

Rebuilding High-Performance Work Teams

What can you do as a contract manager or team leader to rebuild high-performance?

BY JOHN K. BORCHARDT



Workplace restructuring often devastates contract management teams. A frequent side effect of company or agency restructuring is fragmentation of high-performance work teams, as members are promoted, transferred to other assignments, or leave the organization. Because these teams are often a cost-effective means of contract management, managers often need to reconstruct at least some of them. Consultants Price Pritchett and Ron Pound of Pritchett & Associates (Dallas, TX), advise managers, "Don't think of team reconstruction as a distraction... Consider it the heart of your job." What can you do as a contract manager or contract management team leader to rebuild your high-performance work teams?

This rebuilding can be a major challenge. Restructuring results in uncertainty; team members will have concerns about changes to their rank and status. They may be depressed about no longer working with valued associates or worried about their compatibility with a new group of coworkers. They will have concerns about new workplace policies and practices.

Reconstitute the Team

Begin team rebuilding by understanding your new workplace dynamics. After a restructuring, contract managers and team leaders confront new problems. Many teams have their missions changed. New workplace procedures are often instituted to achieve more productivity with fewer employees. Contract managers and team leaders have to consider these changes in assessing team goals and membership.

Before developing an action plan to achieve short-term results, analyze your surviving team members' strengths and weaknesses in the context of your

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new (and still evolving) post-restructuring workplace culture. Design a responsibility matrix for the reconstituted team. Define each team member's authority and areas of responsibility, so the people within your organization and the contractors understand the new matrix.

Break down team tasks until the different skill requirements emerge. Then, make sure that team members have the appropriate skills to meet their responsibilities. Do this before recruiting new team members.

Your analysis may identify people poorly suited for their current assignments. By reallocating resources and responsibilities among surviving team members, you can help people improve their productivity and job satisfaction, while giving inexperienced or less capable team members' assignments more commensurate with their current abilities.

When rebuilding a high-performance work team, it is critical to keep your best people, the same people most likely to voluntarily leave the organization for another job. Look for and explain the positive aspects of restructuring to your team members. Do this with everyone but focus on your key people. Engage in private as well as team discussions, so team members can talk about their situations with you more openly than they would in a group.

Uncertainty is a primary reason why your best performers consider leaving the company. Staff reductions make remaining employees concerned about their job security. As organizations redefine their missions and employee expertise needs after a staff reduction, employees may become concerned about the continued need for specialists in their field. Some may be willing to change specialties or enter new fields in response to changing organization needs. However, others will not.

In addition to being dissatisfied with their new work assignment, they could become a source of poor morale that spreads to others. They may voluntarily leave the organization, causing a sudden and unexpected vacancy on your team at a time when

it is difficult to hire new employees.

To retain your team members, explain the mission of the team and the role of each team member. Every team member wants clear work assignments and an understanding of how his or her work fits into the overall effort. When contract managers provide this, team members can function with the confidence that comes with knowing they are adding value to the overall effort and meeting deadlines. This reduces their insecurity and uncertainty.

Revise Team Goals

Work with your team to identify goals and develop an action plan to achieve them. Working together to set common goals unifies a team and gives it focus and direction. Arrest your team's post-restructuring drift by setting forth a clear agenda with short-term goals and tactics to accomplish them. Focus on goals the team can achieve quickly with results you can measure. It is also important focus on a few goals rather than dissipating team members' efforts by trying to do too much at once. Meaningful achievement is the fastest and best way to build team morale and spirit.

Coordinate team members' efforts. Agree with your team members upon a timetable to accomplish goals. Let your team have input on the agenda, goals, tactics, and deadlines. The larger their role in setting the agenda, identifying goals, defining tactics, and agreeing to deadlines, the more the team will be committed to following the plan and accomplishing goals. However, do not let team participation unduly delay setting the agenda or accomplishing goals.

Adapt the team's agenda to changing circumstances. These are likely to occur in the uncertain workplace environment following restructuring. If you use good judgment in initially defining your team's focus, later changes will be relatively modest.

Rebuild Team Morale

As a result of post-restructuring uncertainty, both you and your team

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members often behave differently. This uncertainty leads some people to drift, waiting for direction. Employees may busy themselves with familiar activities that are no longer productive in the post-restructuring environment. Others may disengage from the team to focus only on their individual efforts. Morale often is low, with the loss of trust in company management.

to lunch or giving him or her a department store gift certificate (for which you can try to get reimbursement). Many teams have their own internal awards, small trophies, or gift certificates. Recognize individual and group contributions at team meetings and express appreciation. This lets your team members know that achievement and effort are valued.

When something changes or additional goals are adopted, summarize these at the end of every team meeting and again follow up with a written version.

Meet with team members individually to discuss their roles in the group. As goals and priorities change, team members' roles must change also. To persuade team members to accept these changes, you must explain the reasons for them clearly and logically. The more team members participate in defining team goals, priorities, and deadlines, the more readily they will "buy into" them.

Develop a communications plan so all stakeholders receive needed information in a timely way. Remember that contractors, subcontractors, and staff in other departments may have their own communication barriers to overcome.

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Despite this, Price Pritchett and Ron Pound advise against making morale and employee attitudes your top priorities in rebuilding your work team. They consider morale, employee attitudes, and trust to be symptoms rather than problems. You can improve these by being personally trustworthy yourself and leading your contract management team to morale-building accomplishments. Pritchett and Pound believe, "Success is the magic solution that cures so many of the 'soft' organizational ailments brought about by change."

PriceWaterhouseCoopers (New York, NY) management consultants Mark Feldman and Michael Sprat agree, noting that the only focus in the post-restructuring period should be pragmatic, and include results-oriented steps targeting value creation. Focus your team on achieving short-term results and having a positive impact. As the team records accomplishments, morale will improve. This reinforces constructive team behaviors.

When developing a team action plan, include processes for recognizing and rewarding outstanding performance. If formal recognition takes a long time or recognition programs haven't been established, institute your own informal programs. These can include taking a deserving team member out

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Clear and concise communication is essential to high-performance project teams. Dean Anderson of Being First, Inc. (Durango, CO), a consulting firm specializing in transformational change, emphasizes that it is important to explain why the workplace is changing in addition to describing what is being changed. Leaders must present a strong case for changes, so team members accept them and work productively and willingly in the context of the new workplace environment. Good verbal and written communications are essential for your team members to understand their changed roles in the team and the team's instructions, goals, work procedures, and deadlines.

Shortly after a restructuring, feelings of uncertainty may affect your team members' listening skills. Your message may have to infiltrate a workplace of rumors and speculation. Repeat communications when possible and appropriate. For example, after your team has agreed upon goals, priorities, tactics, and a timetable, close team meetings by summarizing them. Then send team members a written copy. At the opening of subsequent team meetings, reiterate these. Review the status of action items at every meeting.

Provide Strong Leadership

During a restructuring, many contract managers give up their power by waiting for someone to tell them what to do. Weak leadership won't rebuild work teams. "Leave no doubt about who's in control," advises Pritchett and Pound. "Team reconstruction proceeds most successfully when it's driven hard, when the person in charge takes charge and makes things happen that need to happen." DaimlerChrysler CEO Jürgen Schrempp, who oversaw the largest merger in automobile industry history, advises leaders to make changes quickly because resistance to change increases as time passes following a restructuring.

Be authoritative without being overbearing. Show care, concern, and respect for others. Solicit their perspectives and opinions. However, don't let doing so paralyze decision-making.

Finally, heed the advice of Price Pritchett and Ron Pound who note, "People simply won't follow a boss they don't believe in, and they won't believe in you unless you believe in yourself." **CM**