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## Five Components Needed for High-Performing Teams

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### Abstract (Summary)

[Jean M.

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### [Headnote]

FIRM MANAGEMENT

"Communication is the core of building effective teams," Jean M. DiGiovanna told DFMAR. "Without it people can't set expectations or work efficiently together. With so many players involved in A/E projects and so much room for misinterpretation, communication becomes even more important."

DiGiovanna, a certified professional coach who founded ThinkPeople in 1998, defined a team as "a group of individuals who share a common goal and the responsibilities for achieving it." The challenge for A/E teams, she noted, is "how to partner with teams of all the groups involved-with teams of teams." DiGiovanna discussed the topic during a workshop titled "Building Effective Teams (Even When You're Not Always in Charge)" at the 2006 BuildBoston convention sponsored by the Boston Society of Architects.

"What percentage of your projects succeed as planned?" she asked. "Zero, I bet." Though changes are inevitable, DiGiovanna noted that when a project goes off track, the major culprit can often be traced to a lack of communication among team members. DiGiovanna discussed five components-expectations, commitment to team, accountability, open and healthy communication, and trust-as necessary ingredients for high-performance teams.

Set expectations at a kickoff meeting. DiGiovanna stressed the importance of "identifying and communicating what is expected of the project and the team at the start and throughout the project." She recommended calling a kickoff meeting to set expectations. There all team members can discuss and agree upon a process for working together, including such topics as:

- \* Overall project: purposes, goals, and measures of success.
- \* Team functions.
  - roles, responsibilities, accountability;
  - preferred communication mode, frequency, and timeliness; and
  - ways to give and receive feedback.
- \* Project processes and potential scenarios.
  - issue resolution;
  - decision making;
  - FRI and submittal;
  - construction administration; and
  - job-meeting frequency, structure, acceptable behavior.

- \* Document and make public.

"Discussing how to do the various project processes gives you what I call the 'rules of engagement,'" said DiGiovanna. "That way all aspects of the decision-making process are clearly established and agreed upon ahead of time."

Noting that A/E firms don't often hold kickoff meetings at which expectations are set up and processes established, DiGiovanna told DFMR, "If they did, I estimate they'd cut down on frustrations team members feel by 30%."

Aware that most A/E teams do not remain the same throughout the course of long projects, she added : "When new team members come on board, you need to introduce them into the team in a formal way to make sure they're brought into the norm. Teams go through four stages: forming; storming, where conflict may happen; norming, where teams start to gel; and performing, where they produce results. Teams go back to the first stage when a new member is brought on, so that person has to be introduced to the established norms. That way everyone is clear on what their roles and responsibilities are; everyone knows what everyone else is doing; and everyone knows who to go to for what."

Make commitment to team. One of the purposes of the kickoff meeting is to build team spirit and promote cooperation. Thinking of the team as a separate entity may help encourage that cohesiveness, noted DiGiovanna. She suggested having team members answer these questions:

- \* "What is our shared goal?"

- \* "Is what I'm doing best for the team?"

- \* "What is the single most important goal we must achieve for this project if we are to consider ourselves successful?"

Answering those questions, she noted, will further clarify the project and enable team members to track their progress against the shared goal.

"What is the biggest barrier that gets in the way of teamwork?" DiGiovanna asked. "Ego." She suggested that "letting go of ego" is needed to deepen team commitment. Asking the following questions may help promote a collaborative spirit:

- \* Am I doing this to look good?

- \* Is it important for me to be right?

- \* How can I best serve the team?

Establish accountability. Accountability for agreed-upon roles and responsibilities is essential for team success, stressed DiGiovanna. Team members need to be able to hold each other accountable to fulfill their part of the project's goals and ensure its overall success. Team members need to be willing to remind one another when they are not living up to their expectations and their performance or behavior might negatively impact the team.

DiGiovanna spelled out warning signs:

- \* Missed deadlines and deliverables.

- \* Lack of team focus, responsiveness, and quality.

- \* Members do things to look good in the leader's eyes.

- \* Members jump to conclusions about others' intentions.

- \* Resentment develops toward team members who aren't pulling their weight.

- \* Members go behind the leader's back and point fingers.

- \* Leader feels undue burden as the sole source of team discipline.

DiGiovanna suggested clearly reviewing expectations when problems arise. "Be assertive," she said. "Identify issues

quickly and address them to the person who can make a difference. Holding team members accountable requires open and healthy communication."

Promote open and healthy communication. Unless expectations are established upfront at a kickoff meeting and reinforced through accountability, such issues as handling change requests and resolving project or team problems will come to a boil under the surface and interfere with team performance, predicted DiGiovanna. Possible warning signs of poor communication include team members being afraid to speak up or show vulnerability; ignoring controversial topics or avoiding confrontation; making personal attacks on other members; or asserting "it's my way or the highway." To diffuse such problems, DiGiovanna provided a seven-step model for conflict resolution (see the sidebar).

"It only takes one person to disrupt a team," DiGiovanna told DFMAR. "Then everyone focuses on that person and not on the project. What you really need to do is to take a step back and have a private conversation with the person to discuss the issues using conflict resolution."

To set up good lines of communications, DiGiovanna suggested team members need to:

- \* Be assertive: Identify issues quickly and address them to the appropriate person or one who can make a difference.
- \* Overcommunicate: Inform those affected as changes occur.
- \* Ask instead of assume.
- \* Stay curious and show empathy: Try to understand what drives another team member.
- \* Be direct, honest, and respectful.
- \* Practice the seven steps of conflict resolution.
- \* Listen, listen, listen.

Build trust. "When expectations are set, there's commitment to the team, accountability is practiced, and there's open and healthy communication-when all those pieces are in place-that's what establishes trust, and high-performance teams need to be based on trust," said DiGiovanna. She noted that holding grudges, jumping to conclusions about other team members' intentions, refusing to ask for or offer help, dreading meetings, and finding reasons to avoid team members are all signs that trust is lacking.

"If you want to create more trust," she emphasized, "you have to be willing to admit your weaknesses, ask for help, be open and honest in your communication, and genuinely value and respect other team members' skills and opinions." When teams work well, she noted, they generate a sense of accomplishment, shared commitment, and respect, profitability, emotional and intellectual rewards-and members can even have fun.

For more information:

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BuildBoston is sponsored by Boston Society of Architects, 617-951-1433; [www.architects.org](http://www.architects.org).

#### **[Sidebar]**

##### 7-Step Model for Conflict Resolution

To avoid embarrassing finger pointing when conflicts interfere with effective teamwork, Jean M. DiGiovanna, president of ThinkPeople, recommends this seven-step process:

1. Determine the best place to deliver feedback.
  - \* Deliver individual feedback in private.
  - \* Discuss project-specific issues in team meetings or in private.
2. Set the context, disclose your humanity, and/or address what the other is thinking.
  - \* "This is not easy for me to say."
  - \* "I've been avoiding telling you...."
  - \* "I know this may sound like I don't appreciate the work you do, but that is not the case."
  - \* "I'd like to talk with you about...."
3. Stick to the facts and state the impact.
  - \* "I noticed you were 10 minutes late to the last two meetings. When you are late, we cannot fully address the issues, and that

impacts everyone's productivity."

\* "When I reviewed the change order and double-checked the original plans, I noticed that we did include your request. I'd like to show you...."

\* "In our rules of engagement, we agreed that issues be brought up with me first. I noticed the last two you brought up were not addressed to me first."

4. seek understanding. Ask a question (play dumb),

\* "Is there anything going on with you that is impacting your ability to be on time?"

\* "Is this your understanding?"

\* "Is there something that stops you from sharing issues with me as soon as they occur?"

5. Identify an action plan.

\* "What can we do to resolve this?"

\* "What suggestions do you have?"

6. Summarize decisions, next steps, and accountability.

7. Thank the person.

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