

Team trouble got you down? You're not alone. Ingrid Bens provides some prevention strategies for averting team conflict.

Keeping Your Team Out of Trouble

Ingrid Bens

Trouble in paradise? Team conflict got you down? You're not alone. Anyone who has ever been part of a team knows how easy it is to experience problems that can rob it of productivity.

When teams are formed, there's a strong tendency to put on rose-colored glasses and focus on all the benefits. Too often there's no recognition that most teams will experience some interpersonal friction, not to mention other roadblocks.

When problems do occur, team leaders are too often caught off guard. And this lack of preparation leads team leaders to ignore problems. What might have been a simple issue to resolve had it been dealt with early on, soon turns into a major stumbling block. This is both unfortunate and unnecessary since most team conflicts can be averted by implementing preventative measures early in the life of the team.

*Prevention strategy #1:
Conduct a comprehensive
team launch*

Avoid the temptation to plunge

directly into the team's task at the first meeting without properly launching the team. A proper team launch includes such important activities as member introductions, creation of a common team goal, development of specific objectives, creation of team norms, clarification of empowerment levels, creation of a skills profile, identification of customers, products, and services, and development of a communications plan.

Omitting this important step is like asking for trouble. Without a strong foundation, a team is prone to ongoing confusion and constant backtracking to clarify all the things that should have been discussed during the launch.

*Prevention strategy #2:
Provide training*

Being on a team requires a whole new set of skills for both the members and leader. Launching into teamwork without at least a few days of training is a sure formula for ineffectiveness.

Teams need an understanding of the team concept, the stages of

team development and empowerment, and skills in facilitation; meeting management; conflict management; decision making; and (very important) effective team behaviors. Teams also need to know how to use quality tools such as forcefield analysis, cause-and-effect analysis, and systematic problem solving.

**Prevention strategy #3:
Create and use your
team's norms**

Always make sure every team develops and actively uses its own set of rules of conduct. Team norms are an important tool for managing member behaviors. They should be written up on a large flipchart sheet and posted in the room whenever the team is meeting. Posting the rules empowers members to call each other on poor behavior. The active use of norms is the first and most important tool for setting a positive climate.

**Prevention strategy #4:
Anticipate storming**

Another key strategy that helps minimize team conflict is to educate members about the stages of team development, so that everyone knows the signs and understands that this stage is normal.

Engage team members in a discussion that generates preventative strategies. Break the team into dyads or triads and ask for input in response to each of the following questions:

- 1) *What should we do if we start to experience confusion about our goal, objectives, roles, empowerment?*
- 2) *What should we do if we start to see interpersonal conflicts during*

meetings? Outside of meetings?

- 3) *What should we do if our meetings start to spin in circles without real progress being made?*
- 4) *What should we do if we notice that we're starting to experience frustration and general dissatisfaction?*
- 5) *What should we do if we have concerns about our leader?*

Hold a plenary to pull together ideas generated and build consensus about the team's preventative strategies to deal with conflict.

identify all the barriers the team's facing and then prioritize the issues using a multi-vote. Ask:

- 1) *What's working well? What's helping us work effectively?*
- 2) *What's getting in the way of us being effective?*

Use multi-voting to help members identify priority issues that need attention and set aside time to use a systematic problem-solving approach on the top-rated issues.

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This discussion not only creates an awareness but also encourages members to buy into the idea of dealing with problems as soon as they crop up. This discussion is also tremendously empowering and helps the team members feel that they have some control over how well the team functions.

**Prevention strategy #5:
Identify team problems**

Instead of waiting for problems to become huge, it's best to identify blocks to high performance early in the life of a new team.

About six to eight weeks after the team forms, set aside a half hour at a team meeting and use forcefield analysis (used to identify forces that are there for or against a particular action or change and how much force or influence each may exert in facilitating or restraining any change initiative) to

Even if your team can only work on one problem a month, it's better than ignoring issues until they become major stumbling blocks.

**Prevention strategy #6:
Use peer feedback**

Every team needs to have a system where members can regularly give each other feedback about any interpersonal things that are getting in the way of their work performance.

Consider conducting the following activity within six weeks of launching any new team. This activity should be repeated at least once every six months.

Create a simple feedback form by writing two questions on a sheet of paper:

- 1) *What you do that's effective. Keep doing it!*

2) What you could do to become even more effective.

Each person should write his or her name on a form, and the forms are then passed around the team so that each person can write down comments about his or her teammates. The completed sheets are returned to their original owners to use as personal input. The information can be kept private or openly discussed, depending on the atmosphere in the team.

Regardless of how it's used, regular, constructive feedback tells people what they need from each other before problems become serious and bitterness builds.

**Prevention strategy #7:
Monitor team and meeting effectiveness**

Every team needs to conduct a Team Effectiveness Survey every six to eight weeks, whether or not the team shows signs of serious trouble. You should also alternate using a team survey with a periodic Meeting Effectiveness Survey. Examples of these surveys are available in most books on teams, or you can make up your own survey to probe those areas that are relevant to your team.

The open and objective discussion that survey results generate will encourage your team to identify weaknesses and propose solutions to overcome them.

**Preventative strategy #8:
Implement leader feedback**

The best way of avoiding power struggles and adjusting relationships as the team develops is to hold regular checkups of the leader-member relationship. This can be done in two ways.

- Members can be asked to anonymously rate the leader using any one of hundreds of team assessment surveys available. The results can then be anonymously

the needs of the team are changing over time.

Since an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, why not consider implementing a year-

Month 1 Team skills training Meeting survey	Month 2 Meeting survey	Month 3 Team survey
Month 4 Leader feedback	Month 5	Month 6 Peer feedback
Month 7 Update team launch components	Month 8	Month 9 Team survey
Month 10 Leader feedback	Month 11 Meeting survey	Month 12 Peer feedback

fed back to the leader or group members who assess it and prepare a summary to the leader on:

- 1) *What you do that is really effective. Keep doing it!*
- 2) *What you could do to become even more effective.*

- An alternate method is to conduct a "Needs and Offers" negotiation session. This consists of the leader leaving the room while the members discuss:

- 1) *What we need from you so we can be more effective.*
- 2) *What we are offering you, the leader, in return, to support you.*

While waiting outside the room, the leader answers the same two questions. The leader and the members are then reunited to share their needs and offers.

These exercises provide the leader with an opportunity to model gracious acceptance of feedback. They also provide the leader with valuable information about how

round schedule of preventative techniques that will keep your team on track to super performance?

The table on this page is a purely hypothetical example of how your team might schedule a year's worth of preventative activities. Construct your own maintenance schedule to suit your unique needs.

The bottom line is to remember that its natural for teams to get into trouble. They key is to take quick action so that team problems are addressed immediately and in a way that helps the team move forward.



Ingrid Bens, a consultant and trainer with over 20 years of experience helping organizations implement workplace teams, is the author of Facilitating With

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