

Shoveling Smoke: What Every Forester Should Know about Teams and Teamwork

I was just coming off a rough weekend in my first management job and telling my dad how badly things had gone.

► Few of my eight-man crew had done their work properly, so I had to do much of it myself or do theirs over again.

► Only a couple of guys helped make up for the slackers, but that meant extra work and less fun for them, so they were thinking about quitting.

► Several of the others were at each other's throats about something that had happened weeks ago and were still trying to get even, which brought everybody down.

► We didn't finish with any merit badges, and we lost the first-aid relay by a mile!

I was 12 years old, and it was my first camping trip as the *Flying Eagle* patrol

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leader in my Boy Scout Troop. When I was finished ranting, my dad said something I never forgot: "*Now that you're in charge of others, you need to know something about managing people. It's a lot like shoveling smoke. You can't control them, but you can influence their direction. If you want to be a good leader, you'll have to learn how to do that.*"

Boy Scouts to Board Rooms

Not only was my dad's vivid analogy memorable, but 45 years later I've found it to be eerily true at every level in nearly every organization where I've worked, coached, or consulted, from the Boy Scouts to board rooms. Like shoveling

smoke, a team leader's job is a tricky business, so here are some key things to do in three different situations you are likely to face.

Start-ups are newly forming teams, committees, or task forces just beginning their work. Here are three of the most important things you can do to help them get a good start:

► **Choose carefully.** Most team members are selected based on their functional expertise, without sufficient consideration of their team, leadership, and communication skills. Once chosen, team membership is very difficult to reverse, so invest in a good selection process to prevent major problems down the road.

► **Charter the team.** Rather than letting the team jump into the task helter-skelter, take time to clarify exactly *what* members are supposed to do (i.e., their purpose, goals, and scope). If it's a temporary committee, include when the team is to end. Insufficient clarity in these areas will eventually affect morale and efficiency. A sample team charter can be downloaded from the *Source* Extras page: www.safnet.org/members/archive/source_extras.cfm.

► **Establish ground rules.** Ground rules are agreed-upon norms of behavior that spell out exactly *how* the team will work together (make decisions, maintain confidentiality, communicate with one another, make handoffs, and so on). Nature abhors a vacuum—and norms will grow there anyway, so you might as well make some good ones on purpose.

Tune-ups apply to proficiently performing teams that can always do better. Here are three good ideas for helping them stay on track and get even better.

► **Schedule and hold regular check-ups.** Just like any valuable asset, teams need maintenance. Whether it's weekly,

monthly, or quarterly, the main question for team checkup meetings is: "What are we doing well as a team, and what can we do even better?" Don't forget that the harder the working conditions, the more frequent should be the checkups.

► **Revisit who is doing what.** As time goes by, teams naturally change; roles get confused; responsibilities overlap; and things fall between the cracks. This causes unnecessary hardship and hard feelings, so revisit who is doing what with some regularity. Download my favorite tool for this purpose, a responsibility chart, from the *Source* Extras page.

► **Shift or tweak responsibilities.** People tend to get bored doing too much of the same thing. They like to learn, and you need versatile team members. So ask people what they'd like to do more of or less of, and then make adjustments whenever you can. You don't have to change an entire job to change an attitude.

Turn-arounds are needed when teams are in trouble, consistently failing to reach important goals or achieving them in a detrimental way. If you're responsible for a team in trouble, you have three main choices:

► **Full-scale assessment.** Most teams in trouble were once teams that needed tune-ups but didn't get them. When that happens, you'll need a more involved assessment, probably with the help of an outside party. This full-scale assessment should be followed by a rigorous three-, six-, or twelve-month plan (depending upon the scope of the team) for making serious im-

provements or facing consequences.

► **Change key personnel.** It's surprising how much damage one or two people can do to an entire team and even more alarming when managers let the problem persist too long. Follow your organization's performance improvement process, but one way or another you must make the individual(s) aware of their impact and describe the needed behavior. Give them two chances to improve, and make a change on the third. You owe it to the rest of team, and it's your job.

► **Shut down and start over.** If the problems are too deep or endemic, you may need to disband the team entirely and start over from scratch. More likely with a task force or committee than an intact work group, it can have many lateral consequences. Get all the internal and external help you can to assess the situation, weigh the pros and cons, and plan a strategy. Once again, you should never let things get this bad, and you don't have to.

As you already know, making teams work can be a tricky business, and it may not be for everyone. But because teams are such an endemic and important part of today's workplaces, successful leaders need to use all the tools at their disposal, like team charters, ground rules, responsibility charts, and, yes, even shovels.

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