

The Illusion of Teams



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Teams are often viewed as a possible panacea for complex organizational challenges. However, forming and deploying teams to address perennial problems sometimes creates a mirage; leaders believe they see something that isn't really there. Effective teams are more often an illusion than a reality and many nonprofit leaders are content to believe in the illusion.

Simply putting together a team to address an initiative or project does not guarantee success. Agendas are created, meetings are convened, discussions are had and minutes are distributed. However, there is little or no progress toward the goal of the team and resources such as time and staff morale may be wasted.

Elements that Create the illusion

Just as heat and light work together to create a mirage, there are several elements that can work in concert to create the illusion of a successful and effective team.

- The team that plays together, stays together - Common wisdom about teams suggests that they perform better when they are in sync. However, spirited dialogue about issues facing the team is one of the ways to include the different, and often clashing, perspectives of team members. Including different opinions strengthens decisions made by the team and encourages support from the team as well. An absence of conflict doesn't necessarily suggest harmony; going along with the group may be a sign that members are frustrated, don't care enough to express contrary views, fear repercussions of dissent, or simply disagree with the team's purpose or process.
- All for one and one for all - Teams are not automatically focused on a collective goal. In fact, there is often confusion in teams as to what their specific purpose may be. In addition, individuals have their own interests to represent from their functional area (or even personal agendas). Individuals who feel that participating in the team is detracting from their individual responsibilities will eventually come to resent the team and thus decrease their engagement. Cognitive dissonance is created when team and individual performance collide in this manner.
- The more, the merrier - When assembling the team, it is tempting to include anyone and everyone that might have something to contribute. However, larger teams are harder to coordinate and often include more people than necessary. This can lead to social loafing or free riding where an individual contributes less to the overall team effort because the work is perceived as uninteresting or because they believe it makes sense to focus their time and effort somewhere other than where the team is focused.

Dispelling the illusion

A few simple changes can reduce the risk that your next team will be a mirage.

- Be nice, even when you disagree: Encourage respectful, candid dialogue between team members. The sharing of different perspectives enriches the process as well as the decisions made by the team. Avoid using the term “debate” to describe team discussions. Debate is adversarial, with each side trying to convince the other of the correctness of an opinion held prior to hearing others’ points of view. Dialogue suggests collaboration and the desire to learn from one another, understand different perspectives, and reach the best possible decision. In some cases it may be helpful to have a devil’s advocate in the mix (as described in [this NRMCM article](#)).
- Hold the individuals and the team accountable – Progress should be defined by something other than how many times a team meets! Leaders should give their teams a clear mandate when the team comes together, and also welcome refinement of that mandate as additional information and challenges come to light. The team should be given the responsibility to determine their performance indicators that address both individual contributions as well as team success. Early in the process the team should discuss and agree on the accountability process and measures.
- Be creative when forming a team: Strive to populate your teams with members who are likely to offer diverse perspectives. Consider inviting anyone with a special interest in the topic to serve, rather than making assignments to serve. This promotes buy-in and motivation rather than the weary resignation of those who have had another task added to their workload. Provide the opportunity for team members to learn from one another and cross-train in the roles necessary for team success.

Engaging a team to address a challenge facing your nonprofit can be an effective way to begin the process of developing and implementing a suitable strategy. Manage the risks of terrible teamwork by acknowledging the illusions and dangerous assumptions about teams in the workplace.

Resources:

- [Teamwork is Job One](#) – a recorded webinar for Affiliate Members of NRMCM. Not a Member? Contact Whitney Thomey at whitney@nonprofitrisk.org to learn more.
- [Conflict: The Secret of Successful Teams](#)
- [Collaborative Overload](#), by Rob Cross, Reb Rebele and Adam Grant, Harvard Business Review
- [Why Smaller Teams Are Better Than Larger Ones](#), by Jacob Morgan

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