



MANAGING THE TEMPORARY TEAM

The use of temporary teams, often called ad hoc committees, task forces, or project teams, is common in most organizations. This collection of people must come together and, in a relatively short time (usually from six weeks to a year), come up with a work plan, make decisions, develop recommendations, or take specific actions that are carefully thought through and useful. To accomplish these goals with people who already have full-time assignments elsewhere in the organization, the team must quickly coalesce and be productive almost immediately—which is not easy given that developing the appropriate team context, composition, and team competencies typically takes considerable time. How to start and manage these types of teams is the focus of this chapter.

Preliminary Conditions for Temporary Teams

Temporary teams are by definition together for a short duration, and consequently team members feel that there is little time or need for team development activities. Therefore, they often feel under pressure to dive immediately into the work at hand and are reluctant to spend the time needed to get acquainted, plan how the group will work together, develop measurable performance goals, and build some commitment to one another—in other words, become a real team.

A story of two groups, each appointed to function for about a year, highlights the importance of team formation to the group's

later functioning. One group was a high school science curriculum committee asked to coordinate a unified curriculum for all the science classes in the school. The other was the Atomic Energy Committee under the direction of David Lilienthal, which was given the charge to develop guidelines for the control and use of atomic energy in the United States following the blasts over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II. At the end of one year, the high school curriculum committee had nothing to show for its efforts and declared the problem too complex for a committee to solve. In contrast, the Atomic Energy Committee completed an extensive document that outlined the policies for the use of atomic energy for the nation, and this report became the basis of national policy in this area.

This example showed that the two teams differed in major ways in the attention they paid to building team competencies at the beginning of the project. The curriculum team plunged immediately into work and struggled for a year because it did not develop processes for dealing with different ideas, opinions, and recommendations and found itself riddled with conflict almost from the beginning. They had spent little time getting acquainted, discussing how to resolve disputes or disagreements, or developing a process for consensus or majority vote decision making.

The atomic energy team started differently. During the first several meetings, members spent time getting acquainted with one another and developing some guidelines for working together. This group adopted as one of its important operating principles the notion that all of its members were intelligent, committed, productive people. Therefore, if any group member said that he or she did not understand something, did not agree with something, or felt lost or confused, all members said, "We are therefore all confused or not in agreement or not fully understanding, and we must review everything again." The group did not want to have subgroups forming because of different ideas and especially

did not want members to belittle someone by saying, in essence, “Why are you so stupid you can’t understand? You are holding us up. Get on board and agree so we can move ahead.” In other words, to achieve the goal of becoming a productive temporary team, team members need to agree that they will spend enough time preparing to work before they start the work.

An important contextual condition is to give the temporary team adequate resources and authority to get the work done. A few years ago, a major U.S. automobile company found itself behind its competitors in important design features. An analysis showed that temporary design teams made up of people from several basic functional departments (engineering, R&D, production, and so on) took as much as a year longer than competitors to come up with new designs. Further analysis also disclosed that most team members were told by their superiors in their functional departments, “Don’t you make any final decisions until you come back and check with me.” This meant that decisions in the design team were continually being postponed while team members checked back with functional bosses. These delays continued until the design teams were given authority to make key decisions without checking back with departments.

While having the proper amount of authority to make decisions is important, temporary teams are typically acting at the request of senior managers in the organization, and it is senior management who often has the final word when it comes to the decisions or actions that the team takes. Hence, it is important for the team to keep senior managers or anyone else who is sponsoring the team activities aware of the progress the team is making and what decisions have been or will be made.

Unfortunately, many temporary teams have been derailed because after they complete their work, senior managers complain, “We didn’t know that’s what you were doing. Who authorized you do to that?” Moreover, if implementation of the

temporary team's decisions requires the support of other stakeholders—people, departments, or groups—outside the team, it is important to include people representing those stakeholders on the team or have a liaison to report team progress to those stakeholders so they will be supportive of the team's decisions when implementation of the team's decisions is needed. One solution to this problem is to identify what types of decisions will need to be made and then clearly specify who has the authority to sign off on those decisions (we describe in chapter 14 the strategic decision-making template process that Eli Lilly uses).

One temporary committee at a university was tasked with redesigning the college's curriculum and spent an entire semester meeting each week to come up with a new set of classes. However, the committee failed to keep the faculty (who would need to implement the changes) informed of the team's ideas and progress. When the committee presented its recommendations to the faculty for a vote, the faculty turned down the recommendations. Why? Because little had been done to make sure that the committee's actions had the support of key stakeholders, namely the faculty. After the vote, the curriculum committee was disbanded, leaving team members discouraged and feeling that the entire effort was a waste of their valuable time.

The major tasks facing the temporary team are basically the same as for more permanent teams. Team members must build relationships, establish a supportive emotional climate, and work out methods for (1) setting goals, (2) solving problems, (3) making decisions, (4) ensuring follow-through and completion of tasks, (5) establishing open lines of communication, and (6) ensuring an appropriate support system that will let people feel accepted and yet keep issues open for discussion and disagreement. One advantage the temporary team has over an established unit in a team-building situation is that it does not have to break down any barriers, bad habits, useless or harmful stereotypes or attitudes, inappropriate working relations, or procedures that have been formed and are sometimes set rigidly in

the concrete of human habit. Generally the new team can start its activities by asking, “How can we set in motion the kinds of actions that will allow us to work together and get our goals accomplished and leave us feeling good about ourselves and one another?”

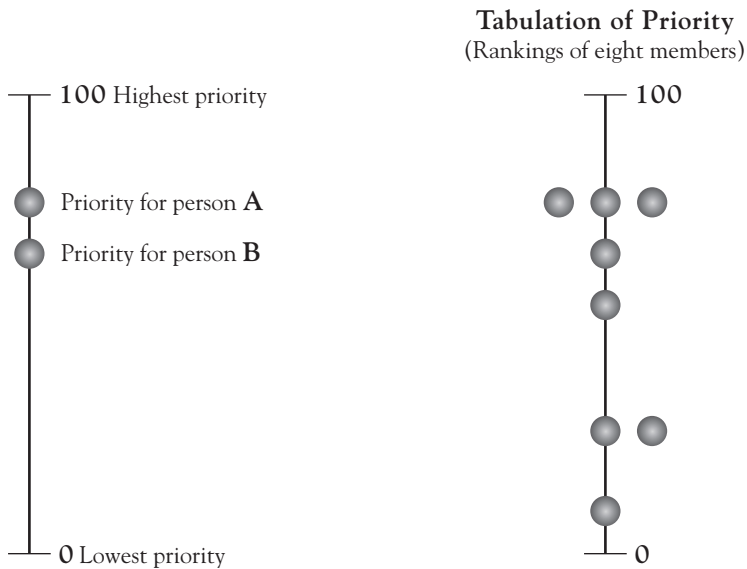
Design for a Temporary Team

When a temporary team is being formed, its members must first meet long enough to get acquainted and set guidelines and procedures for work. The design of a new temporary team consists of several distinct steps.

Step 1: Developing a Realistic Priority Level

Often people who are put together on a new team, frequently by assignment, have slightly different levels of priority or commitment to the work of the team. Some may see it as a highly significant assignment and worthy of a great deal of time and energy. Others may see it as important but lower on their personal priority list, and yet others may see it as low in both importance and priority. To come to grips with the priority issue, team members can do the following:

1. Using the scale shown in figure 11.1, have each person draw a vertical line that represents his or her total work requirements and priorities. Each person marks the point that represents where this team assignment ranks as a priority activity.
2. Have each person write down the amount of time he or she is willing to commit to the work of the team over a month.
3. Summarize the priority rankings (see figure 11.1) and the time commitments. Note the range of times and priorities and also the averages for the two dimensions.

Figure 11.1 Team Members' Priority Rankings

4. In the group, let each person who desires explain his or her priority and time rankings and then come to agreement as to a realistic amount of time and energy that can be expected of the team as a whole. Those with a higher priority and team commitments may be allowed to accept heavier assignments. Making this decision openly reduces the resentment some have for doing more work and the guilt of others for letting them.

Step 2: Sharing Expectations

Give the team five minutes for each person to think about and get ready to respond to the following questions:

- What worries you most or is your biggest concern about working on this team?

- How would this team function if everything went just as you hoped?
- What do you expect to be the barriers to effective team functioning? What will likely prevent the team from achieving its goals?
- What actions do you think must be taken to ensure the positive outcomes?

Each person should be given an opportunity to share reactions, and everyone should respond to each question in turn. Try to identify the major concerns people have, and list them on a whiteboard or flip chart. These concerns should become items on a planning agenda as conditions to take into consideration in order to ensure a positive outcome.

Step 3: Clarifying Goals

Having established priority and commitment levels and identified positive and negative expectations, the new team is ready to clarify its goals and objectives. The team should discuss and then write down what members agree is the team's core mission—a statement of the basic function or “reason for being” for that group, committee, or team. All plans and actions should be evaluated against the core mission. The question to ask continually is “If we continue the activities already outlined, will we accomplish our core mission?” Extending from the core mission are the subgoals and specific objectives for a given period of time.

For example, the Edgemont Company (we have disguised this case) formed a task force to review all training and development activities in the company and make recommendations for a coordinated training and development effort. The task force met and established its core mission: “The mission of this

task force is to ensure that the Edgemont Company has appropriate and effective programs in management and organization development.”

Subgoals were then identified. The team agreed to try to accomplish the core mission by (1) reviewing all ongoing training and development programs; (2) assessing the effectiveness of these programs; (3) determining if there were any overlaps or major gaps in training and development; (4) constructing a model of an effective program; (5) making recommendations to the executive committee as to the type of program needed; (6) assisting, if needed, in implementation of the recommendations; and (7) assisting in evaluating the consequences or results of the implemented recommendations.

Once the core mission and specified subgoals have been set, the task force can make specific assignments to its members.

Step 4: Formulating Operating Guidelines

The new team needs to establish guidelines for how it will work. Provisions also need to be formulated for changing the guidelines if they prove to be dysfunctional or inappropriate as conditions change. The guidelines should clarify actions and roles and reduce any ambiguity or mixed expectations of people as to how things ought to function, which is the basis of a great deal of conflict in a working group. The following questions indicate some of the areas for which guidelines may be useful.

How Will We Make Decisions? It is useful for the new team to talk about its decision-making procedures. Do members want to make all decisions by majority vote or team consensus, or do they want to leave some decisions to subgroups that are assigned to do the work?

If the group opts to make decisions by consensus, all should realize that this does not mean unanimity (everyone thinking alike). A consensus is a decision hammered out by permitting

everyone to participate. Consensus is reached after discussion, give-and-take, and compromise—when people can honestly say, “This is a sound decision—one that I am willing to support and implement. It is not exactly what I personally want, but given the range of opinions, the time factor, and the kinds of personalities involved, it is a good working decision.”

Unless everyone can take that position, a consensus has not been reached. Discussion would need to continue, and adjustments or compromises or new alternatives would have to be explored until a solution is found that results in team consensus.

What Will Be Our Basic Method for Work? The team should decide what it feels will be the most efficient way to get work done. Should the total group consider all items? Should people do individual work that is then submitted to the group? Or should subcommittees do the initial work? All of these methods may be used, depending on the nature of the work to be done. However, the method of work should be decided at the outset.

How Do We Make Sure That Everyone Gets a Chance to Discuss Issues or Raise Concerns? If a team is to be effective, members need to feel that they can discuss and have others consider the issues or concerns they deem important. How will the team ensure this condition? It may be agreed that any members can put any item of concern on the agenda for the next meeting. An open meeting might be scheduled periodically to allow discussion of any topic or issue. Time could be reserved at the end of certain meetings for an open discussion. Members could be asked to distribute a memo or e-mail identifying the issue they want discussed.

How Will We Resolve Differences? Any working group will have times when individuals or subgroups disagree. If not handled

or managed, disagreements can, at the least, waste time and may even split the group into warring factions.

A guideline for dealing with differences can be useful. If two people or subgroups disagree, it may be more useful to have a guideline stating that they get together (sometimes with a mediator) outside the meeting of the whole group to work out their differences rather than holding up the work of the entire team. A third person or subunit could be appointed to listen to both sides of the issues and recommend possible compromises or new alternatives. Time limits for the open discussion of differences might expedite reaching a conclusion (or might be a frustrating hindrance). A majority voting procedure might be appropriate if the group can honestly adopt a “loyal opposition” position that allows the people the right to disagree or vote differently but still support and implement actions. Whatever the method for discussing, understanding, and resolving issues, a guideline will provide a beginning for coping with the sensitive problem of differences that may occur.

How Will We Ensure Completion of Work? One of the major problems in working in groups (particularly of a committee or a task force) is the frustrating experience of some people coming unprepared or failing to complete assignments. How can the team face that issue constructively?

The guidelines may state that no one will be given or will accept an assignment if the person honestly knows that he or she will not invest an appropriate amount of energy in its preparation. This means that there must be a realistic level of priority building and a climate of trust so that people will feel free to state their honest preferences and reactions to assignments. This guideline may outline a procedure for having the chairperson or other designated leader remind everyone with an assignment (typically by e-mail) at a suitable time prior to the next meeting. An action summary of every meeting will clearly identify all

Table 11.1 Action Summary for Tracking Assignments

| <i>Decision</i> | <i>Who Is to Do What</i> | <i>Date for Completion</i> | <i>Date to Report Progress</i> |
|--|---|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. A training seminar for all supervisors will be held on June 15. | 1. John Hicks will make all physical arrangements. | June 10 | Next meeting— May 20 |
| | 2. Ann Stewart will contact the three possible resource people. | May 24 | Next meeting— May 20 |

assignments and dates for report and completion, as illustrated in table 11.1.

The action summary can be used in place of or in addition to regular narrative minutes, but it should clearly pinpoint assignments and times for completion. The guideline may suggest an appropriate action, such as a personal visit by the chairperson, a report and explanation to the committee, or some other review mechanism, if a person fails to complete an assignment.

How Will We Change Things That Are Not Producing Results? There should be some guidelines for reviewing the way the committee or team has been working and a method for making changes when guidelines or procedures or even people in certain positions are no longer achieving results. This guideline may suggest a periodic evaluation session at which the team honestly looks at its own work, reviews its successes and failures, and asks, “What changes would make the team more effective?” If team guidelines have been operating effectively, many issues will have been covered, but the team may need to agree on a periodic review and evaluation meeting or may decide that any person may call for such a meeting when he or she feels that conditions warrant it.

Again, the success of such a meeting depends on members' feeling free to express their honest views about the team's effectiveness and to make recommendations for improvement. A fearful, defensive group will find it difficult to plan useful changes. Temporary teams that are functioning poorly may also decide to engage in more extensive team-building activities by using one of the designs outlined in chapter 6.

How Can We Keep Key Stakeholders Informed? The temporary team should generate a list of key stakeholders—senior managers, department heads, clients, and so on—who will pass judgment on the team's final product. Next to each name on the list, the team should note when the stakeholder needs to be informed of a team decision or activity or whether the stakeholder must approve the decision or activity. In this way, as the team sets out a timetable for its work, it can identify when to get stakeholders involved at appropriate milestones to ensure their support and avoid an unpleasant surprise like the one experienced by the college curriculum committee described earlier.

In Summary

Managing a temporary team creates certain challenges for such a team given the short time frame in which it has to do its work. Upfront planning and sharing of expectations are often the keys to successful temporary teams. The team also needs to set clear priorities and goals, establish operating guidelines for how to make decisions, keep the work on schedule, solve problems, and keep key stakeholders informed.