



Tools for Leading Teams

Developing a Mission Statement

One of the most important exercises you can perform with your team is to clarify its mission, its reason for being. As organizations grow and change, it is essential that team members remain clear about their purpose as a group. The most important part of this exercise is not the output but the process. The conversation that takes place to create the mission statement can, in itself, mobilize people in the same direction. With a clear and common understanding of mission, people will make hundreds of independent decisions that support the team and avoid working at cross purposes.

Steps for Success

1. Introduce the importance of Mission Statements (or “Purpose Statements”) as a basic tool for ensuring that the team is “on the same page” from the very beginning. It is also useful for a team that is derailing, has undergone significant change in membership, leadership, direction, or organizational culture. Draw from your own experience, show a video, or use the U.S. military as an example (i.e., every man and woman in uniform can tell you their mission, their individual one and that of their unit. It is the single most important piece of information for any team to clarify.)
2. Have each individual take a few minutes to write down “why this team is in existence.” Additional ways of asking this include: “What unique job is this team here to perform?” “How does this team help fulfill the larger mission of the organization?” “Why are we here?” The answer should be one or two brief sentences but may be difficult to condense.
3. Pair people up either randomly or using an ice-breaking technique. Assign the pairs to discuss their separate mission statements and blend them into one new product that reflects their (now) shared ideas.
4. For most teams, one more step is needed, and that is having all the pairs come back together to post and share their blended mission statements with the entire team. It is usually best to have an outside facilitator (who can be seen as objective) help the group blend all of the “paired mission statements” into one new mission statement.
5. The most awkward part of doing this involves the desire to “wordsmith” the final document. Once wordsmithing begins to mire the group, it is time to delegate the final version to a small sub-team and live with the final product. The objective will have already been accomplished with a rich dialogue.
6. Once the final product is complete, it should be made an integral part of team documents, included in team communications, shared with other teams, and used to orient new team members. Remember that it is involving people in a dialogue about the meaning of the mission statement that installs it into people’s thinking and guides their decisions and actions.