

How to Increase Team Participation

You can create meaning for your team members by encouraging their participation as active partners in the team. On a team, participation means taking part, joining in, and sharing responsibility with others. Participation by all team members is critical for the success of a high-performance team.

As team leader, you need to ensure full participation by your team members.

This means every member of the team will need to contribute, communicate, share information, and make decisions. Your goal is to ensure 100% of team members are contributing 100% to the team's success.

Gaining full team participation involves many challenges:

- **Geographic Isolation** – Remote teams are a part of modern business. When team members are located at different sites, or even in different parts of the world, it inhibits the bonding and intimacy brought by face-to-face communication. This increases the chances that team members don't fully participate in the team's activities.
- **Diversity** – Diverse teams have a wealth of knowledge and experience. But that diversity can also affect participation. Members of diverse teams differ from each other in many ways – culture, language, age, gender, business style – resulting in inherent barriers to interaction and understanding.
- **Personality Differences** – Including different personality types on a team can enhance creativity and innovation. But teams are rarely in perfect balance. Personality differences among team members may create a situation where the extroverts dominate and the introverts withdraw and don't participate fully.
- **Socializing** – Socializing is important to help team members bond and build a sense of trust. However, team members are sometimes more interested in enjoying the fun aspects of being on a team than in getting the actual work done. There's also the danger of some team members creating a social clique and isolating other colleagues.
- **Self-Interest** – Good team members understand compromise – giving up something to better the team as a whole. But some team members are only self-interested. They understand how to calculate gains and losses, but they make decisions that serve themselves as individuals.

The two main strategies you can use to encourage participation are providing opportunities for input and creating shared roles.

Providing opportunities for input

Communicating the value you place on each team member's participation is important. When you provide opportunities for input, you show team members you value their opinions, ideas, and perspectives. A participative team culture overcomes problems with poor communication and lack of trust.

Three guidelines can help you provide opportunities for input:

- Two-way communication enhances efficiency and creativity. You should make sure to encourage an open exchange with team members. This means being open to communication with team members and encouraging full participation in team discussions and brainstorming. It also means providing team members with feedback and giving them the opportunity to respond. Consider both the diversity and the mix of personality types on your team when you're encouraging open communication. You can use different techniques to bring out the best in both reserved and outgoing personalities on your team.
- Don't rush. You need to give team members enough time to formulate their input. It takes time for people to absorb, understand, and contextualize information. If you rush team members, the quality of their input will suffer. They may offer suggestions that haven't been thought through, or they may hold back from offering any input at all. To bring team members along, you can use techniques that involve creativity, idea generation, and critical thinking.
- Team members feel valued when you show them you intend to use their input. You're empowering them by letting them know that their input has value. But make sure you don't make false promises. If you ask for input and then ignore it, you risk demoralizing your team.

Creating shared roles

The second strategy for encouraging participation is creating shared roles.

This is often the best way to leverage each team member's skills and ensure participation in team activities. In a shared role, two or more people on a team work closely together to achieve a common objective.

When you create shared roles for your team, you create a participatory team structure. Even when team members are located in different geographical areas, their shared purpose can draw them together and help them bond.

Sharing a role means that team members depend on one another. Each member makes significant contributions, and each depends on the other to meet the goals and objectives of that role. Neither of the members can afford to pull back or withdraw. To do so would mean failure.

There are two main guidelines for creating successful shared roles:

- Creating shared roles means assigning shared responsibility to team members. Sharing a role encourages participation, because each team member has an equal stake in achieving the goal. You can encourage participation by assigning shared roles to complement team members' combined strengths and talents.
- To encourage buy-in and support for sharing roles, you'll need to create a system that rewards shared responsibility. Working toward a common reward promotes collaboration within the team.

High-performance teams require full participation by team members. The two main strategies you can use to encourage participation are providing opportunities for input and creating shared roles.

Providing opportunities for input involves encouraging an open exchange, giving team members time to formulate input, and showing them you intend to use their input. Creating shared goals means assigning team members to work together and rewarding shared responsibility.

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