The 5 Biggest Mistakes Team Leaders Make

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Over the years, I have had the opportunity to work with over 100 senior teams and cabinets in higher education. Overall, the experience has been quite positive due to the intelligence, dedication, aspirations, and integrity of those veteran leaders.

Unfortunately, about 10% of teams I have worked with just never performed well, despite great effort and talent. This article is an attempt to conduct a "post mortem" on the teams that just didn't make it. These mistakes go beyond some of the essential elements of stellar team performance, such as having a shared purpose, holding each other accountable, open and trusted communication, and high levels of trust. All these are very important, but the absence of these was not responsible for these talented teams' failures.

The following five "mistakes" may sound like common sense, but they are often overlooked when leaders at colleges and universities are building their teams.

1. The team leader falls prey to the "comfortable cloning" syndrome.

"Comfortable cloning" describes our natural tendency to seek out other team members who are similar to us or who we expect will think similarly to us. They may share our educational background, culture, gender, or race. These individuals are "comfortable" to us because they are so familiar and easy to work with. We use them as thought partners or solicit feedback from them about our ideas and decisions. But this "sameness" can hinder a team's performance in dramatic ways.

Exceptional leaders seek diversity in their team composition, not because this is a "nice" or politically correct thing to do, but because the diversity creates the foundation for exceptional team performance. We have found that when a team leader actively seeks diversity in the composition of a team, several things tend to happen:

- Solutions to complex challenges and problems will be more effective because you have multiple perspectives at the table.
- Natural blind spots (those things we simply cannot see because of our limited perspectives and experience) become apparent to us through the eyes of others.
- Team plans usually get implemented because different ideas have been vetted, debated, and argued from the varied perspectives of different team members. There tend to be better solutions to the team's challenges and a shared commitment to actually execute the team's decisions.

2. The team leader never establishes explicit "ground rules" or working agreements that help the group perform at high levels.

Almost everyone comes into a group or team situation with tacit expectations for other members. For example:

- "Everyone should come to our meetings on time and prepared."
- "In our meetings, one person should talk at a time."
- "We should 'actively listen' to others when there is conflict on the team."
- "We should have a prioritized agenda for all our team meetings."

The problem with these implicit expectations is that they usually stay in our heads, and people continually violate these hidden expectations while remaining unaware of their infractions. Effective team leaders understand that these tacit expectations need to be made explicit so that everyone understands them. Once the hidden expectations are in full view, the team can negotiate them and agree upon a small set (3-4) of ground rules. These shared expectations help create the human infrastructure for stellar team performance.

3. The team leader never learns how to manage conflict within the group.

High performing teams realize that conflict is inevitable and a natural part of group interaction. When you have dedicated, talented and bright people on your team, there will be vast differences of opinion and perspective. This is a given and team leaders need to realize this. Conflict isn't going away any time soon. It's here and leaders need to learn to deal with it effectively.

Exceptional teams are "curious" about conflict and see it as a resource, something they need to learn from, not avoid. It takes both courage and skill to deal with conflict. Therefore, team leaders need to develop their own conflict resolution skills as well as help build the capacity of their team

members to resolve conflict constructively. I recommend the book *Crucial Conversations Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011), which is an excellent resource for team leaders and team members who are interested in building their conflict resolution skills.

4. The team leader never clarifies the decision rules for the team.

When there is a lack of clarity about how decisions are made on a team or about who makes what decisions, this creates confusion and conflict within the group. The team leader must take responsibility for making sure everyone on the team understands the decision rules.

The following simple decision-making model has worked well on many campuses:

Level One decisions

The leader communicates that a particular decision is his/hers to make. They don't need input or discussion from others.

It is an autocratic decision, and this level of decision making should be utilized very carefully.

Level Two decisions

In this case, a team leader solicits the ideas and opinions of others on the team, usually in a one-to-one discussion. The key here is to manage the expectations of the individual team members, because there is a natural tendency for those whose advice is solicited to assume that the leader will listen to their ideas and then implement them. Yet, this may well not be the case; the team leader might want to test their thinking, hoping to reveal a blind spot in their thinking or to enhance their understanding about a particular situation. These are all good intentions, but the team leader needs to communicate clear intentions to all team members involved.

For example:

- "Rahim, I really respect your experience with a problem I am wrestling with and need to make a decision about. Can I use you as a 'thought partner' and share my current thinking with you and get some feedback?"
- "Maryann, I like the creative approach you take in solving problems. I have an important decision to make and would really appreciate the opportunity to brainstorm with you about it for a few minutes."

The key here is that the team leader is very specific about how he/she wants to utilize the team member's expertise and skill – to help the leader make a decision, not to make a decision with them.

Level Three decisions

In this level, the team leader states up front that they have an important decision to make and will be seeking lots of input and feedback from multiple sources before ultimately making a decision. It is key to communicate that the team leader will make the final decision.

Level Four decisions

The team leader agrees to be a "peer of the realm" and have one "vote," just like everybody else on the team. This is usually a sign of a high performing team because the decision-making is shared, not top down. The key thing to remember with Level Four decisions is that the team leader needs to still establish how the final decision will be made. For example, the final decision could be made:

- By consensus: Make sure you define "consensus"!
- By super majority: If 75% of the group agrees with the decision, it's a go.
- By legislative majority: The decision will be implemented if 2/3 of the group agree to it.

Level Five decisions

These are often called "delegated decisions" because in these cases the leader fully delegates the decision to the team or to specific team members. Here, the leader is not part of the decision making process. The team leader needs to communicate several items up front:

- What the "givens" are (e.g. budget constraints, time table)
- How he/she would like to be informed about the progress of the decision (e.g. communication protocols)
- Identify a "problem resolution" process that will be implemented when challenges or problems occur

The other key in a Level Five decision is to be wary of micromanaging the decision process. The team leader gives responsibility to others to successfully carry out the task/decision.

5. The team leader never asks for help.

This is one of the traps that really smart people fall into over and over again. These individuals are surrounded by talented people, many of whom have respect and affection for the team leader, yet the team leader almost never reaches out to ask for advice or help. Leaders have access to great resources, yet these resources remain untapped and this is a blind spot for many team leaders. Often, team leaders get "trapped" in their offices, struggling with a complex problem or challenge all by themselves, while help is right outside the door.

There are several reasons for this:

- Sheer pride is often a culprit. Team leaders don't want to appear lacking in knowledge. They fear that by asking for help, they might appear ineffective or incompetent to their team members.
- They get caught up in the notion that they must be all-knowing, an expert at everything, and that asking for help would reveal that they aren't the "expert" that people thought they were.
- Stubbornness. Some team leaders have a "lone ranger" attitude and will try mightily to do it all themselves, because that style may have worked well for them in the past.

Whatever the reason for it, the notion that you have to "go it alone" is an ineffective idea to harbor, because team members almost always will provide the necessary support and advice that is needed. But you have to ask! They want to be helpful, and often they will find being asked a compliment. Never forget this: for the most part, people want to help.

For those team leaders who find it difficult to ask others for help, I suggest that you read a great article: "Smart People Ask for (my) Advice: Seeking Advice Boosts Perceptions of Competence" by Alison Wood Brooks, Francesca Gino & Maurice E. Schweitzer (2015). This article demonstrates that asking for help is a positive leadership behavior, one that improves people's impressions of you! I have had several colleagues send this article anonymously to a struggling team leader, and it motivated that leader to seek the support of other team members.

To build a real team is a noble and difficult task. It will take great perspiration and aspiration, but if you can do this, you will have made a difference for your campus. I recommend reviewing these five mistakes with your team members and discussing practical applications for your own team. Raising awareness about how team leaders get into trouble keeps everyone vigilant about what can go wrong and helps everyone stay the course.