

TEAMWORK AND EMPOWERMENT

Top executive teams, project teams, cross-functional teams, product-market teams. They come in several varieties, but they all have one thing in common: Teams are constructed entities designed to get a job done.

Empowerment is key. A team that is empowered has the authority, information and skills to make decisions that ratchet up performance and drive results. Also, how well a team functions depends largely on how well it is structured (its architecture), how well team members behave toward one another (their interpersonal relationships) and the quality of team leadership.

Think of a team leader as an architect. If the architect's blueprint, or construction plan, for the team includes five key elements, then the team is poised for high performance.

First, the team must be guided by a clear strategy. Strategy directs decision making and gives team members a sense of purpose. Otherwise, what's the advantage

of being empowered?

Second, operational goals that flow from the strategy must be clear. At the day-to-day tactical level, a team without clear, specific operational goals can easily become a house divided, with each member empowered to follow only his or her own pet initiatives.

Third, roles and responsibilities must be clear and agreed upon. Otherwise, empowerment is apt to devolve into passing the buck, blame fixing and silo behavior.

Fourth, business relationships must be transparent and honest. Effective empowerment assumes team members can confront issues—and one another—openly. No amount of empowerment will cure a culture that avoids conflict and buries disagreements.

Fifth, protocols for decision making must be put in place. Empowerment often gets derailed because there



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is no upfront agreement on whether decisions will be made:

- **Unilaterally:** by one person with no input from others.
- **Consultatively:** by one person after soliciting input from the fewest number who will add value.
- **By consensus:** everyone has input and must agree to live with the outcome of majority rule.

In addition to getting the team to agree on how decisions will be made, team leaders must establish a decision making process that includes:

- Identifying the decisions the team must make. The old laundry list on a flip chart works well.
- Identifying decision subteams. For each decision identified, assemble a subteam that becomes a steering committee responsible for making the decision.

- Assigning accountability. Each decision requires a point person—someone responsible for achieving closure within the subteam.
- Selecting a decision making mode for each decision. Then, setting a deadline for the subteam to keep it on track and ensure that members of the larger team know their deadline for giving input.

Once the decision is made and announced to the full team, it's on to implementation.

While the leader might be the architect of the high-performing, empowered team, success depends equally on the team members' willingness and ability to step up and perform at a new level for greater results.

—Howard M. Guttman