

10 Rules for Well-Performing Teamwork

Psychological Basics for Group Leaders

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Subject

Mastering group dynamics is essential for the successful and efficient work of groups – especially for those that do intellectual work.

Managers and team moderators must ensure that no undesirable effects impede work or even puts collaboration at risk.

This also applies to groups in social networks in which specific issues are discussed. Group processes also take place with asynchronous (i. e. not simultaneous) and written communication.

Risk Factors

Unfortunately, any group performance is qualitatively jeopardised by group processes like the following:

- Peer pressure: The individual conforms strongly to what the group seems to want.
- Authority pressure: The individual depends strongly on what the superior apparently wants
- Prestige and attribution of competence: The group is guided by what members say who stand out, for example because they are considered particularly competent.
- Influence of frequent speakers: The group aligns itself with what members say who take up the most speaking time.
- Sympathy and antipathy effects: The group conforms to what particularly popular members say or opposes what particularly unpopular members say.
- Emotionalization: Dealing with emo-

tional tensions on the factual level and dealing with factual contradictions on the emotional level.

- Risk shift phenomena: The group finds far more risky solutions than the members would advocate individually.

Case From My Practice

A product definition working group was heavily dominated by a single member because he spoke very loudly, long and frequently, was older and more knowledgeable than the other group members, and liked to summarize what he thought the group had just come up with. When I asked him about it privately, he was surprised and immediately changed his behavior in the group. He hadn't intended his dominance at all; his self-confidence and his expressiveness simply carried the others away.

Groupthink

Each group separates itself (to a certain degree) from the outside and makes certain demands on its members. When these norms become too strong, the effectiveness of the group is compromised. This undesirable condition manifests itself as follows:

- The group considers itself invulnerable.
- Fictitious justifications are given.
- One's own course of action experiences a moral justification.
- Outsiders are stereotyped.
- Group pressure is built up against arguments that endanger illusions.

- There is self-censorship and group census.
- Unanimity is overrated.
- Self-proclaimed alignment guards shield disruptive information.

Case From My Practice

Right at the beginning, a problem-solving group agreed that the required result should be presented as quickly as possible. From this it was concluded that no discussions, for example about how to find an acceptable solution, should be allowed. The suggestion to first analyze the initial situation and the known requirements for the result and to find out whether there are already solutions was also rejected with reference to the time required. Some group members then withdrew. Since the solution became a random product in this way, the result finally presented was completely inadequate.

Ten Rules for Teamleaders

- 1) Educate the group about the dangers of groupthink. In particular, the aim is not to find a solution as quickly as possible that will satisfy just the opinion leaders.
- 2) As a supervisor, hold back on your own statements. Otherwise, the group falls into the authority trap.
- 3) Encourage members to raise objections when in doubt. This should help limit the influence of pseudo-competent members and members that talk very loud, or very much.
- 4) On a case-by-case basis, have a member play devil's advocate (representative of the unpopular opposing position). In this way you prevent quick unanimity with subsequent retention of the hasty result due to peer pressure.

- 5) Occasionally form sub-groups to work on a sub-problem in competition. In this way, members who otherwise hold back also join in the discussion.
- 6) Have any competitors or opponents carefully analyzed by the group. This prevents the formation of stereotypes.
- 7) Let solutions to be reconsidered before they are considered final; avoid snapshots.
- 8) Bring in outside observers and critics. Efforts towards objectivity benefit from the awareness of being observed and judged by those who are otherwise uninvolved.
- 9) Have group members solicit opinions from trusted outsiders. This turns them into agents who carry the experiences from their network into the group.
- 10) Establish a parallel group working on the same problem. In a competitive situation, the group is more motivated and pools its strengths more strongly.

Case From My Practice

A working group was set up to gather arguments on a strategic issue that had already been decided. With their help one wanted to counter future objections. A member of the group who was particularly competent in the subject played devil's advocate. He did this so well that the others soon ran out of arguments and the unwanted counter-position became more and more attractive. This remained the case even after the facts presented had been checked by persons outside the group. In the end, the strategy to be supported was significantly improved due to the gained understanding of the initial problem.

Summary

With a few measures, risk factors and group-

think can be limited:

- 1) Educate about groupthink
- 2) Holding back as the leader
- 3) Encourage »disturbing«
- 4) Use a devil's advocate
- 5) Create subgroups
- 6) Analyze competitors
- 7) Check the solutions found again
- 8) Use external observers
- 9) Use external agents as agents
- 10) Form a parallel group

You can see that this prevents the group from becoming an unflexible and insular "machine" that works quickly but tends to produce low-quality results.

These rules have a very positive influence on the results of work, especially in focus and problem-solving groups.

Discuss With the Author

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