

If I Were You:

Tips for High-Performance Leaders

by Howard M. Guttman

Few of us need to be reminded of the importance of cross-functional teams. Such teams, after all, are the DNA of today's modern, complex, and wired enterprise. Ideally, at least, information today flows horizontally and work gets done across organizations, rather than in the old up-and-down, hierarchical pattern. When cross-functional teams are firing on all cylinders, they operate without walls in order to harness the brainpower, energy, experience, and talent needed for effective problem solving, decision making, and planning. The organization hums.

Given their importance, you would think that most companies would have learned a thing or two about how to structure winning cross-functional teams. Think again. Seventy-five percent of all cross-functional teams fail, according to research cited in the *Harvard Business Review*. In my own personal consulting experience, transforming dysfunctional cross-functional teams into high-performance entities is one of the most common challenges that senior executives ask us to help confront.

Case in point: A consumer products company called us in recently to deal with a dysfunctional cross-functional team. Sales and Supply were involved in the classic pitched battle, pitting a super-charged sales organization against a super-concerned operations function that was worried about insufficient lead time and sourcing. Not surprisingly, much to the consternation of top management, the team moved at a snail's pace rather than at market speed—jeopardizing a make-or-break product launch and the company's bottom line.

If I were you, I wouldn't rely on chance and "hope-for-the-best" thinking to ensure top-performing cross-functional teams.

One reason why the failure rate of cross-functional teams is so dismal is that executives often don't recognize the unnatural nature of such teams. Team members do not instinctively play a cross-functional, collaborative game. When such teams are left on their own, old functional habits kick in. Countering this requires being intentional and explicit in setting up cross-functional teams.

First, take a good, hard look at your cross-functional teams, using **The Cross-Functional Team Scan** that we have developed as an evaluation tool. Assess your cross-functional teams in the eight areas set out below.

Use a 1-5 scale to answer each question: 1) Strongly Dissatisfied, 2) Somewhat Dissatisfied, 3) Somewhat Satisfied, 4) Mostly Satisfied, or 5) Completely Satisfactory.

- Are the team's goals clear and realistic?
- Is there role clarity—and do team members know what performance and behaviors are expected?
- Are there clear, agreed-upon protocols in place, dealing with making and keeping commitments, decision making, conflict resolution, meeting management, and the like?
- Are accountabilities crystal clear?
- Does the team have the right set of skills to play collaboratively, horizontally, cross-functionally?
- Is there a process for onboarding new members to the team?
- Are there measures letting a team know when it has "arrived?"
- Is there a performance/compensation system in place providing positive—and negative—consequences for behavior?

And be sure to start the scan introspectively. Look first at the senior executive team. Other cross-functional teams throughout your organization won't become high-performance ones unless the top team has its act together. In the example cited earlier, the root of the team's dysfunction lay squarely with the senior team, where the senior vice presidents of Sales and Supply were stuck in an intractable conflict.

Teams that score low on **The Cross-Functional Team Scan** are in serious trouble. Without clear goals, roles, and accountabilities; without agreed-upon norms for how conflict is to be resolved, how meetings work, how to measure and reward success; there are no picture and supporting processes for channeling desired team behavior. You're left with a team of functional players trying to get by in a cross-functional environment.

Cross-functional teams pose unique challenges. The fundamentals that drive such teams differ both in kind and degree. What constitutes a "team" in a cross-functional setting? How do members participate as dual citizens: working for the team, while representing a specific function? How do you establish agreed-upon protocols and ways of working, so that accountabilities, information, and decision making proceed without borders?

My next column will come to grips with these questions, as I provide the "how-tos" for moving cross-functional teams from being collections of functional players to ones where players see themselves in a new paradigm, working collaboratively and fully accountable for team success. ●