as influential when appropriate. Treat tension and conflict as allies to creativity, innovation, and balance. Accommodate genuine differences of perspective prior to decision. Once decisions are made, hold all team members strictly accountable to uphold all team agreements about both the work of the team and the communication processes the team uses.

IX. CORRECT DEFICIENCIES QUICKLY

Creatively confront deficiencies of team members that cannot be effectively handled within the team. Quickly step up to individual performance problems before they become team morale problems. Respect the sensibilities of individuals when confronting them while also respecting the needs of the team to get the best performance and reliability from every member.

X. CREATE COMMITMENT

Create continuing team commitment through full participation and enabling genuine ownership of team goals, strategies, and tactics. Maintain a high level of team credibility – assure that people keep believing in each other's integrity and desire to achieve the team's mission. Encourage the use of authority to authorize action and support individual responsibility rather than as an attempt to control others. Recognize that you can only earn and engender commitment from others; you cannot demand it. It is commitment that produces team results.

Just as there are wide differences among traditional administrative-bureaucratic style leaders, there will also be variations among participative-team leaders even as they use these same activities to lead their teams. There is plenty of room for variation in personal style and individuality for leadership in teams. This acknowledgment also serves as a reminder that the real strength of teams is found in the strength of the individuals that compose and lead them.