re:Work

Return Path: Reorienting HR around team effectiveness

Challenge	Action	Results
Work is done on teams but HR systems manage individuals.	Return Path focused on providing feedback and coaching at the team level.	Team effectiveness improved by an average of 13%.

Challenge

At **Return Path (https://returnpath.com/)**, an email data solutions company, the vast majority of work is done on teams (like so many other organizations). And like many organizations, Return Path's performance management system was focused exclusively on the individual. There was a clear disconnect between the lived experience of work and the management structures set up to supervise and incentivize that work.

Return Path's leadership wanted to shift the focus to the team and maintain the openness, trust, and care that define the Return Path culture. Leaning heavily on external research and methods, Return Path anchored on **Lencioni's five dysfunctions of a team (http://www.tablegroup.com/books/dysfunctions)** to help it understand, build, and maintain highly effective teams. They defined effective teams as ones that have strong trust across members, productive conflict, commitment to goals, great results, and people who hold each other accountable for results.

In order to accomplish all of this, Return Path's leadership and People Development group set up their "Team Effectiveness" program which reoriented a number of traditional HR processes to focus on and empower teams including peer feedback (long a cornerstone at Return Path), personal development planning, talent reviews, and ad hoc team development.

Action

The team started by identifying measurable attributes of effective teams and having all team members, including leaders, take Lencioni's simple survey. Using Lencioni's five behaviors of a cohesive team, the semi-annual team effectiveness survey used a five-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" and had questions around:

1. **Trust** - "Team members openly admit their weaknesses and mistakes."

2. **Productive Conflict** - "During team meetings, the most important and difficult issues are put on the table to be resolved."

3. **Commitment to a Common Goal** - "Team members know what their peers are working on and how they contribute to the collective good of the team."

4. **Accountability** - "Team members are deeply concerned about the prospect of letting down their peers."

5. **Attention to Results** - "Team members are slow to seek credit for their own contributions, but quick to point out those of others."

The team added questions focused on team effectiveness and overall engagement, including:

Team effectiveness questions:

- I feel I am part of a team.

- The people I work with cooperate to get the job done.

- My team holds ourselves accountable for results.

Engagement questions:

- I am proud to work at Return Path.

- I rarely think about looking for a job at another company.

- I see myself still working at Return Path two years from now.

- I would recommend Return Path as a great place to work. Return Path motivates me to go beyond what I would in a similar role elsewhere.

Each team in the program also had their leader, team members, and team coach (a partner from HR) assign assessment scores of the team's effectiveness based on Lencioni's five behaviors and how they think the team is performing relative to their best performance. By looking at the potential different scores from these assessments, gaps and communication barriers can be identified. These results are shared back with the team leaders along with a strong suggestion to share the results with the team and tools to facilitate a peer feedback session.

Sample team results

All RP Effective Teams

Factor	Average	% Agreement
Trust	3.95	73%
Productive Conflict	3.98	73%
Commitment to a Common Goal	3.90	72%
Accountability	3.68	61%
Attention to Results	3.87	67%

Team Name

Factor	Team Average	Team % Agreement
Trust	3.67	89%
Productive Conflict	3.58	58%
Commitment to a Common Goal	3.58	50%
Accountability	3.38	50%
Attention to Results	3.75	50%

Sample team results by item

In-depth Review of Score by Question for *Team Name*

Trust	Average score	% Agreement
Team members quickly and genuinely apologize to one another when they say or do something inappropriate or possibly damaging to the team.	4	100%
Team members openly admit their weaknesses and mistakes.	3.5	75%
Team members know about one another's personal lives and are comfortable discussing them	3.5	50%

Productive Conflict	Average score	% Agreement
Team meetings are compelling, and not boring.	3.25	25%
During team meetings, the most important - and difficult - issues are put on the table to be resolved.	3.75	75%
Team members are open and unguarded in their discussion of issues.	4.25	75%

Commitment to a Common Goal	Average score	% Agreement
Team members leave meetings confident that their peers are completely committed to the decisions that were agreed on, even if there was initial disagreement.	3.5	50%
Team members end discussions with clear and specific resolutions and calls to action.	3	25%
Team members know what their peers are working on and how they contribute to the collective good of the team.	4.25	75%

Accountability	Average score	% Agreement
Team members are deeply concerned about the prospect of letting down their peers.	3.58	75%
Team members challenge one another about their plans and approaches.	4	75%
Team members call out one another's development areas or unproductive behaviors.	2.75	0%

Attention to Results	Average score	% Agreement
Team members willingly make sacrifices (such as budget, turf, head count) in their departments or areas of expertise for the good of the team.	3.5	50%
Morale is significantly affected by the failure to achieve team goals.	3.5	50%
Team members are slow to seek credit for their own contributions, but quick to point out those of others.	4.25	100%

The goals of a peer feedback session are to build trust, get more comfortable giving and receiving feedback, and build self-awareness of strengths and development areas. Sessions start with an assessment of the leader, and then of each individual contributor. Assessments are broken into a spoken two-minute self-assessment followed by eight minutes of feedback from the team. The session ends with an assessment of the full team. Team leaders are well supported by their team coach, knowing that these can be challenging, but crucial, conversations to hold.

Tips for leaders leading peer feedback sessions:

- Give an honest self-assessment of your own strengths and development areas. Write these down beforehand.

- Give honest, well-intentioned, and meaningful feedback to every member of your group on their strengths and development areas. Write these down beforehand.

- Discuss how your team works as a whole including team dynamics, operating system, stakeholder relationships, and more.

- Be a role model: be the first to do your self review in the session — ask for feedback, be open when you receive it, and thank people.

- When other team members are receiving feedback, be the last to contribute. Only give feedback if you have something to add that hasn't yet been covered by other team members.

- Give at least one piece of constructive feedback for each team member. Ideally, most constructive feedback is shared in the team setting so that the rest of the team knows that performance issues are being addressed. However, sometimes very personal feedback is best shared privately.

The last step of a peer feedback session is to to schedule a follow-up development planning session, usually about two weeks later. The goals of a development session are to help individuals understand their current skills, identify gaps between where they are and where they want to be, and determine the three most important developmental areas for the individual and the team.

During development sessions, Return Path has the team break into pairs. The pairs help identify a development gap for one another and develop a plan to bridge the gap. They spend about 15 minutes on each individual's development plan and then each team member shares updates with entire team at the end. By sharing with the team, everyone knows what they're trying to work on and can be held accountable.

Sample development plan

| Where I am	GAP	Where I want to be
Solid Performer		High Performer
Beginner Excel User		Intermediate Excel User
Good written communication skills		Great written communication skills
Poor at collaboration		Skilled Collaborator
Slow response time to clients		Responsive and proactive
Good product knowledge		Great product knowledge

It's important to have separate, dedicated conversations for feedback and development, at least when the model is new, to ensure that all relevant feedback is surfaced. Feedback and development then factor into the manager's assessment of performance and potential for each individual, which then factor into compensation decisions. Return Path is still a pay-for-performance company, and still has pay based on individual performance. The team does have more input into measuring that performance, but they haven't yet moved to a true team-based compensation model.

Results

Return Path started piloting the program in 2014 and has tracked team effectiveness scores quarter-over-quarter. Their data showed that teams that had peer feedback sessions and development planning sessions have improved by an average of 13%.

Change in average team effectiveness score before and after pilot
Teams with peer feedback and development planning sessions improved by an average of almost 15% over the course of a year.
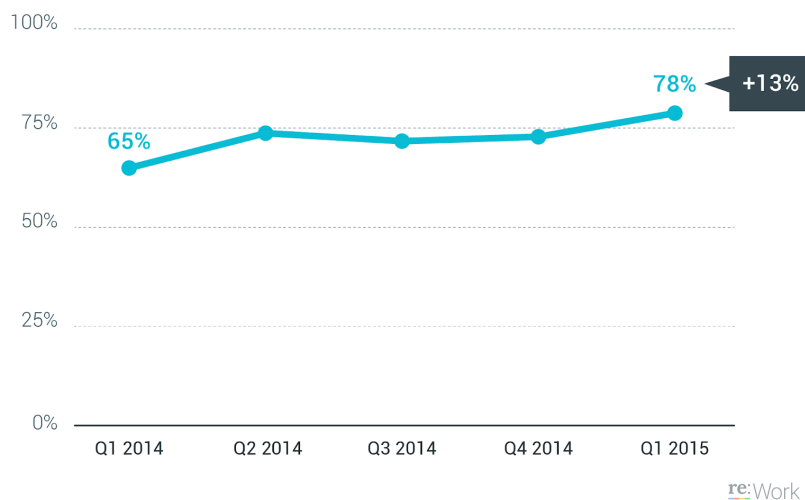
Return Path's data also validated this team-based approach to coaching and development. They could see that individuals were members of different teams, and now they had the data to show these teams could have vastly different effectiveness scores. So by giving feedback and coaching at the team level, Return Path could focus where the challenges and opportunities actually cropped up. And this does mean individuals may go through multiple sessions with the different teams they're part of, although most people are only part of one or two teams.

The data has also been revealing about Return Path's company structure. They found that the most engaged teams are the ones that are flatter and more transparent. And the insights have been helping them shape future teams. For example, they found that the ideal team size is 6-8 people, so they're using this as they build future project teams.

Perhaps the most validating outcome has been the fact that teams are asking for more support; being part of an effective team is not just seen as a checkbox being pushed by the People Team. Teams of all stripes — sales, product, and technical teams — are seeking out team effectiveness diagnostics, tools, and development opportunities. There is now a cultural expectation around team effectiveness. While a team may be flagged due to lagging performance scores, people are calling out dysfunctional teams, whether their own or others.

COMMUNICATION **(/search/?tags_ids=6749519184134144)**