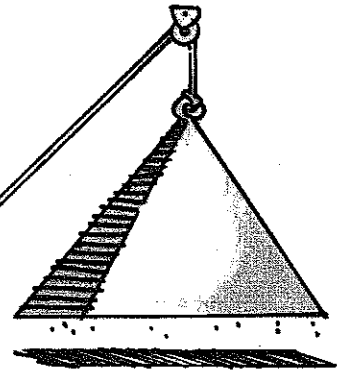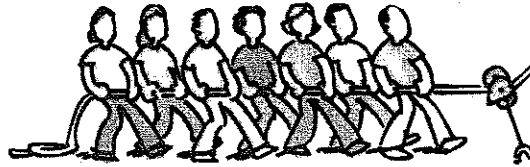# Chapter 6

Learning to Work Together

A team is a complicated creature. Members must work out personal differences, find strengths on which to build, and balance commitments to the project against the demands of their everyday jobs.

Dealing with the needs that arise from these pressures is as important as the team's work to solve the problem or improve the process. When teams work together well, members can concentrate on their primary goals. However, teams often underestimate the need for building relationships, ultimately wasting time on struggles for control and endless discussions that lead nowhere.

The more you know about what to expect as your team progresses, the better equipped you will be to handle challenges as they emerge. With a strong foundation in place you will be better able to anticipate and avoid many disruptions, and better able as a group to work through those that cannot be avoided.

I. Team Dynamics

When people form into work teams, there are predictable stages of development that must be experienced for the team to become a fine-tuned working group. Each individual comes to the team with a variety of emotions and a range of questions that must be answered. In order for each person to find answers to their questions, the team must spend time on activities that may seem unrelated to the task—but which are, nevertheless, important for the team to become a cohesive working group.

What You Will Find Here:

🖫 *Worksheets with this symbol may be downloaded from Oriel's website @ www.teamhandbook.com.*

Chapter 6

For Ongoing Teams

Ongoing teams face the same emotional issues, experience the same stages of growth, and ride the same roller coaster of highs and lows as project teams.

Teams must face issues not often spoken about, but common to all teams.

Personal Identity in the Team

It is natural for Team Members to wonder how they will fit into the team. The most common worries are those associated with

- **Membership, inclusion.** "Do I feel like an insider or outsider?" "Do I belong?" "Do I *want* to belong?" "What can I do to fit in?"

- **Influence, control, mutual trust.** "Who's calling the shots here?" "Who will have the most influence?" "Will I have influence?" "Will I be listened to?" "Will I be able to contribute?" "Will I be allowed to contribute?"

- **Getting along, mutual loyalty.** "How will I get along with other Team Members?" "Will we be able to develop cooperative spirit?"

Relationships among Team Members

With few exceptions, Team Members want the team to succeed, to make improvements, and to work cooperatively. They extend personal concerns to the team: "What kind of relationships will characterize this team?" "Will members make and keep commitments?" "How will members of different ranks interact?" "Will we be friendly and informal, or will it be strictly business?" "Will we be open or guarded in what we say?" "Will we be able to work together, or will we argue and disagree all the time?" "Will people like or dislike me? Will I like or dislike them?"

Identify with the Organization

Team Members usually identify strongly with their departments or divisions, and they will need to know how membership in the team will affect those roles and responsibilities: "Will my loyalty to the team conflict with loyalty to my coworkers?" "Will my responsibilities as a Team Member conflict with my everyday duties?" Usually it is the team's work that suffers if the two compete.

Just as Team Members must reach outside the group to maintain ties with their departments, so must the team as a whole build relationships throughout the organization. Political astuteness is crucial. Finding influential people to champion the team and its project can make a big difference in the support the team receives from the organization. A team's relationship with its manager or Sponsor is one avenue for creating such support within the organization.

Chapter 6

Forming

When a team first forms, Team Members are like hesitant swimmers standing by the side of the pool and dabbling their toes in the water.

※◯※ **Tip**
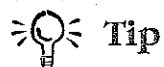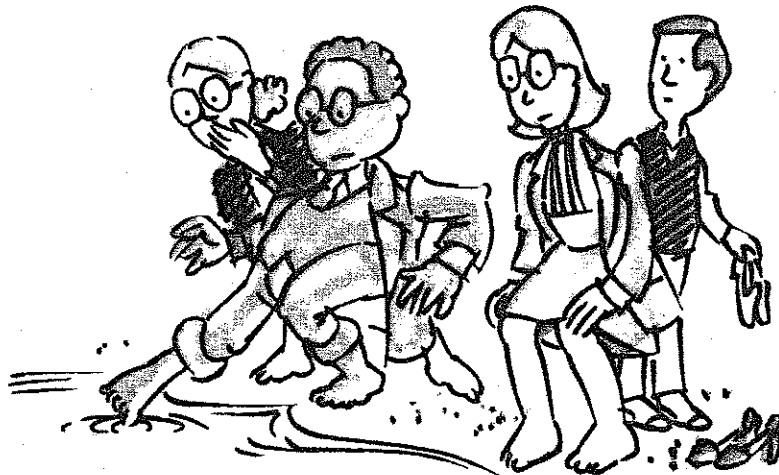
Leading a Team through Forming

To build trust and confidence during the forming stage, the Team Leader should

- Help members get to know each other
- Provide clear direction and purpose
- Involve members in developing plans, clarifying roles, and establishing ways of working together
- Provide the information and structure the team needs to get started
- Help members answer the following questions:
  - "What will be expected of me?"
  - "Do I belong here?" "Do I *want* to belong here?"
  - "What's in it for me?"
  - "What's the purpose?"

II. Stages of Team Growth

Teams go through fairly predictable stages. Knowing what the stages are and how to meet the needs of the group at each stage can help to prevent many of the pitfalls teams seem to come up against.

Stage 1: Forming

When a team is forming, members cautiously explore the boundaries of acceptable group behavior. Like hesitant swimmers, they stand by the pool, dabbling their toes in the water. This is a stage of transition from individual to Team Member status, and of testing the Team Leader's guidance, both formally and informally.

Forming includes these feelings...

- Pride in being chosen for the team
- Excitement, anticipation, and optimism
- Initial, tentative attachment to the team
- Suspicion, fear, and anxiety about the job ahead

...and these behaviors:

- Attempting to define the task and deciding how it will be accomplished
- Deciding what information is needed
- Determining acceptable team behavior and how to deal with team problems; establishing team ground rules
- Waiting to be told what to do and directing most communication to the Team Leader

Storming

As Team Members start to realize the amount of work that lies ahead, it is normal for them to start to panic. Team Members jump in the water and, thinking they are about to drown, start thrashing about.

- Discussing symptoms or problems not relevant to the task; having difficulty identifying relevant problems
- Complaining about the organization and barriers to the task

Because the work of forming seems to be separate from the task at hand, many teams either try to ignore this stage or become impatient with this work. It is important to remember that if the team doesn't move successfully through this stage, it is much less likely to reach a level of performance that will produce the best outcome and be satisfying to all.

Stage 2: Storming

Storming is probably the most difficult stage for the team. It is as if Team Members jump in the water and, thinking they are about to drown, start thrashing about. They begin to realize that the task is different and more difficult than they imagined, and become testy, anxious, or overzealous.

Teams can fall apart at this stage because members are unprepared to effectively manage differences of opinion. For a team to move successfully through storming, meetings and tasks should be structured to allow equal opportunity to participate and to influence decisions. These structures should encourage collaboration instead of individual activities.

Storming includes these feelings...

- Frustration and resistance to tasks and methods of work different from what each individual member is comfortable using
- Sharp fluctuations in attitude about the team's chance of success
- Anxiety about or withdrawal from conflict

⚡ Tip
Leading a Team through Storming

To build self-direction, the Team Leader should

- Resolve issues of power and authority. For example, don't allow one person's power to squash others' contributions.
- Develop and implement agreements about how decisions are made and who makes them.
- Adapt the leadership role to allow the team to become more independent. Encourage members to take on more responsibilities, such as serving as meeting facilitator, notetaker, scribe, and timekeeper in regular rotation.
- Use established ground rules to guide team behavior.
- Ensure equal opportunity to participate.
- Help members answer the following questions:
  - "Who is in charge?"
  - "Will I have influence here?"

Integrating New Members

When someone new joins the team, help them move through the stages.

- Welcome him or her. Introduce everyone. Make the new member comfortable.

- Orient him or her. Review the charter, ground rules, and progress so far.

- Provide training as needed. Help the new member acquire necessary technical and team skills.

- Provide ways of demonstrating membership. Have the new member volunteer for meeting roles and assignments. Recognize his or her contribution to the team's work.

...and these behaviors:

- Arguing among members even when they agree on the real issue

- Being defensive and competitive; splitting into factions and "choosing sides"

- Questioning the wisdom of those who selected this project and appointed the other members of the team

- Establishing unrealistic goals; expressing concern about excessive work

- Perceiving a "pecking order;" creating disunity, increased tension, and jealousy

- Withdrawing—whether literally dropping out of the team or simply withdrawing psychologically

During this stage, the Team Leader is expected to take primary responsibility for guiding the team. Progress on the task may be uneven, but Team Members are beginning to understand each other.

Norming

Team Members start helping each other stay afloat rather than competing with one another.
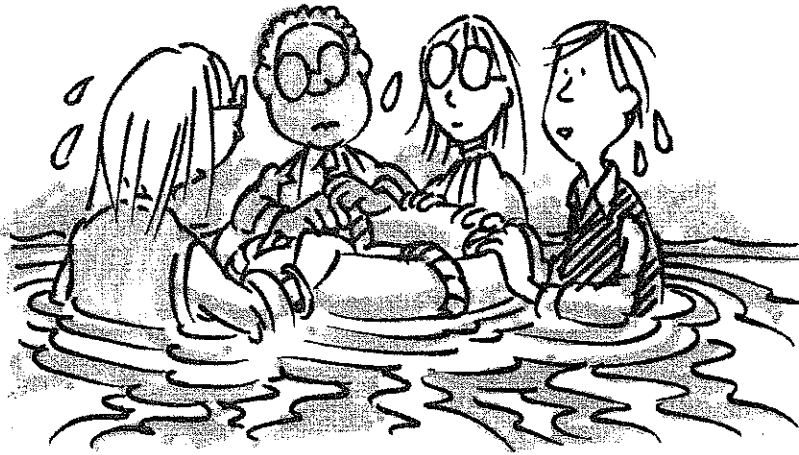
Stage 3: Norming

During this stage, members reconcile competing loyalties and responsibilities. They accept the team, the team ground rules or "norms," their roles in the team, and the individuality of fellow members. Emotional conflict is reduced as previously competitive relationships become more cooperative. In other words, as Team Members realize they are not going to drown, they stop thrashing about and start helping each other stay afloat. The key to this stage is to build the team's confidence in their ability to resolve differences without anyone feeling left out or discounted.

Norming includes these feelings...

- A sense of team cohesion, a common spirit and goals
- Acceptance of membership in the team
- Relief that it seems everything is going to work out

...and these behaviors:

- Laughing, joking, and attempts to achieve harmony
- Experimenting with ways to raise and discuss differences of opinion effectively
- Confiding in each other and sharing personal problems; discussing the team's dynamics; becoming more friendly
- Expressing criticism constructively
- Maintaining team ground rules and boundaries (the "norms")

As Team Members begin to work out their differences, they have more time and energy to spend on their work. They are now able to make significant progress. Shared leadership emerges as Team Members' skills increase.

ⳤ☼ⳤ Tip
Leading a Team through Norming

To build cooperation the Team Leader should

- Fully utilize Team Members' skills, knowledge, and experience
- Encourage and acknowledge members' respect for each other
- Encourage members to "roll up their sleeves" and work collaboratively
- Refer the team to established ground rules as a guide for group behavior; modify ground rules as needed
- Help members answer the following questions:
  - "How will we effectively handle conflict?"
  - "Will we develop a cooperative spirit?"

Performing

As Team Members become more comfortable with each other, and as they better understand the work and what is expected of them, they become a more effective unit with everyone working in concert.

☼ Tip
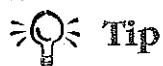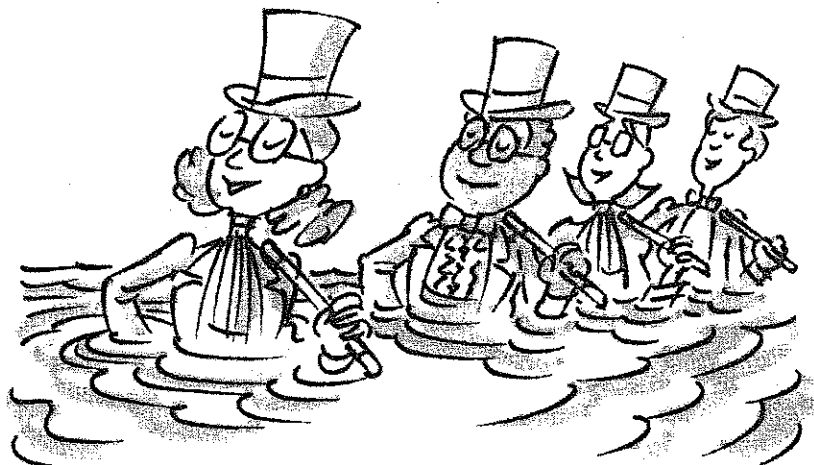
Leading a Team through Performing

To build openness to change in the performing stage, the Team Leader should

- Update the team's methods and procedures to support cooperation

- Help the team understand how to manage change

- Represent, and advocate for, the team with other groups and individuals

- Monitor work progress and celebrate achievements in order to help members answer the question, "Will we accomplish our goals?"

These stages are based on the work of Bruce Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," *Psychological Bulletin*, 1965, Volume 63, No. 6, pp. 384-99.

Stage 4: Performing

Now the team has settled its relationships and expectations. They can perform consistently—diagnosing and solving problems, and choosing and implementing changes. Now they can swim in concert.

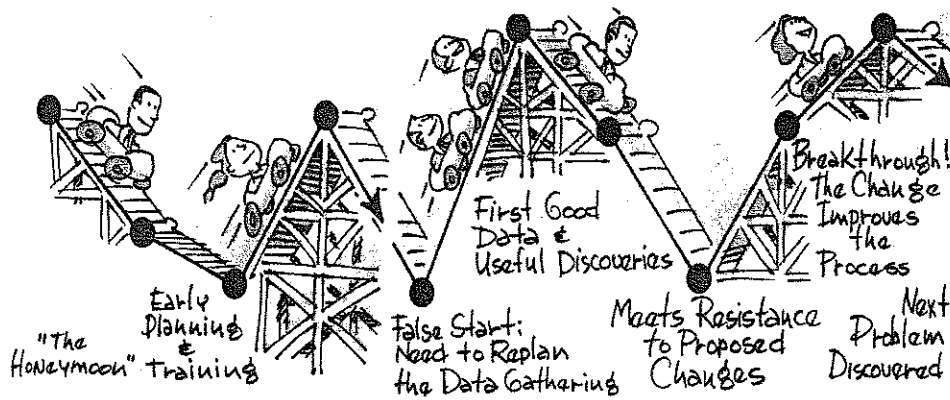**Performing includes these feelings...**

- Insights into personal and group processes, and a better understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses

- Satisfaction at the team's progress

- Close attachment to the team

...and these behaviors:

- Creating constructive self-change

- Preventing or working through group problems

The team is now an effective, cohesive unit. You can tell when your team has reached this stage because you get a lot of work done. A team that will disband will experience a fifth stage—adjourning. Team closure requires careful planning. (See p. 3-65.)

The duration and intensity of these stages vary from team to team. Sometimes Stage 4 (performing) is achieved in a meeting or two; other times it may take months. While the stages build on one another, the path forward is not linear. Teams cycle through the stages many times. All four stages can be seen within some meetings, as well as over the life of the team. Whenever a new member joins the team, or if leadership changes, the team goes back to forming. Understanding these stages of growth will keep you from overreacting to normal problems. Don't panic. With patience and effort this assembly of independent individuals *will* grow into a team.

"The Honeymoon" — Early Planning & Training / First Good Data & Useful Discoveries / False Start: Need to Replan the Data Gathering / Meets Resistance to Proposed Changes / Breakthrough! The Change Improves the Process / Next Problem Discovered

Roller Coaster of Highs and Lows

Every team goes through cycles of good times and bad times. The duration of these highs and lows will vary for each team, depending on how quickly they progress, work through obstacles or problems, and so forth. Team Members should know that such cycles are normal and do not signal a team's ultimate success or failure.

III. Riding the Team Roller Coaster

A team's mood usually reflects its fortune—with every step forward, the future looks bright and Team Members are optimistic. But no matter how well a team works together, progress is never smooth. As progress swings from forward to stalled, and then from stalled to backward, the team's mood will swing, too.

As shown above, the team begins with hopefulness and optimism. These positive feelings may last awhile, but usually change to boredom and impatience as the project gets under way. Members begin to feel overwhelmed when they realize just how much they have to learn. Somewhere in here the storming starts.

When they finally begin collecting data, Team Members again feel encouraged—at last they are making progress! Rarely does this elation last. Since few people are experts in scientific methods the first time out, Team Members usually uncover mistakes in data collection procedures and realize they must go back and do it again. The mood swings down. Recovery comes as the team learns from experience and gathers good, reliable data.

The pattern is different for each team. Team Members' attitudes depend on both the speed of progress and the resistance or encouragement they receive from their Sponsor and their departments.

The best way to deal with these cycles is to understand and accept them with a "this too shall pass" attitude. Changes in attitude, just like growth stages, are normal. The team must cultivate patience. Eventually, everyone will better understand how the work unfolds.

For Ongoing Teams

Ongoing teams also experience highs and lows about the progress of their work. Initial excitement about defining how work will be done can shift into frustration or defensiveness as work methods are examined and changed. Recovery comes as the team learns to work together and as improved work methods remove daily hassles. Then new deadlines, adding or losing members, or other changes can cause the team to slip back into discouragement. Take time to review what's going on and give the team time to readjust.
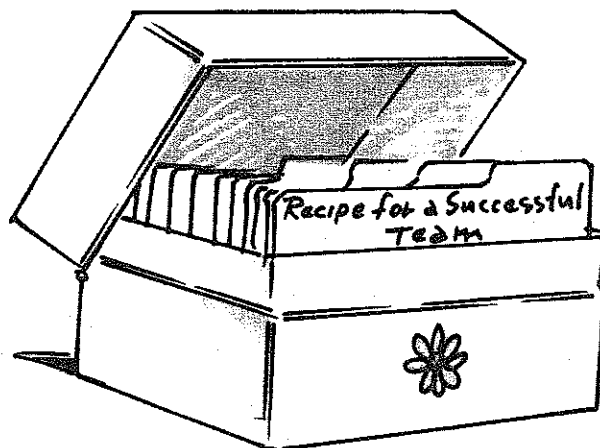
⚞🗼Ten Ingredients for a Successful Team

1. Clarity in team goals

2. A plan for improvement

3. Clearly defined roles

4. Clear communication

5. Beneficial team behaviors

6. Well-defined decision procedures

7. Balanced participation

8. Established ground rules

9. Awareness of the group process

10. Use of the scientific approach

Teams can also take a more active approach to dealing with the stages and cycles they experience. The rest of this chapter describes approaches for improving the team's ability to solve and prevent problems.

IV. Recipe for a Successful Team

No team exists without problems. But some teams—particularly those which have learned to counter the negative team dynamics—seem to be especially good at preventing many typical group problems. How close a team comes to this ideal depends on the mix of 10 essential ingredients.

1. Clarity in Team Goals

A team works best when everyone understands its purpose and goals. If there is confusion or disagreement, they work to resolve the issues.

Ideally, the team

- Agrees on its charter, or works together to resolve disagreement

- Sees the scope of the charter as workable or, if necessary, narrows the charter to a workable size

- Has a clear vision and can progress steadily toward its goals

- Is clear about the larger project or improvement goals and about the purpose of individual steps, meetings, discussions, and decisions

Trouble Tip Offs

- Frequent switches in directions
- Frequent arguments about what the team should do next
- Feelings that the project is too big or inappropriate
- Frustration at lack of progress
- Excessive questioning of each decision or action
- Floundering

Trouble Tamers

If Team Members feel they don't understand the charter, try working through the exercise Discussing Your Charter (p. C-27). Emphasize the right of each Team Member to ask questions about a decision or event until satisfied with the answers. If you find the charter is too broad, work with the Sponsor to make it more manageable.

2. A Plan for Improvement

Work plans help the team determine what advice, assistance, training, materials, and other resources it may need. They guide the team in determining schedules and identifying milestones. Work plans can be built from the strategies described in Chapter 5 that incorporate the scientific approach, which can be difficult for early teams. You can also use the Project Planning Template, which can be downloaded from www.teamhandbook.com.
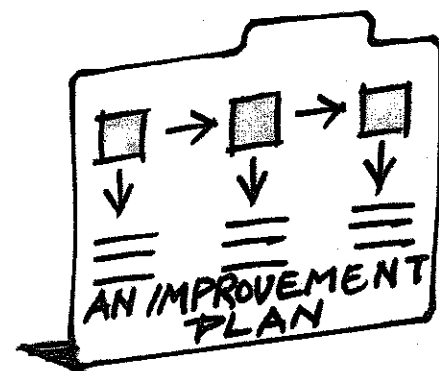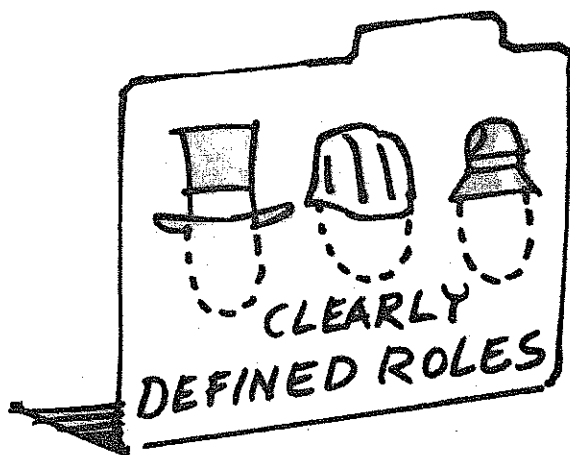
Ideally, the team

- Has created a work plan, revising it as needed

- Has a process map or similar document describing the steps of the work; refers to these documents when discussing what directions to take next

- Knows what resources and training are needed throughout the work, and plans accordingly

Trouble Tip Offs

- Uncertainty about the team's direction (the team muddles through each step without a clear idea of how to get the information it needs)

- Being "lost in the woods" (when one step is completed there is little or no idea of what to do next)

- "Fishing expeditions" (the team plunges ahead, hoping to stumble across improvement ideas)

- "Filling the sky with lead" (launching many activities without thinking about what each is supposed to do, hoping at least one will hit the target)

Trouble Tamers

Seek assistance from a competent technical advisor. Work through the improvement plans in Chapter 5; ask yourselves what you need in order to fulfill your charter. Ask your Sponsor to review or, if necessary, help formulate your plan.

3. Clearly Defined Roles

Teams operate most efficiently when they tap everyone's talents, and when all members understand their duties and know who is responsible for what issues and tasks.

Ideally, the team

- Has formally designated roles (all Team Members know what is expected of everyone, especially the Team Leader, facilitator, technical expert, and Coach)

- Understands which roles belong to one person and which are shared, and how the shared roles are switched (for instance, using an agreed-upon procedure to rotate the job of meeting facilitator)

- Uses each member's talents and involves everyone in team activities so no one feels left out or taken advantage of

Trouble Tip Offs

- Roles and duty assignments that result from a pecking order

- Confusion over who is responsible for what

- People getting stuck with the same tedious chores

Trouble Tamers

The team must decide how roles will be assigned and changed. Review both the team and meeting role descriptions. (See Chapter 2 and p. 3-5.) Have the Team Leader discuss the responsibilities and roles of all involved with the team. The Team Leader might facilitate discussions on what duties must be assigned, how they will be assigned, and how they can be changed. Reach consensus about roles within the team.

Listening

Active listening is key for clear communication.

4. Clear Communication

Good discussions depend on how well information is passed among Team Members.

Ideally, Team Members should

- Speak with clarity and directness
- Be succinct; avoid long anecdotes and examples
- Listen actively; explore rather than debate each speaker's ideas
- Avoid interrupting and talking when others are speaking
- Share information on many levels by offering
    - **Sensing statements** ("I don't hear any disagreements with John's point. Do we all agree?")
    - **Thinking statements** ("There seems to be a correlation between the number of errors and the volume of work.")
    - **Feeling statements** ("I'm disappointed that no one has taken care of this yet.")
    - **Statements of intention** ("My question was not meant to be a criticism. I simply wanted more information.")
    - **Statements of action** ("Let's run a test on the machine using materials of different thickness.")

Trouble Tip Offs

- Poor speaking skills (mumbling, rambling, speaking too softly, little eye contact)
- Cautiousness; inability of members to say what they really feel; lots of tentative, conditional statements ("Do you think, maybe, that sometimes it might be that...")

- Undercurrents; everyone senses there is more going on than meets the eye (people's words do not match their tone of voice or mannerisms)
- Opinions expressed as facts or phrased as questions
- "Plops!" (statements that receive no acknowledgment or response)
- Bullying statements ("What you don't understand is...")
- Discounts ("That's not important. What's worse is...")

Trouble Tamers

Develop strong communication skills, and learn to recognize problems that result from poor communication. Use the meeting evaluation to discuss how well Team Members communicate. Have observers (Team Members, Coach, or outsiders) watch the team and give honest feedback on communication dynamics. (See Observing Group Process, p. C-19.)

5. Beneficial Team Behaviors

Teams should encourage all members to use the skills and practices that make discussions and meetings more effective. (See pp. 3-1 and 3-10.)

Ideally, Team Members should

- Initiate discussions
- Seek information and opinions
- Suggest procedures for reaching a goal
- Clarify or elaborate on ideas
- Complete assignments on time
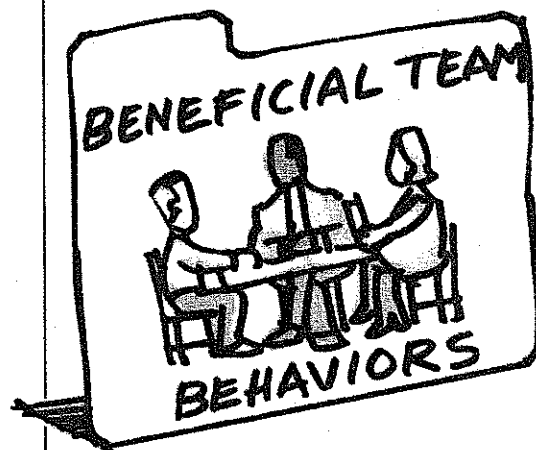
Summarizing

Summarizing periodically is important for effective discussions.

- Summarize
- Test for agreement
- Act as gatekeepers: direct conversational traffic, avoid simultaneous conversations, manage participation, make room for reserved members to talk
- Keep the discussion from digressing
- Be creative in resolving differences
- Try to ease tension in the group and work through difficult matters
- Express the group's feeling and ask others to check that impression
- Get the group to agree on standards ("Do we all agree to discuss this for 15 minutes and no more?")
- Refer to documentation and data
- Praise and correct others with equal fairness; accept both praise and complaints

Trouble Tip Offs

- Failure to use discussion skills
- Reliance on one person (the Team Leader) to manage the discussion; no shared responsibility
- People repeating points, unsure whether anyone heard them the first time
- Discussions that are stuck; wheel-spinning; inability to let go of one topic and move on to the next
- Discussions in the hallway after the meeting that are more candid and free than those during the meeting
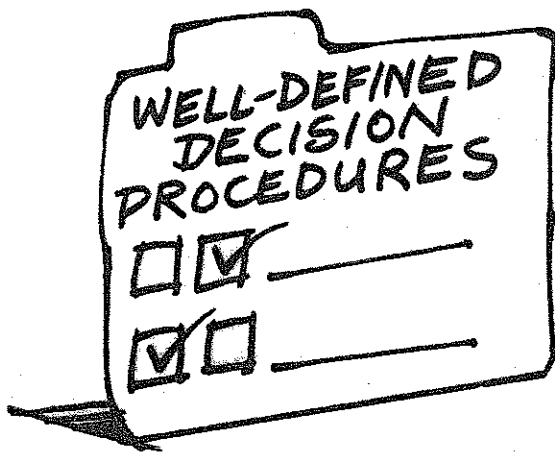
Trouble Tamers

Refer to Constructive Feedback (p. 6-24), Ten Common Problems and Solution Strategies (p. 7-14), and the Meeting Skills Checklist (p. C-13). The Team Leader can also focus the team on developing effective discussion skills. For example, Team Members could pick two or three skills for the whole team to practice at a meeting, reviewing their performance during the meeting evaluation.

6. Well-defined Decision Procedures

You can tell a lot about how well a team is working by watching its decision-making process. A team should always be aware of the different ways it reaches decisions.

Ideally, the team should

- Discuss how decisions will be made, such as when to take a poll or when to decide by consensus; identify times when a decision by only a few people is acceptable

- Explore important issues by polling (each member is asked to vote or state an opinion verbally or in writing)

- Test for agreement ("This seems to be our agreement. Is there anyone who feels unsure about the choice?")

- Use data as the basis of decisions

Balance Participation

Balancing participation helps the team utilize everyone's experience and knowledge.
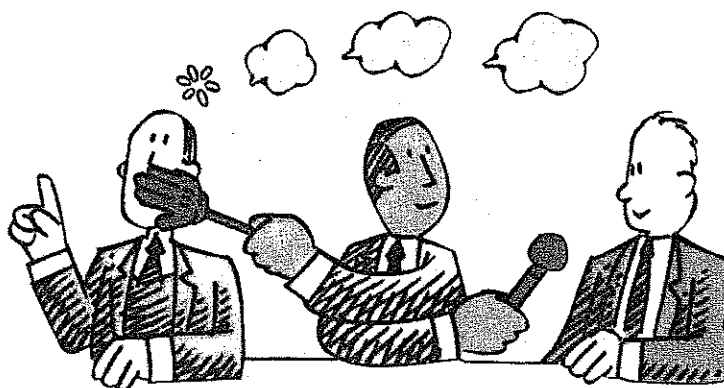
Trouble Tip Offs

- Conceding to opinions that are presented as facts with no supporting data
- Decisions by one or two people in the group without Team Members agreeing to defer to their expertise
- Too-frequent recourse to "majority rules" or other easy approaches that bypass strong disagreement
- Decision by default; people do not respond to a statement (the "plop"); silence interpreted as consent

Trouble Tamers

Have the Team Leader (or, if appropriate, the Coach) lead a discussion on decision making in the team. Occasionally designate a member or outsider to watch and give feedback on how decisions are made so the group can talk about any changes it needs to make. (See Observing Group Process, p. C-19.)

7. Balanced Participation

Since every Team Member has a stake in the group's achievements, everyone should participate in discussions and decisions, share commitment to the project's success, and contribute his or her talents.

Ideally, the team should

- Have reasonably balanced participation, with all members contributing to most discussions
- Build on members' natural styles of participation (For information on Team Member styles, see Glenn Parker's book, *Team Players and Teamwork*, listed in Appendix D.)

Trouble Tip Offs

* Some Team Members have too much influence; others, too little

* Participation depends on the subject being discussed (for example, only those who know the most about a subject are actively involved; others do not even ask questions)

* Members too often contribute only at certain times in a conversation or meeting

* Some members speak only about a certain topic (for example, they only participate when the subject touches their "hot buttons"—such as money or politics).

Trouble Tamers

Use Brainstorming (p. 3-13) and the Nominal Group Technique (p. 3-14) to elicit input from all Team Members during discussions. If problems persist, adapt the Disruptive Group Behavior exercise (p. C-16) to your group. Send agendas out before meetings to allow participants to prepare for discussions.

8. Established Ground Rules

Teams invariably establish ground rules or "norms" for what will and will not be tolerated in the team. A list of typical issues included in ground rules is on p. 3-46.

Ideally, the team should

* Have open discussions regarding ground rules, including behaviors that are acceptable and unacceptable

* Openly state or acknowledge norms ("We all agreed to decide the issue this way...") or post groundrules during meetings

Trouble Tip Offs

- Certain important topics are avoided; too many subjects are taboo; conversations recur that are irrelevant to the task and harmful to the group

- No one acknowledges the norms; everyone acts as he or she *thinks* the group wants him or her to act; no one is able to say exactly what ground rules the team follows (for example, no one cracks jokes even though it was never stated that jokes would be out of place)

- Recurring differences about what is or is not acceptable behavior

- Behavior that signifies irritation (for example, repeated interruptions or restating of points previously made)

- Conflict over assumed norms or conflicting expectations

Trouble Tamers

Right from the start, teams must take time to discuss and agree on obvious ground rules. From time to time, review the ground rules—adding, deleting, or revising them as needed. Particularly pay attention to current and possible ground rules during times of conflict and antagonism.

9. Awareness of the Group Process

Ideally, all Team Members will be aware of the group process—how the team works together—*and* pay attention to the content of the meeting.

Ideally, Team Members should

- Be sensitive to nonverbal communication (for example, be aware that silence may indicate disagreement, or know that physical signs of agitation might indicate someone is uncomfortable with a discussion)
- See, hear, and feel the team dynamics
- Comment and intervene to correct a group process problem
- Contribute equally to group process and meeting content
- Choose to work on group process issues and occasionally designate a Team Member or outsider to officially observe and report on group interactions at a meeting

Trouble Tip Offs

- Avoidance of group dynamic issues particularly when the group is having difficulty
- Pushing ahead on the task when there are nonverbal signs of resistance, confusion, or disappointment
- Inattention to obvious nonverbal clues and shifts in the team's mood
- Members attributing motives to nonverbal behavior ("You've been quiet during the last 30 minutes. You must not be interested in what's being said.")
- Remarks that discount someone's behavior or contribution ("Let's get on with the task and stop talking about that stuff.")

Chapter 6
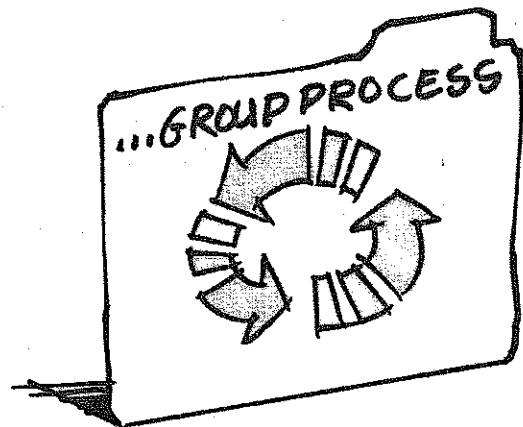
Trouble Tamers

Use the series of observation formats described in Observing Group Process (starting on p. C-19) to work through pertinent team issues before they become a problem. Use the Coach as an observer to evaluate how well the team handles problems, confusion, discussions, and so forth. Encourage the team to have several "process checks," times when members can say how they think the meeting is going, or express thoughts for which there are no appropriate times in the meeting. Routinely include group process issues in meeting evaluations.

10. Use of the Scientific Approach

Teams that use a scientific approach have a much easier time arriving at permanent solutions to problems. Failure to use a scientific approach can lessen the team's chance for success. This approach helps avoid team problems and disagreements. Many arguments are between individuals with strong opinions. The scientific approach insists that opinions be supported by, or at least defer to, data.

Ideally, the team should

- Ask to see data before making decisions and question anyone who tries to act on hunches alone
- Use basic statistical tools to investigate problems and to gather and analyze data
- Dig for root causes of problems
- Seek permanent solutions rather than rely on quick fixes
- Utilize the improvement approaches and strategies described in Chapter 5

Trouble Tip Offs

- Insistence by Team Members that they don't need data because their intelligence and experience are enough to tell them what the problems and solutions are

- Wild stabs at supposed solutions: jumping to conclusions, too many inferences and assumptions, shooting from the hip

- Hasty action, a "ready, FIRE, aim!" approach

Trouble Tamers

Make sure the team has access to an expert for training and guidance (usually this is the Coach). Every team should talk about the importance of using a scientific approach, especially when decisions or actions are needed.
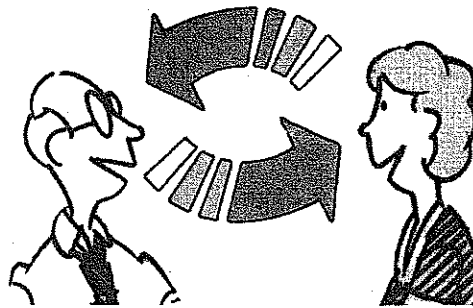
V. Constructive Feedback

A fundamental message of this handbook is that no matter what pressures a team encounters, it can work hard at its task *and* support members' needs. A critical skill to have in working through any problem is the ability to give and receive constructive feedback.

Why? Because most often problems are expressed as criticism of someone's actions. When you are criticized by someone, it is difficult to know what to do. A common reaction is to feel defensive: "What right do they have to criticize *me?*" Suppose it is you reacting negatively to behavior that truly disrupts the team's progress. Do you sit on your negative feelings for the sake of group harmony? Is there a way to express dissatisfaction without provoking a confrontation that might disrupt the team even more?

There are proven methods for giving and receiving criticism, methods that work equally well for giving and receiving praise. The goals are to give constructive feedback, whether positive or negative, and to make sure that any feedback you receive is constructive. While there is no guarantee, there are ways to minimize the possibility of provoking a bad scene. Use the following guidelines to help you decide when to give feedback, how to tell a person or team what you think, and how to listen to feedback given to you.

Guidelines for Constructive Feedback

Useful feedback comes in several forms. *Statistical data* provides feedback from a *process*, telling you how well a project is running, whether changes you tried were effective, and so forth. *Market research* provides feedback from *customers*, telling you how well your organization is doing and whether your product or service meets customers' needs. The most common form of feedback (and our focus here) is simply *one person talking to another.*

Many people know that to get good data or useful market information you must plan carefully and follow established rules and guidelines. Few people realize that the same ideas apply to person-to-person feedback. Thinking ahead about what you are going to say and how you are going to say it increases the value of what you say to another person.

**To make personal feedback constructive, you must:**

- **Acknowledge the need for feedback.** Feedback, both positive and negative, is vital to any organization committed to improving itself for it is the only way to learn what needs to be improved. Giving and receiving feedback should be more than just a part of a Team Member's behavior; it should be part of the whole organization's culture.

  You will need good feedback skills to improve your team meetings and interactions among Team Members. These skills will also help you communicate more effectively with customers and suppliers (both internal and external). In fact, you will find many opportunities to apply these skills in your work. First, however, your team should agree that giving and receiving feedback is an acceptable part of how you will improve the way

Guidelines for Constructive Feedback

- Acknowledge the need for feedback
- Give both positive and negative feedback
- Understand the context
- Know when to give feedback
- Know how to give feedback
  - Be descriptive
  - Don't use labels
  - Don't exaggerate
  - Don't be judgmental
  - Speak for yourself
  - Phrase the issue as an "I" statement, not a question
  - Restrict your feedback to things you know for certain
  - Help people hear and accept your compliments when giving positive feedback
- Know how to receive feedback
  - Breathe
  - Listen carefully
  - Ask questions for clarity
  - Acknowledge the feedback
  - Acknowledge valid points
  - Take time to sort out what you heard

Chapter 6
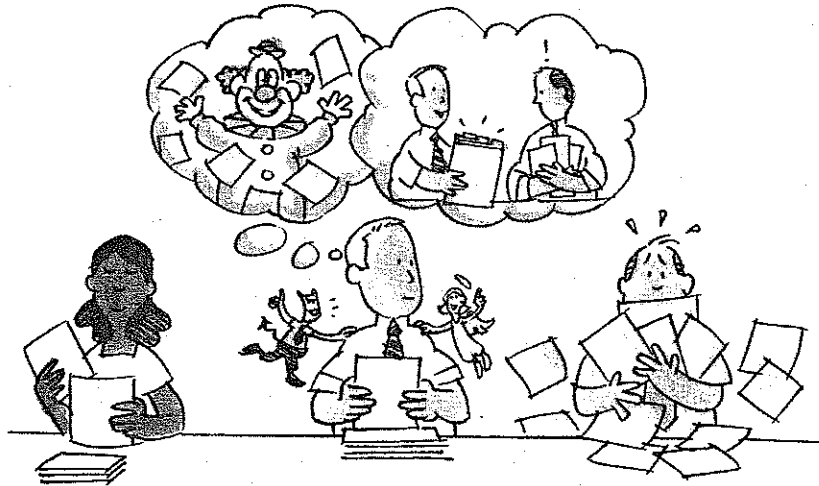
you work together. This agreement is necessary so that no one is surprised when he or she receives feedback.

- **Give both positive and negative feedback.** Many people take good work for granted and give feedback only when there are problems. This is a bad policy. It is just as important to tell people when they have done something well. People will more likely pay attention to your complaints if they have also received your compliments.

- **Understand the context.** The most important characteristic of feedback is that it always has a context: where it happened, why it happened, what led up to the event. You never simply walk up to a person, deliver a feedback statement, and then leave. Before you give feedback, review the actions and decisions that led up to the moment.

- **Know when to give feedback.** Before giving feedback, determine whether the moment is right. You must consider more than your own need to give feedback. Constructive feedback can happen only within a context of listening to and caring about the person.

Do not give feedback when

- You don't know much about the circumstances of the behavior.

- You don't care about the person or will not be around long enough to follow up on the aftermath of your feedback. Hit-and-run feedback is not fair.

- The feedback is about something the person has no power to change.

- The other person seems low in self-esteem.

- You are low in self-esteem.

- Your purpose is not really improvement, but instead to put someone on the spot ("gotcha!") or demonstrate how much smarter or how much more responsible you are.

- The time, place, or circumstances are inappropriate (for example, in the presence of outsiders).

- Your, or the other person's, emotions are running high.

- **Know how to give feedback.** Use the At-a-Glance Guide for Giving Constructive Feedback (p. 6-29) the first few times—though it may feel awkward, soon you will get more comfortable and be able to give constructive feedback without having to refer to the guide. When the circumstances are appropriate for giving feedback, use the following guidelines:

  - **Be descriptive.** Relate, as objectively as possible, what you saw the other person do or what you heard the other person say. Give specific examples, the more recent, the better. Examples from the distant past are more likely to lead to disagreement over "facts."

  - **Don't use labels.** Be clear, specific, and unambiguous. Words like "immature," "unprofessional," "irresponsible," and "prejudiced" are labels we attach to sets of behaviors. Describe the behavior and drop the labels. For example, say, "You missed the deadline we had all agreed to meet" rather than, "You're being irresponsible and I want to know what you're going to do about it!" Don't attribute motives to the behaviors you observe. (See "Attribution," p. 7-21.)

  - **Don't exaggerate.** Be exact: To say, "You're always late for deadlines" is probably untrue and, therefore, unfair. It invites the feedback receiver to argue with the exaggeration rather than respond to the real issue. It is better to say "you missed the last two deadlines. The last time your work was two days late."

At-a-Glance Guide for Giving Constructive Feedback

Sequence	Explanation
1. "When you..."	Start with a "When you..." statement that describes the behavior without judgment, exaggeration, labeling, attribution, or motives. Just state the facts as specifically as possible.
2. "I feel..."	Tell how the behavior affects you. If you need more than a word or two to describe the feeling, it's probably just some variation of joy, sorrow, anger, or fear.
3. "Because I..."	Now say why you are affected that way. Describe the connection between the facts you observed and the feelings they provoke in you.
4. (Pause for discussion.)	Let the other person respond.
5. "I would like..."	If the feedback involves a suggestion for change, describe the change you want the other person to consider...
6. "Because..."	...and why you think the change will alleviate the problem.
7. "What do you think?"	Listen to the other person's response. Be prepared to discuss options and compromise on a solution.

How the feedback will work:

When you [do this], I feel [this way], because [of such and such]. (Pause.) What I would like you to consider is [doing X], because I think it will accomplish [Y]. What do you think?

Example:

"When you are late for meetings, I get angry because we are never able to get through our agenda items and I think it is wasting my time. (Pause.) I would like you to consider finding some way of planning your schedule so you can get to these meetings on time. If you are no longer able to attend at this time, you could request that the team meet at a later time. That way we can be more productive at the meetings and we can all keep to our tight schedules."

- **Don't be judgmental.** Or at least don't use the rhetoric of judgment. Words like "good," "better," "bad," "worst," and "should" place you in the role of a controlling parent. This invites the person receiving your comments to respond as a child. When that happens, and it will most of the time, the possibility of constructive feedback is lost.

- **Speak for yourself.** Don't refer to absent, anonymous people. Avoid such references as, "A lot of people here don't like it when you...." Don't allow yourself to be a conduit for other people's complaints. Instead, encourage others to speak for themselves.

- **Phrase the issue as an "I" statement, not a question.** If you ask "When are you going to stop being late for meetings," people get angry and defensive. Instead use "I" statements that create an adult/peer relationship. For example, you could say "When you are late for meetings, I feel annoyed." This way people are more likely to remain open to your message. The "I" statement implies "I think we have an issue we must resolve together." The "I" statement allows the receiver to see what effect the behavior had on you.

- **Restrict your feedback to things you know for certain.** Don't present your opinions as facts. Speak only of what you saw and heard and what you feel and want.

- **Help people hear and accept your compliments when giving positive feedback.** Many people feel awkward when receiving praise and will fend off the compliment. ("Oh, it wasn't that big a deal. Others worked on it as much as I did.") Sometimes they will change the subject. It

may be important to reinforce the positive feedback and help the person hear it, acknowledge it, and accept it.

- **Know how to receive feedback.** There may be a time when you receive feedback from someone who does not know feedback guidelines. In these cases, *help your critic refashion the criticism* so that it conforms to the rules for constructive feedback. (For example, "What did I say or do to dissatisfy you?") When reacting to feedback,

    - **Breathe.** This is simple but effective advice. Our bodies are conditioned to react to stressful situations as though they were physical assaults. Our muscles tense. We start breathing rapidly and shallowly. Taking full, deep breaths forces your body to relax and allows your brain to maintain greater alertness.

    - **Listen carefully.** Don't interrupt. Don't discourage the feedback giver.

    - **Ask questions for clarity.** You have a right to receive clear feedback. Ask for specific examples. (For example, "Can you describe what I do or say that makes me appear aggressive to you?")

    - **Acknowledge the feedback.** Paraphrase the message in your own words to let the person know you have heard and understood what was said.

    - **Acknowledge valid points.** Agree with what is true. Agree with what is possible. Acknowledge the other person's point of view ("I understand how you might get that impression") and try to understand his or her reaction.

    Agreeing with what's true or possible does not mean you

agree to change your behavior. You can agree, for instance, that you tend to focus on details without implying that you will change your focus in the future. Agreeing with what's true or possible also does not mean agreeing with any value judgment about you. You can agree that your reports have been late without thereby agreeing that you are irresponsible.

- **Take time to sort out what you heard.** You may need time for sorting out or checking with others before responding to the feedback. It is reasonable to ask the feedback giver for time to think about what was said and how you feel about it. Make a specific appointment for getting back to him or her. Don't use this time as an excuse to avoid the issue.

Chapter 6: Action Summary

✔ Spend ample time on activities that, while not directly related to a task, build understanding and support in the team. Dealing with "undercurrents" of anxiety, divided loyalties, and perhaps mistrust, is critical when trying to build an effective team.

✔ Understand that the four stages of team growth (forming, storming, norming, and performing) are predictable and easily managed when leaders acknowledge, encourage, and involve Team Members through these phases.

✔ Cultivate patience. Progress is never smooth no matter how well a team works together. Changes in attitude, just like growth stages, are normal.

✔ Use a work plan to help the team determine what advice, assistance, training, materials, and other resources they need to succeed.

✔ Discuss the responsibilities and roles of all involved with the team.

✔ Develop communication skills and learn to recognize problems that result from poor communication. Use the meeting evaluation to discuss how well Team Members communicate.

✔ Establish ground rules or "norms" for what will and will not be tolerated in the team. Review the rules occasionally and make any needed adjustments.

✔ Use the Coach as an observer to evaluate how well the team handles problems, confusion, discussions, and so forth.

✔ Learn and employ the guidelines for constructive feedback on p. 6-29 to increase the value of what you say to another Team Member.