

Things To Consider When Managing Teams

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson you will learn some key considerations in managing teams. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Key Considerations When Managing Teams

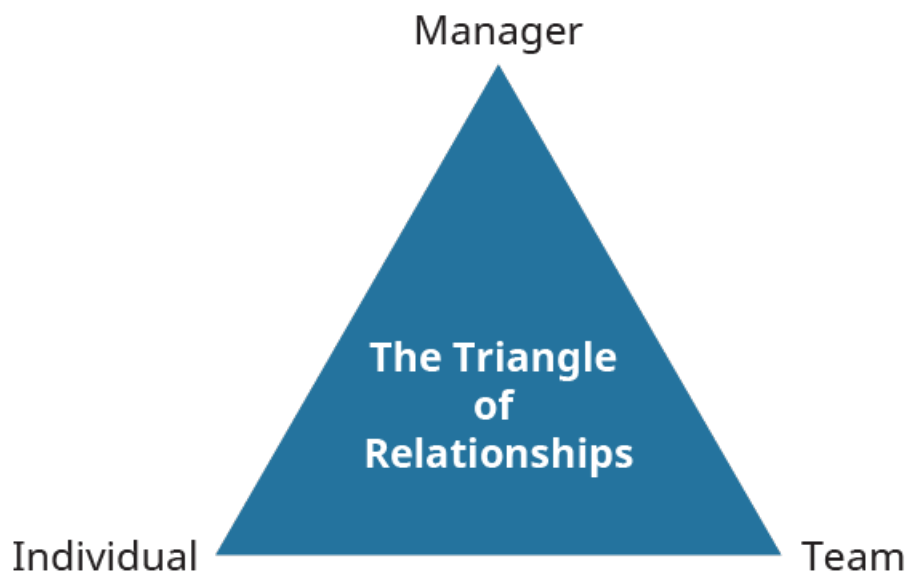
For those of us who have had the pleasure of managing or leading a team, we know that it can feel like a dubious distinction. Leading a team is fulfilling—especially if the task or organizational mandate at hand is so critical to the organization that people are happy to be a part of the team that drives things forward. It can also be an exercise in frustration, as the charge is to lead a group composed of various individuals, which at various times will act both like a group and like a bunch of individuals. Managing teams is no small feat, and the most experienced managers truly understand that success ultimately depends on their ability to build a strong and well-functioning team. In J.J. Gabarro's *The Dynamics of Taking Charge* (HBS Press, 1987, pp. 85–87), he quotes a manager who had successfully worked to turn around a number of organizations (Gabarro, 1987):

“People have to want to work together; they have to see how to do it. There has to be an environment for it and that takes time. It’s my highest priority right now but I don’t write it down anywhere because it’s not like other priorities. If I told corporate that building a team was my prime goal they’d tell me, so what? They’d expect that as part of making things better.”

This quotation is so indicative of the state of most organizations today. The focus is on corporate goals and priorities—very task-driven and outcome-driven—but it is the people dynamics and how people work together in the company and in TEAMS that can make a real difference to the goals and outcome.

In Linda A. Hill's *Harvard Business Review* article “Managing Your Team” (Hill, 1995), she discusses that managing a team means managing paradox. **Paradox** exists in the fact that teams have both individual and collective identities and goals. Each individual has goals and ideas as to what he wants to accomplish—on the project, in one’s career, and in life. The team itself, of course, has goals and success metrics that it needs to meet in order to be successful. Sometimes these can be in conflict with each other. Competition may arise among team members, and a win-loss attitude may take place over a collaborative and problem-solving team dynamic. The team manager may need to step in to help integrate all of the individual differences to enable them to productively pursue the team goal. Therein lies the primary paradox—balancing individual differences and goals **AND** the collective identity and goals. Other paradoxes include:

- Fostering support AND confrontation among team members
- Focusing on performance AND learning and development
- Balancing managerial authority AND team member discretion and autonomy
- Balancing the Triangle of Relationships—manager, team, and individual



TERM TO KNOW

Paradox

A self-contradictory statement or situation.

2. Managing Team Boundaries

Managing a team also means managing its boundaries. Managing the team's **boundaries**—or the space between the team and its external forces, stakeholders, and pressures—is a delicate balance of strategy, stakeholder management, and organizational behavior. The team manager must serve, in part, as a **buffer** to these external factors so that they don't derail or distract the team from its goals. However, the manager must also understand enough about the external environment and have enough emotional intelligence to understand which forces, players, or situations must be synthesized within the team for its own benefit. Think about any medium or large-scale change initiative that you have been a part of in your career. Ideally, there is generally a vision for change and a level of sponsorship at the senior levels of the organization that is supposed to pave the way for that change to take root. The project team is officially "blessed" to kick off the team, create a charter, and identify the needed actions to drive the initiative to successful completion.

The dynamic that ensues after the kickoff is really what will determine the success of the team. There are numerous stakeholders in any organization, and many will be pro-change initiative, but others may be against the initiative—either due to lack of understanding or concerns about losing power, territory, etc. The external environment and business strategy may not be particularly well suited for a change initiative to take place, and so there may be the feeling of forces opposing the project team efforts. A strong team manager needs to manage these "boundaries" with the organization to help the team navigate through and with the organizational complexities, goals, nuances, and egos that are a part of any organization. In Linda A. Hill's *Harvard Business Review* article "Exercising Influence" (Hill, 1994), she states that "managers also need to manage relationships with those who are outside their team but inside their organizations. To do so, they must understand the power dynamics of the larger organization and invest time and energy in building and

maintaining relationships with those on whom the team is dependent.” With all of the potential external influences on a team, managing a team’s boundaries can truly mean the difference between success and failure.

The final element of managing a team is to manage the team itself—both the people elements and the process elements, or task at hand. The process-focused elements include managing the work plan to reach the overall goal, as well as the incremental meetings and milestones that are a part of the team’s journey to reach the longer-term goal. Keeping the team focused on its objectives—beginning with setting agendas all the way to managing project tasks and celebrating milestones—assures that the team will stay on track. Projects and initiatives vary in size, scope, and complexity, and so the project management tools shouldn’t be prescribed in a general sense. The important takeaway here is to choose an approach and a tool that works for the culture of the team and the organization, and that helps the team understand where they are, where they need to go, and what resources are a part of that process.

In managing the team members and interpersonal dynamics, there is the important element of selecting the right team members, shaping the team’s norms and culture (i.e., how are decisions made, what are our rules, how do we manage conflict, etc.), and coaching the team. Defining the right skill sets, functions, perspectives, and expertise of the members will ensure a solid foundation. Helping the team to identify and formalize the ground rules for team engagement will help manage in the face of adversity or team conflict in the future. Finally, playing a role as a **supportive coach** will help both the individual team members and the group entity think through issues and make progress towards goals. A coach doesn’t solve the individual/team problem, but helps the team think through a solution and move forward. Teams may need guidance on how to work things out within the team, and the manager must provide feedback and hold team members accountable for their behavior and contribution. Continuous improvement is the name of the game. A team may not start out as high-performing, but they can certainly achieve that goal if everyone is focused on incremental improvements to communication, collaboration, and performance.



REFLECT

1. Discuss the paradox(es) of a team.
2. How can a leader manage team boundaries?



TERM TO KNOW

Boundaries

Lines that make the limits of an area; team boundaries separate the team from its external stakeholders.

Buffer

The distance a manager creates between the team and its external forces, stakeholders, and pressures to prevent these external factors from derailing or distracting the team from meeting its goals.

Supportive Coach

A team management role that helps both the individual team members and the group entity think through issues and make progress towards goals.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about some **key considerations when managing teams**, including the

understanding that managing a team means managing paradox—such as the paradox that exists in the fact that teams have both individual and collective identities and goals. A successful team manager may need to help integrate all of the individual differences within his or her team to enable them to productively pursue the team goal, balancing individual differences and goals as well as the collective identity and goals. You learned that managing a team also means **managing team boundaries**, or the space between the team and its external forces, stakeholders, and pressures. The team manager must serve as a buffer to these external factors yet also understand which forces, players, or situations must be synthesized within the team for its own benefit. Lastly, you learned that an important element of managing a team is to manage the team itself, which includes selecting the right team members, shaping the team's norms and culture, and playing the role of supportive coach.

Best of luck in your learning!

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REFERENCES

Gabarro, J. J. (1987). *The dynamics of taking charge*. Harvard Business School Press.

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