Clarifying Roles and Responsibilities

Designing the roles and assigning the responsibilities for team members in a way that aligns their individual skills, knowledge and abilities with the work is one of the key steps of building an effective team. Having clear roles and responsibilities and communicating these with one another will help alleviate conflict and improve teamwork and decision-making.

What does this look like?

• The team has the right number of people with the right mix of skills and abilities as well as diverse perspectives to get the work done, based on the purpose of the team.
• Team roles are assigned based on expertise.
• Everyone knows what is expected from each team member.
• Individual roles and responsibilities are clear.
• Team members know how to prioritize issues as they arise and understand and agree on the plan for reaching key goals and objectives.
• Team members are able to succeed at each component of their job simultaneously and do not feel pulled in different directions.

Signs you may have a problem

• Inability to do certain aspects of the work due to the skill gaps on the team.
• Slow progress and inefficient work.
• Team members struggle to understand how to prioritize issues as they arise.
• Team members struggle to succeed at each component of their job simultaneously and are being pulled in two opposite directions at the same time.
• Confusion about who is responsible for what, resulting in conflict.
• If you have the Employee Engagement survey results*, a low score on the item of “There is an equitable distribution of workload within my department.”

*For more information on Employee Engagement survey and survey results see: ee.ltd.umn.edu.
A Quick Guide to
Clarifying Roles and Responsibilities (Cont.)

How to improve

Consider the purpose of the team, then determine who is on the team, who's not, and why:

- What skills, knowledge, and abilities are needed for success?
- Do you have the right people on the team?
- Are there skill gaps? Redundancies?

Consider the team size:

- Generally, the most effective teams are the smallest teams that have the skills, knowledge, and abilities required to get the work done.
- The size of teams can vary widely and for many important reasons, but five members often results in the greatest productivity, and benefits of a team: increased motivation, shared learning, and a larger pool of expertise - without too many of the downsides, such as: process conflict, inefficient coordination, and slower execution.
- When teams have more than nine members, it becomes difficult to get work done efficiently and the effort required from the leader to coordinate the work increases dramatically.

Consider role clarity and expectations:

- Are individual expectations clear?
  Be sure everyone on the team knows what is expected of them in terms of what they are expected to do (results) and how they are expected to work (behaviors).
- It is also important that the entire team is clear about every team member’s role, not just their own. Failure to do so will likely result in a conflict over how the work gets done or the work may not get done because everyone assumes someone else is responsible for it.

Watch Out for Social Loafing

Under certain circumstances, people will put forth less effort when working with others than when working alone.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What can cause this?</th>
<th>Belief that others are not carrying their fair share of the work, so effort is scaled back. Or, if individual performance is not evaluated or known, people may be tempted to become “free riders.”</th>
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<td>How to address?</td>
<td>Be sure that each person’s individual contributions are assessed in addition to the team’s collective performance.</td>
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- Do people perceive that they have more work to do than others on the team? Lack of clarity about team members’ roles and responsibilities is heightened when team members have different busy seasons or work off-site frequently. Clarity helps build appreciation and respect within teams and it also helps teams become more interdependent. As a result, they’ll know who to turn to for assistance and how to help in case of a bottleneck. The Roles and Responsibilities Exercise on the next page can help improve role clarity within teams.
Try it! Roles and Responsibilities Exercise

This exercise works best shortly after a major change has taken place in your unit or department as it helps to resettle into a new normal. Misunderstandings about the work that people do can cause some hurt feelings; however, when colleagues already have good rapport, this doesn’t tend to be an issue.

Want to go paperless? See z.umn.edu/RRExercise for a digital facilitation template

• Each team member receives a piece of flip chart paper posted on a wall with their name on it.
• With black markers – every team member is to spend 2-3 minutes at each flip chart (excluding their own) and write down the primary job responsibilities for each of their peers.
• Team members then return to their own flip charts with a red marker to edit the chart so that it accurately represents their role.
• Each team member then reports out what their primary responsibilities are, what flip chart edits they needed to make, and highlight the piece of their role that is currently the most challenging. If time allows – add an opportunity for discussion and feedback for each individual.
• Debrief – what did you learn about yourself and others through this exercise?
  • What about your role did team members accurately depict?
  • What did they get wrong?
  • Why do you think these discrepancies exist?
  • What is the thing you are struggling with the most right now?
  • Does anyone on the team have ideas for how to help or streamline?
• Have a note taker capture the key takeaways and email to the team post-exercise.

Coach your team:

• Are the team members getting too caught up in details or going off track?
• Are the team members becoming complacent?
• Is there a lack of fresh ideas?

The answers to these questions might not be known until the team is already formed and had a chance to work together. When building a team, appointing a “devil’s advocate,” or a person whose role is to challenge the status quo and ask tough questions can help the team avoid complacency, stay focused on a larger goal, and come up with more innovative solutions. A person playing this role might ask:

• Why are we doing this again?
• What problem are we trying to solve?
• What other options do we have?
• What happens if we don’t do this?