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Best practice to inspire and ensure a successful group effort

When the Australian women's relay teams blitzed the pool at the Pan Pacific swimming championships in August, it was an inspiring example of what a motivated group can achieve when everyone is pulling together, urging each other on.

But in the day to day operations of most organisations, there's no cheering crowd and managers rarely get to assemble a dream team of champions; it's more often a case of making the most of available employees.

According to **Catherine Collins**, a senior lecturer in the school of management at UNSW Business School, it's a common misconception that once teams are set up, they will sort out themselves and be high performing.

"Workplace teams, just like sport teams, need a goal – and the space to practice, to learn from failed attempts, and feedback to monitor if they are on track for performance," Collins says.

This applies particularly to knowledge workers: from boards of directors, top management and consultants, to engineering teams selling products and services, teachers delivering education to a grade at school, or a finance team servicing an organisation.

And Collins challenges the traditional notion of appraising teams in terms of high – or low – performance. She notes team performance ebbs and flows over time and we need to work and manage teams in dynamic ways.

So, how can we get the best from a team project?

Success needs a goal

"Most people think setting up the team for success is about getting the right people in the team, but what's more critical is ensuring that you set the goal for the team and make sure everyone knows what the outcome is going to be; what the product or service is going to be," Collins says.

"Negotiating and writing down this goal upfront among the team, the team's manager, customers, and other external stakeholders is vital for minimising political fallouts."

A clarity of purpose is particularly important because "many teams in the workplace these days have evolving leadership and demands from stakeholders".

Let the stars emerge

"Let team members set up their own agreement, their own charter, about how they want to work together," Collins says. "These details are critical for creating a common goal that everyone buys into.

"Autonomy is a device that allows the flexibility teams need to achieve the outcomes in a way that is most effective for them. It also helps the team hold one another to account to minimise social loafing – people just waiting for others to complete the work for them."

Managers often say a team has autonomy, until a small blip in performance emerges.

"Managers typically look at teams to see whether they've met their short-term KPIs. For instance, have they met a certain level of gross profit in a sales team that week? But we know performance is highly variable.

"I argue that it is the patterns of change rather than the level of change per se that determines whether you are in a high performing team.

"Does the team have consistently high levels of performance, or are they moving towards higher performance? Are teams able to pull themselves out of performance slumps? If so, then in the main, leave them alone.

"Nothing is more disengaging than a manager being a task-master about an odd performance outlier, or a manager focusing on a more minor aspect of performance that is less critical to the agreed goal of the team.

"So let teams do their work, and the stars will emerge," Collins says.

Interrupt and evaluate

Collins notes a caveat in providing teams with autonomy. There must be multiple systems in place that enable teams to monitor and stay on track to achieve their goals. At times this monitoring needs to be self-initiated.

"Go back to the team agreement. Are you working the way you said you would? Are you reaching the targets? This is essentially a debrief," she says.

"The mid-point and end-point of one task or project are important junctures for these conversations. Annual performance reviews or ad hoc 360 degree surveys are too far apart to make sustained impact. But regular simple conversations over lunch can suffice."

What is key is the regularity in which team members and their stakeholders connect to keep momentum in the right direction.

"The goals in teams often change – managers and stakeholders change their mind and the agreed goal needs shifting to remain relevant to customers. The debriefs help to get back on track."

Moving outside the task or team helps evaluate whether there is progress on the team's goal.

"Teams need interruptions to be effective. Usually teams can get new inspiration if the team members have interactions with different stakeholders or they have a break from a task," Collins says.

"We find that when we put people in teams, they create a routine – people will sit in the same places, talk to the same people. And it may not be the most efficient way to resolve problems and get things done. Creating interruptions in the task enables people to change the way they're working together and be more innovative.

"It might be a change in location. It might be moving to a group collaborative area to work, or alternately break the task up to work separately. There needs to be space to be independent as well as interdependent when working in teams."