Defining Group Goals

In today's workplace, most non-trivial projects are too big for a single person to accomplish. A team is necessary. An effective team will have a clear picture of the what the group is trying to accomplish, and will develop ways of working together in order to accomplish their goals. This seems quite simple and obvious, yet teams constantly suffer from goal confusion: some people don't understand the goals, some are not committed to the team goals, and some are not happy with their roles. Worst of all, when asked if they understand, most people simply nod their heads.

The popular solution to goal setting is SMART goals: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound. Just follow those rules, the theory goes, and everything will work out. Unfortunately, reality does not always agree. There are several factors involved.

The first problem is a subtle one: are the goals as stated appropriate to the group in its current form? It might seem strange that this question should even come up; after all, if a team is formed to build a product, then obviously the goals should all revolve around that task, right? Well, not quite.

Teams go through four distinct phases of development, commonly known as Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing. How a team handles goals will vary according to the stage of development it is at. Members of a new team, one in the Forming stage, need learn how to work together. Until they do, the vast majority of people will not ask questions, even when goals are unclear. Trying to leap into product design and development without taking the time to develop effective team dynamics is like building a house with a faulty foundation. Under stress, it's likely to collapse when you least expect it. Therefore, the initial goals need to be structured to guide the team into developing effective means of communication, into assigning appropriate roles to team members, and into agreeing on how the team will approach accomplishing the tasks before it.

How team performance is evaluated can be another source of problems. Team members are expected to cooperate in the pursuit of a common goal, but are usually evaluated individually. That means that team members are in an environment where they are expected to compete with one another as well as cooperate. The problem is that when given a choice between competition and cooperation, most people will choose competition: they will work to maximize their own immediate term benefit over the long-term good of the team. Individual reward must be tied primarily to overall team performance as well as individual contribution.

Few things are more demoralizing than to make people responsible for something out of their control. In one large and well-known company, engineers were evaluated based on how well a product sold. Unfortunately, they had nothing to do with the actual sales process. So even if they built the best product in creation, if the sales team dropped the ball, the engineers took the consequences. This eventually led to serious problems for the company, and an exodus of many of their best people. Goals must be within a person's, or a team's, sphere of responsibility and ability to execute.

How do the team's goals fit into the overall mission of the company? Can you state your corporate vision in a couple of sentences? Do team members know what it is and how their work fits in? People like to be connected to something bigger than they are. Even in a brand new startup, the more team members know where the company is going, what it hopes to accomplish, and feel that they are an important part of the process, the greater the degree of goal acceptance.

Once all those pieces are in place, then it's possible to start building your SMART goals. Otherwise, you risk wasting time, money, and the energy of your employees, and that translates into product delays, reduced quality, lower morale, and increased employee turnover.

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