

# Guiding Teams To Wise Decisions

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**S**olving problems as a team is never an easy task. Too often, managers concentrate on their individual needs and goals and miss the opportunities of collaboration. What should be a coordinated effort that capitalizes on the sum of individual strengths unfortunately often degenerates into an unproductive series of destructive internal struggles.

## Leadership

The crucial component of a successful team is a leader who empowers and guides fellow teammates to reach solutions without dictating actual outcomes. These leaders should allocate most of their efforts to listening, summarizing the group's key comments and moving the problem-solving process forward.

Leaders should resist the temptation to move too quickly to solutions without adequate discussion of individual teammates' concerns and causes of the problem. The team leader needs to make sure all colleagues are heard from and that the information is fully discussed. Most importantly, the team must determine if the

problem is worth solving in the first place. Often, the benefits of solving a problem may not be worth the group's efforts and time.

The following six-step process can be called, "facilitating the wheel" or reaching a collaborative solution.

**Discuss the present problem**—After stating the team's problem, the leader needs to hear specifically how each team member experiences it. Particularly in multifunctional teams, a particular colleague's past experience with similar problems is valuable to the rest of the group. The leader needs to let everyone adequately air their concerns, without allowing the meeting to degenerate into side discussions of past, unrelated topics. If the group fails to fully describe the problem, new aspects of the problem will crop up later in the meeting and sidetrack the discussion.

**Determine the cause of the problem**—Here, the leader should encourage brainstorming to find what actually caused the problem. The team's discussion should focus on clarifying the root causes. The skillful leader will probe for more information about possible causes by encouraging teammates to dig deeper before summarizing the group's conclusions. Un-

covering the root causes gives the group a checklist to evaluate the efficacy of the ultimate solution.

**Evaluate benefits of solving the problem**—At this point, a crucial question for the team to answer is: "What do we get if we solve this problem?" Teammates need to verbalize how solving the problem will personally benefit them and the department they work for. If the results of solving the problem don't merit the group's efforts, then it has the option of abandoning the problem. If the problem does merit further action, discussing the benefits ensures that all team members buy in on the project.

**Offer possible solutions to the problem**—Brainstorming is the key objective at this juncture. The team leader's main goal is to elicit from colleagues a number of possible ways to solve the problem. Leaders should encourage fellow teammates to uncover all potential solutions, while de-emphasizing the full details of their implementation. Team leaders should remain neutral as to which solutions may be more realistic and actionable than others.

**Decide on the best solution**—The best solution may actually be a hybrid of several previous suggestions. At this point, the team leader needs to guide participants in keeping the best of their assembled ideas without necessarily demotivating people whose suggestions may not be included for future consideration. Refer back to the root causes to confirm that the solutions eliminate the root of the problem and not just the symptoms.

**Chart action steps**—The team needs to answer: "What's the first thing we need to do?" The action plan that results from this discussion should include functional responsibilities, due dates and an overall project schedule that's signed off by everybody. An important aspect of the plan is deciding on a communication procedure so that all team members are aware of changes that may occur once the project begins. ❖

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