

## 5 Mistakes of Cross-Functional Teams

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Most people if asked, would like to do away with the idea of cross-functional teams. Just let my department handle it one might say. It would be easier than having to worry about conflict and drama, that is only created because we have teams. Well, as much as we'd like to do without them, they aren't going away because they are strange and uncomfortable. They exist because we need cross-functional teams to achieve tasks like creating systems that cross boundaries, to produce complex products like cars (well maybe not so many cars these days), or for sustained coordinated efforts.

In addition, in a world where the only constant is change, the ability to manage change is a very desirable skill or ability for anyone on a team. Research was done in schools North West of England using the results of extensive interviews conducted with teachers at levels from Heads of Departments to trainee teachers. The researchers were able to conclude that team building is an effective methodology for managing change. Furthermore, the top five organizational barriers to facilitating change voiced by those in the study include: (1) Poor working relationships (91%), (2) Insufficient authority to get my job done effectively (87%), (3) Unclear understanding of my roles (75%), (4) Insufficient resources to get my work done effectively (64%), (5) No support for updating my skills (42%)<sup>1</sup>

I've managed a few high performing teams and it is extremely rewarding to work with such a group. A team can produce much more than an individual on that team could produce on their own, unless a person was doing something routine like getting dressed in the morning for work. But if that same individual was dressing for an evening event and was female trying to get into a long, tight gown, they might just need a team. Synergy or the ability to accomplish more together than you can as individuals is often at work in a high performing team environment. When teams are not in sync or not playing nice together, they often make five mistakes. Working on these mistakes can turn a situation around, if focused attention is given to these key areas.

(1) Allowing Attitudes to Run Wild – When you see posters about attitude they say it is the little things that make a big difference. However, most of us don't even know whether they have a good attitude or not. That is why measurement is key in this area. Having members of the team measure attitude of the other group members periodically and report back on the results, then develop action plans to address any deficiencies is a healthy exercise for any team, but especially for cross-functional teams. Learning how to focus on the positive aspects of issues, change negative energy into positive during meetings, finding humor in the situation and learning to tolerate people you don't like are all valuable skills for people who perform well on cross functional teams. You may not want to poll team members

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as often as the American people are polled during elections, however, providing feedback on a key metric like attitude can prevent potential conflict issues and unnecessary drama in teams.

(2) Misguided Power Moves - There are all types of power beyond the traditional garden variety position power we all know and love so well. There is interpersonal power, influence power, leadership power, and social power. Each of these can have an impact on the team dynamics of a cross functional team, due to the variety of departments and personalities involved. Understanding how to maximize the positive uses of power and minimize the negative uses of power in cross-functional teams creates better team dynamics for all involved. If you think of a Chess set where each piece has different values or a role to play in the game, understanding each one's power, moving the pieces to use that power and playing them at the right time allows the chess player to win the game. Similarly when in a team, appropriate use of and respect for power makes team experiences much more productive.

(3) Lack of Expectations or ground rules for working together - When different areas of an organization work together, ideally, high level people in the organization should develop a set of ground rules of how the groups will work together. These ground rules set the tone for how the groups will accomplish the tasks outlined for the group. When the group veers off-task, these expectations or ground rules make it easier to provide authoritative reasoning for that group to get back on track and stay focused on achieving the end result of the group. Similar to a compass used when orienteering, if ground rules are set, revisited and honored, they help the team, stay on track and on point in reaching their desired destination.

(4) Tunnel Vision - Being able to solve a problem while considering the agendas and resources of all departments in a cross functional team is a critical skill in making the concept work for an organization. Just as a scientist looks at a specimen under a microscope from a lot of different angles to determine if the hypothesis is correct, considering different points of view on cross functional teams, assures a richer solution in the end, making sure the organization has made a thorough decision. A scientist could not come to a conclusion looking at one angle, nor would an organization want to look at one department's view of the situation to make a decision. Looking at all the perspectives, using the resources of all departments, considering the impact of decisions on all involved, assures buy-in from the other departments and improves the quality of the decisions made.

(5) Playing Without the Full Team - If you played volleyball in school you may recall the tense dynamics that centered around picking a team. Especially if you had no skills and your friend was a team captain. If your friend was playing to win, they picked the people most likely, that had the best skills. For example, they wanted someone who could spike the ball, play the net and someone good at

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serving. They probably wanted to pick you to avoid hurting your feelings, but wanted to win more. In the end, the kids with the best skills who already knew how to play well often got picked and that team won.

Playing favorites or only working with people you like is another bad habit some members of cross-functional teams fall into. They erroneously believe they are making their job easier by working with people they like. Studies show however that teams that have competent members perform much better and proper use of the skills of the members play a key role in how productive the team is in achieving results. In some cases it may take longer for the team to gain momentum. However, in the long run, it is advantageous for team leaders of cross-functional teams to do a skill inventory early in the project and assign tasks to the members according to skill levels. It is win/win—individual team members will be able to improve their skill levels and a skilled team will accomplish much more than one that only has good camaraderie.

Organizations are made up of small groups of teams that form one big team. As people learn better teaming skills, the true value of cross-functional teams can be maximized to make organizations better as a whole. Two heads are better than one, three heads are better than two and if those three heads are from different departments, and they set good expectations, respect power, measure attitude, value skills over personality, and listen to each other, perhaps real productivity can be improved in organizations.

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<sup>1</sup>Hughes, C., " [Managing Change in Design and Technology](http://hdl.handle.net/2134/2834). This is a conference paper that considers some of the issues that effect the management of design and technology in an ever demanding change environment. A number of models are examined which relate design and technology to the external and internal pressures. The work then goes on to propose a change model for design and technology. This emphasizes the need to focus on team building as a methodology to manage change.(MANAGEMENT, CHANGE, MODELS, TEAM BUILDING, DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY) © DATA. 2007. OAIster Search. 10 Feb. 2009 <http://hdl.handle.net/2134/2834>