



TODAY'S THRIVING TEAMS

What It Takes for Teams to Be Successful in Today's Workplace

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"Must be a team player."
"Must have a strong team orientation."

These phrases have become common in our daily work lives. We see them in employment advertisements. We see them in job and position descriptions. And, we've seen them for over three decades.

Teams continue to be a real and integral part of our everyday work lives. In fact, in a recent study by AchieveGlobal, nearly half of the participants reported that their organizations create teams always or often (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

How often are teams created in your organization?

45% of respondents replied
"Always" or "Often."

SOURCE: AchieveGlobal Focus Group Research

So, just what constitutes a team—how do you recognize and create one? Frequently, people misconstrue a group of people for a team. However, there is a distinction between the two

concepts. A group of people is simply that—a group of people. A team, on the other hand, is defined as *a group of individuals assembled and organized, formally or informally, to work together to achieve some shared objective.*

Whether the result of organic growth, mergers, acquisitions, or downsizing, many organizations have found that teams are critical. Teams fill gaps, respond to crises, plan for the future, and ensure the success of both short-term and long-term projects that touch multiple areas of the organization—internally and externally.

Plus, organizations are increasingly opening various activities of their value chain to vendors, suppliers, partners, and other third parties. As a result, individuals are finding themselves operating in team environments composed not only of co-workers, but also of those outside the organization. Teams meet face-to-face, via the telephone, and in cyberspace—either across cubicle walls, the street, or even the globe.

Teams can take a number of shapes. Some may be cross-functional, intra-departmental, or virtual. Others may be based in one location. Some are ongoing, while others are ad hoc in nature. Teams consistently involve some level of collaboration and may include as few as three individuals and as

many as 500 or more. In short, teams exist so that organizations may utilize their resources to their fullest for accomplishing tasks that require the skills and experiences of individuals from various places inside and outside the enterprise. And, **team leaders** are the critical element of the way teams function and accomplish goals. AchieveGlobal, through focus groups, examined the critical success factors and threats to team success and team leadership. From these focus groups has emerged a belief about what makes team productivity soar.

“Teams and collaborative work systems are here to stay. Now project teams outnumber production teams. Other forms of collaboration are emerging as new forms of teaming are invented and tested, such as virtual teams. Team-based organizing will be critical for world-class performance in all industries in the future.”

—Mike Beyerlein, Director, Center for Collaborative Organizations at the University of North Texas

SOURCE: trainingmag.com, “Working Teams: Capturing the People Side of Performance”

public sector and the very small to some of the world’s largest employers.

Most frequently, participants reported that a team means “people working together for a common cause,” “different strengths coming together and helping each other,” and a “cohesive unit with parts that work together and are interdependent.”

Throughout the exercise, the participants, each from workforce cultures with historical roots that embrace and reward individual achievements over group accomplishments, used **collaborative-oriented language** to define their understanding of teams. Common responses included such phrases as “getting along,” “working together,” “different backgrounds coming together,” “sharing a goal,” “support for each other and the leader,” along with a host of adjectives such as “professional,” “honest,” “fair,” “loyal,” and “respectful.”

The focus group participants also described some of the benefits productive teams could bring to an organization. Some of these descriptions included:

- Efficiencies
- Enhanced Global Reach/Faster Time to Market
- Work Fulfillment and Serving Company Business Outcomes

DEFINING “TEAM” IN TODAY’S WORKPLACE

How do employees who are actively engaged in today’s workplace define teams? Certainly their perceptions about teams come from their observations of workplace teams in action, participation in team efforts themselves, or from familiarity with their company’s guidelines that direct team operations (Figure 2). In some cases, they may have had roles as team leaders.

In a series of AchieveGlobal focus groups, we asked the question, “What does the term ‘team’ mean to you?” The focus group participants represented a wide range of types and sizes of industries, including the

FIGURE 2

Does your organization have formal guidelines or procedures for ...

	YES	NO
Evaluating a team’s performance?	77%	23%
Selecting a team leader?	74%	26%
Leading a team?	67%	33%
Compensating members of a team?	63%	37%
Developing a team?	55%	45%
Leading team meetings?	52%	48%

SOURCE: AchieveGlobal Research

Efficiencies

“... on our teams everyone serves as a representative for their areas of expertise because no one project leader could have all areas of expertise. Each person represents a certain area for the common goal.”

Enhanced Global Reach/Faster Time to Market

“... gaining a better understanding of those areas [Japan] ... [People there] are my local expert, they can help me bridge the understanding gap between what the market might want or need and what their local laws will allow. Having the resident expert that lives there who works with the people who I need to get the work done for me is the key. *If I was trying just to work with the Japanese government myself and not have a contact there that could physically make that connection, it would take a lot longer to get products approved in that market.*”

Work Fulfillment and Serving Company Business Outcomes

“There was a particular market we were not previously very active in and we decided at the last minute in December to become active in it, so we developed a team to take a product we got from another company. So we had people from another company helps us At first, it was very chaotic and I would attribute it to a lack of shared vision and goals. *When we made the agreements, we were finally serving the same business outcomes.* Before that we were a series of discrete departments that I wouldn't call a team. ... Then we got to the shared purpose; the group was able to perform very well.”

All told, the participants revealed that the general understanding of workplace teams in the early 21st century reflects that of earlier generations: A team is *a group of individuals brought together in some ordered manner to collaboratively accomplish the desired outcomes of their common goals.*

TEAMS IN TODAY'S HECTIC WORKPLACE: THE NEED FOR SPEED

Spurred by dramatic increases in global competition, technology, and customer expectations, speed has become a key requirement for both business and team success. The pressure to “be fast or be last” has become a primary concern for leaders as they struggle to accelerate team productivity.

Many focus group participants expressed concerns regarding time pressures for team planning. The old notion of carefully and deliberately “forming, storming, norming, and performing” may have undertaken new meaning in the early 21st century as organizations yield less tolerance for functions outside of “performing.” Today's business climate often dictates that we do everything faster, more cost effectively, and with higher quality—no simple task in an age composed of workplace stress and information overload.

One focus group participant reflected on the impact time pressures had on his team and said, “You need more time on planning, getting team member buy in, etc. I'm going through a healing process now as we needed to start over. This wouldn't have happened if we had more time to plan and get buy in and put other important things into place.” Another participant reported, “Our team finally came together after being allowed enough time to perform. Most of the teams in our organization are like you have to just jump in and do it. It works much better to spend the time setting up and putting everything we need into place.”

Expressing a stronger understanding of today's business realities, one focus group participant suggested, “We need to take time to get shared understanding, but can't spend too much time getting ready to do something.”

These comments express the need to increase team output and do it more quickly than ever before.

THREATS TO TEAM SUCCESS

In addition to severe time pressures, other threats to team success were revealed during focus group discussions.

In 1995, as the use of teams was growing in popularity within service-sector organizations, AchieveGlobal conducted a research survey of North American organizations to gain better insights about teams. The research project looked at a host of issues including those that hinder team success. The survey found the top threats to team success included inadequate resources (human and financial), inadequate time for meetings, lack of coordinated work schedules, no or low reward, and lack of decision-making authority.

Bearing in mind that teams were relatively established in manufacturing sectors by this time, from this research it is clear that as teams were forming in service sector organizations, overcoming a number of more logistical or operational hurdles such as inadequate time for meetings and lack of coordinated work schedules appeared to pose the greatest peril to team success.

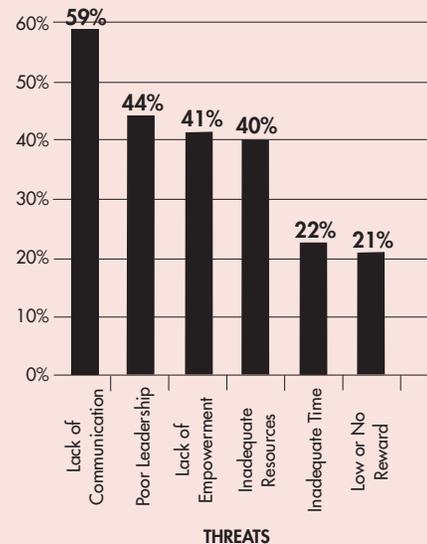
Based on our most recent focus groups, teams in all sectors—public, service, and manufacturing—have matured greatly. And, just as we sought to identify and better understand the critical factors for team success, we likewise attempted to identify and better understand the major threats to team success.

Universally, the focus group participants cited some form of **lack of communication** as the number one roadblock to team success today. The participants recalled countless situations that involved either “lack of communication among members of the team” or “lack of communication from the

team leader to members of the team and vice versa.” Lack of communication was also chosen as a threat in a recent poll conducted by AchieveGlobal (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

What are your biggest threats to team success in your organization?



SOURCE: Survey of LEADINGedge™ Subscribers (AchieveGlobal's Online Newsletter)

Ironically, despite most participants reporting that the majority of the team communications were delivered face-to-face—in a time where communication technologies have advanced to levels that permit continuous instantaneous communication, both verbally and in written form—we still confront workplace communication challenges. New technologies can be a double-edged sword if not used properly. One participant noted that e-mail communications, while a valuable tool overall, can serve as a detriment to even the most accomplished teams. She recalled a situation that involved e-mail and said, “It takes away seeing the reaction and developing the relationship, and that can be an obstacle for successful teams.”

Communication concerns aren't just internal. Independent research studies have suggested that teams may also fail when they are not able to communicate effectively with external stakeholders and, instead, become inward-focused and inflexible to external demands.¹

Following communication challenges, the focus group participants suggested that a **lack of vision or team direction** was a major threat to team success today. Tied into this theme, some participants recalled situations that involved “the team leader losing focus or interest.”

The third greatest challenge to team success revolved around **lack of enthusiasm** and **lack of motivation**. And that is not just among team members themselves. One focus group participant, a team leader, candidly shared her struggles with maintaining high levels of motivation for herself and her team in light of workplace developments, such as continuous downsizing and consolidation of functions that have increased her overall workload and daily responsibilities.

Others proposed that potential threats to team success could include: “dominance of one personality or team member over others,” “cliques and subgroups,” “hidden agendas,” and a “lack of respect among team members.”

Successfully Overcoming Threats to Team Success

After identifying the core obstacles to team achievement, the focus group participants were asked for some suggestions on how to overcome these threats. And to a great extent their ideas

were congruent with what the gurus of workplace teams have been preaching for years.

Several participants said that team members “need to face problems immediately”—no simple task. Think about what Frank LaFasto, senior vice president of organization effectiveness for Cardinal Health, Inc. and co-author of the book *When Teams Work Best: 6,000 Team Members and Leaders Tell What It Takes To Succeed*, said in an interview with hr.com: “In our research, 6,000 people told us that it is the ability of a team to identify, raise, and resolve issues that allow or prevent them from achieving the goal; the ability of the team to talk over the barriers and challenges is key. And, it is an open and safe environment that best encourages people to act in the best interest of the team.”

“Set clear expectations,” said many participants. So often organizations assume that teams will develop and mature on their own, hence the reason why teams don't always receive the support and nourishment they require to make them exceptional. High-performing work teams commonly have a clear and well-defined vision, as well as a solid understanding of what is expected in terms of both individual behavior and contribution as a team participant. One study has also shown that tying performance management systems with team participation may help crystallize goals, expectations, and responsibilities and accelerate overall performance.²

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL TEAMS

Past AchieveGlobal research has shown that the critical factors which contribute to team success include senior management support, training, and voluntary participation. To some degree those elements remain important to team achievement. Consider the fact that the Center for Collaborative Organizations at the University of North Texas cites a study which “found that

“Teamwork is the building of energy that usually comes from understanding the goal. That is why we talk about goals as being clear and elevating. Not only does everyone have to understand the goal, but there also has to be some worth to it, some meaning.”

—Frank LaFasto, co-author, When Teams Work Best: 6,000 Team Members and Leaders Tell What It Takes To Succeed

SOURCE: hr.com

77 percent of team failures were due to lack of management support.”

To better understand the factors (outside of materials, equipment, and tools) that are critical for team accomplishment in today’s workplace, the focus group participants were instructed to think of a successful work team and then to identify and describe the critical elements to its success. The results follow.

Communication

First and foremost, the focus group participants linked strong **communication skills and systems** to overall team achievement. “Communication is a critical goal. Everyone needs to understand the expectations, the goals, and what they bring to the table. Open and honest communication is what is important,” said one participant. Another participant added, “Team members need to share knowledge and information in order to increase effectiveness of the team.”

Interestingly, almost two-thirds of focus group participants indicated that the majority of their team communications were delivered in person (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4

What method of communication is used most often by the members of your team to communicate with one another?

59% in person **30%** e-mail/Web **11%** telephone

SOURCE: AchieveGlobal Focus Group Research

Internal team communication is but one piece of the puzzle. Several participants noted that a team cannot function or survive in isolation. They suggested that team members “need to be able to communicate with people that are not on the team” in order to develop and maintain productive non-team relationships, which in turn, may positively contribute to overall team success.

Whether with internal or external parties, contributing to effective communication is the ability to develop a common language with mutual understanding. Incidentally, some participants who had experience with international teams shared that when working globally there is an expectation that everyone speaks the same language. Said one participant, “This is a barrier because we speak different languages, have different customs, and different cultures. With that in mind, we need to ensure that there is a common understanding, even when using the same words.” And that shared language doesn’t just include international situations. Just look around your own workplace. If your organization is like most, you will notice lots of communication accented by the organization’s culture, which may include a shared and accepted vocabulary and language.

Commitment to Goals

Next to communication skills, the participants agreed that a winning team must be comprised of individuals **committed to the team’s objectives** and be willing to put the good of the team ahead of self. “You have to have common agreement and understanding of the goal and how to get there,” said one participant. Another participant added, “There needs to be mutual support among team members. ... At times that may mean having sympathy. At other times it may mean having empathy. ... We need mutual support and encouragement to be successful.”

Mutual Respect Among Team Members

Some participants further suggested that team “members have to have mutual respect for each other” and “be able to carry their own weight.”

SUCCESSFUL TEAM LEADERSHIP

The success of teams depends ultimately on solid and effective leadership. Good managers don’t necessarily make for good team leaders either. Take into consideration the comments of one

focus group participant who fully understood the distinction between the two when he said, “There is a difference between being a manager and being a leader. Motivating others, sticking one’s neck out for the benefit of the team, and moving the team towards the vision is leading. A manager, on the other hand, is just getting things done. It’s a lot easier to manage than it is to be a leader.”

To survive and thrive in today’s workplace, leaders need to be more than book smart and personable; they need to know how to bring out the best in others. Today’s team leaders must be equipped with the people skills that will bring optimal efficiency, productivity, and profitability to their organizations.

In a series of focus groups conducted by AchieveGlobal with senior and mid-level managers, one director succinctly described his view on the prevalent system that promotes managers as a “double whammy.” Citing the common occurrence of the “best salesperson being promoted to sales manager,” he stated, “First you lose your strongest producer on the delivery side and then realize conflicts and challenges on the management side.” He further explained that the new managers often lack the necessary human skills to manage conflicts with other managers and the skills to coach and mentor direct reports.

Likewise, one service line focus group participant described her current team leader who apparently hails from such a promotion system: “We

“A team leader needs to keep the team focused on the business objectives and needs to make a connection between the work at hand and the business objectives. The business objectives have to be the driving force.”

–Focus Group Participant

SOURCE: AchieveGlobal Research

“I have found that with successful teams, the leader is someone who is objective, doesn’t have an agenda, looks at things objectively, plays the devil’s advocate, brings out all sides of an issue, and takes a counterpoint.”

–Focus Group Participant

SOURCE: AchieveGlobal Research

just show up for the discussion. It is very dictatorial. He makes all the decisions. It’s just not effective.” And, unfortunately, there are infinite examples of these situations to share.

The focus group participants were instructed to think about successful team leadership and to develop a list of the skills they believed were necessary for a team leader to effectively and productively lead a team.

Consider some of the characteristics included in their list:

- “A team leader should lead by example.”
- “A team leader must know what the goal is and articulate the goal to the team.”
- “A team leader must have the abilities to move team members toward the vision.”
- “A team leader has to have the ability to negotiate for team resources.”
- “A team leader must be able to listen and communicate both ways.”
- “A team leader must empower team members to do their jobs and make decisions.”
- “A team leader has to take risks and support team members to accept risks.”
- “A team leader must get involved in the hands-on work to serve as a motivator to the rest of the team.”
- “A team leader needs to develop individuals by giving them responsibilities, providing them with coaching, and regularly working with them to gain the skills needed for the job.”
- “A team leader must ensure that members of the team receive credit and are rewarded or acknowledged for doing well or getting something done successfully.”

As reflected by this list, it seems obvious that the traditional competencies—sharing the vision, communicating, motivating, supporting, coaching, developing, and lobbying for resources—remain critical to providing successful and effective leadership for today’s teams.

It is the responsibility of the team leader to continuously support high levels of motivation, safety, collaboration, and instill the fact that teams are made up of equals—each with unique skills, talents, experiences, and contribution expectations.

WAYS TO ACCELERATE TEAM PRODUCTIVITY

Given these comments from our focus groups, together with knowledge gained from years of experience with customers and consulting with industry experts, AchieveGlobal believes that for a team to be successful, the team leader must:

- **Build Team Pride and Purpose** — Team leaders must exhibit the principles and skills that instill high degrees of pride and purpose in their teams. Team members who own a sense of pride in their project team, and are clear about the purpose of the team, are more likely to succeed. Building pride and purpose eliminates top threats to success, such as lack of motivation, vision, and commitment.
- **Develop Team Agility** — Team leaders must build high levels of team agility: quickness, flexibility, and adaptability. An effective team leader will develop agility in three key areas: focus, learning, and information. This allows for better communication practices, more empowerment, and faster exchange of information.
- **Resolve Conflicts Within the Team** — Disagreements and tension are bound to arise in most team settings. Team leaders must be equipped to handle tricky situations that often develop among and be-

tween team members. This creates mutual respect among members, resulting in higher productivity.

- **Negotiate Resources for the Team** — Negotiating resources continues to be a key team leadership skill. Without the needed funding, support, materials, time, and effort, teams lack the basics to achieve their end goal.

CONCLUSION

Without a doubt, teams will continue to play a vital role in the workplace for years to come. Typically a team will surpass any individual performance—especially when the work challenge requires assorted skills, talents, and experiences.

Benefits of effective teams include:

- Increased productivity and improved efficiency
- Greater involvement, commitment, and loyalty from associates involved in teams
- Better use of diverse talents, knowledge, and experience
- More equitable sharing of leadership and management responsibilities
- Improved quality of projects and programs because of enhanced focus of efforts and talents
- Increased flexibility and more rapid response times in rapidly changing environments

Organizations will continue to make considerable investments in training their employees with regards to team building and development. In a 2003 *Training* magazine special report dedicated to leadership training, 47 percent of the respondents reported “that their organizations focus on groups or teams to a great or very great extent.” The report continues, “Team building ability is

becoming a more valued skill and one that is being developed at various organizations; 59 percent of the respondents reported that developing team capabilities is among the established leadership training goals at their organizations.”

To that end, AchieveGlobal’s proposed formula for accelerating team productivity will be key to business growth in future years. Successful team leadership will continue to be vital to developing and maintaining high performing teams.

NOTES

¹ Ancona, D.G. and D.F. Caldwell, “Bridging the Boundary: External Activity and Performance in Organizational Teams,” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1992a, 37(4): 634-665.

² Scott, Susanne G. and Walter O. Einstein, “Strategic Performance Appraisal in Team-based Organizations: One Size Does Not Fit All,” *The Academy of Management Executive*, May 2001, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 107–116.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

In addition to an extensive secondary literature review which included publications such as *Harvard Business Review*, *MIT Sloan Management Review*, *Training*, among others, the AchieveGlobal research team conducted proprietary primary research projects to compliment its efforts which are detailed below.

Throughout October 2003 the AchieveGlobal research team conducted focus groups in Jacksonville, Florida; Chicago, Illinois; and London, England. The audience for each session was service line staff and service line supervisors and managers. In total, 59 individuals participated in the groups.

During December 2002 and January 2003, the AchieveGlobal research team conducted an on-line survey with a random sample of business

leaders in the United States. A total of 373 respondents completed the questionnaire, of which 125 were executive managers (e.g., vice president, C-level) while the balance represented other management ranks. The margin of error is ± 5 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

Throughout November and December 2002, the AchieveGlobal research team conducted focus groups in Omaha, Nebraska; Tampa, Florida; and London, England. The audience for each session was director-level and above. In total, 57 individuals participated in the groups.

In 1995, AchieveGlobal commissioned a survey of teams in conjunction with the Association for Quality and Participation (AQP). Altogether 480 questionnaire packets were mailed to AQP members (240 in the United States and 240 in Canada). Respondents were asked to complete one survey, and then distribute copies of the survey to two randomly selected team members in different departments or functions of the organization. Overall, the study garnered a 22 percent response rate.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Linda Moran, Ph.D., helps organizations with large-scale change, leadership development, executive coaching, training design and delivery, and high-performance teams.

Linda is the co-author of *Self-Directed Work Teams: The New American Challenge*; *Keeping Teams on Track: What to Do When the Going Gets Rough*; *Self-Directed Work Teams: Mastering the Challenge*, 2nd Edition; and *Beyond Teams: Building the Collaborative Organization*.

She is a nationally acclaimed speaker at such conferences as the International Work Team Conference, Linkage Team Conference, the American Society for Quality Control, the Association for Quality Performance, and the American Society for Training and Development.

Linda holds a doctorate degree in organizational leadership and adult education from Columbia University, a master's degree in organizational communication from the University of Maryland, and a bachelor's degree from Pennsylvania State University. She became certified in Advanced Organizational Development through Columbia University in 1996 and is listed in *The Guru's Guide* for thought leadership on team design.

Mark Marone, Ph.D., is AchieveGlobal's senior research manager. He has more than 13 years of academic and private sector experience in research and consulting on issues such as economic development, corporate strategy, and business policy. His career includes being a senior analyst with Nielsen Media Research, where he was responsible for analyzing market data for key national media accounts. He also served as director of research at the Global Business Information Network, a research firm that provides international consulting to businesses in the Midwest. In addition, he spent several years as a management consultant with KPMG, LLC, and as a client services manager with Sterling Research Group, Inc.

Mark has written extensively on topics such as high technology industries, economic development, and corporate strategy in the telecommunications industry. He has been a featured speaker and presented research findings at numerous international academic conferences.

He earned a Ph.D. from Indiana University, where he has held several academic posts. He is currently an adjunct professor of management at the University of South Florida.

In 2003 Mark co-authored a book on sales performance, *Secrets of Top-Performing Salespeople*.

He is also a member of the American Marketing Association and Marketing Research Association.

ABOUT ACHIEVEGLOBAL

AchieveGlobal is the world leader in helping organizations translate business strategies into business results by developing the skills and performance of their people. We are a single resource for aligning employee performance with organizational strategy through training and consulting solutions in customer service, leadership and teamwork, and sales performance.

With offices throughout North America and a presence on every continent, we serve more than 70 countries and offer programs and services in more than 40 languages and dialects. We continually adapt and translate our programs and services to meet the needs of global cultures.

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AchieveGlobal Source Material

Building a Collaborative Relationship with Your Peers

Building a Foundation of Trust

Clarifying Team Roles and Responsibilities

Gaining Commitment to Preset Goals

Giving and Receiving Constructive Feedback

Forward Thinking

Launching and Refueling Your Team

Lobbying

Making the Most of Team Differences

Moving from Conflict to Collaboration

Moving the Organization Forward

Professional Sales Negotiation

Providing Constructive Feedback

Resolving Team Conflicts

Raising Issues with Your Team

The Challenge of Team Leadership

The Principles and Qualities of Genuine Leadership™



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