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Leading effective teams from home:

Seeing the team in action

By the Catalyst Research Team* on April 21, 2020



The team is your best tool for achieving outcomes when problems are wicked. Problems range from routine and well-defined to ill-defined to wicked and nonroutine. Wicked problems mean the team is “building the boat while going downriver” (Purser & Pasmore, 1992). That means the tools for solving the problem have to be invented while solving the problem. The knowledge and tools for solving some problems do not yet exist and so requires development while the team works on its assigned

project. Routine, well-defined problems may not need a team, so avoid using one. Ill-defined and wicked problems demand collaborative work that usually takes the form of a team.

If you choose to use a team to work on the goals of the project, how do you take care of your tools? Rusty ones don’t work well. How can you tell when your team and your tools are working well?

Tangible tools include workspace and equipment, funds and time, and support personnel. Intangible tools include knowledge, attitudes, values, goals, and relationships. If outcomes are not being achieved, reason back to what tools need to be upgraded or acquired to make those valued outcomes attainable. Consider each of these outcomes as a starting point for assessing your team tool chest.

- Outcomes from a top team include:
- Processes – work and team
- Products – prototypes and tools
- Strategies – taking the long view about team development

- Services – support and support systems
- Rituals – establishing useful routines with special meaning for members
- Structures and substructures – adapting the team through the use of subteams and adapting relationships to other teams
- Tools and aids – equipment, knowledge, and subject matter experts
- Ideas – new ways to see that emerge from the opening discussion
- New knowledge – constant learning by members and by the team to grow capability
- Relationships – within the team and between teams
- Trust – of knowledge and skill, intent and caring, dependability and accountability
- History – shared events that become captured in stories
- Stories – that illustrate the essence of the team and its journey through time – useful in socializing new members
- Patterns of behavior – routines that represent lessons learned and values shared
- Routines – a set of behavior patterns that represents the culture of the team
- Habits – small, repeated actions that build or destroy the quality
- Skills and competencies – members’ resources for contributing to the team – always growing
- New methods of research/development – awareness of the cutting edge work in each relevant discipline
- Momentum/motivation/energy – drive for achieving goals – tangible and intangible

If this looks complex, it’s because it is. Project team leaders have a lot to pay attention to and face challenges of task work, teamwork, and connecting with the larger organization every day. Building expertise in team leadership requires continual learning. New challenges arrive on nearly a daily basis. That’s what makes it interesting – there is never a good reason for being bored in that role.

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