

If I Were You:

Tips for High-Performance Leaders

by Howard M. Guttman

Let's assume that you completed the [Cross-Functional Team Scan presented in the September issue of Guttman Insights](#) and discovered, alas, that your cross-functional team resembles one of those in the consumer-goods industry with which we worked a while ago. That team was thought to be camera ready; After all, the players on the team were all director level. No need for prep or training there. Just let nature take its course, and let the team do its thing.

It wasn't that easy. Players on the team immediately felt trapped between the proverbial rock and hard place. Who had the "D" or decision-making responsibility: the team or the VPs of the functions represented on team? No one knew.

At its root, there were no agreed-upon ways of working or protocols that were clear to the team, never mind key to stakeholders in the organization. Lacking clarity, expectations on how the team should function were inconsistent. Not surprisingly, decision-making paralysis set in. There was plenty of that old dysfunctional "agreeing to disagree," and nothing got done.

Once the team's role, accountabilities, impact, ways of working, and composition were all made crystal clear and communicated organization wide, team performance shifted immediately. Decision making accelerated, and the team went from being a value drag on the organization to becoming a value-added contributor.

If you are the leader of a cross-functional team who is facing a similar situation as this team—and if I were you—I'd begin by "pulling the cord" and calling a team time-out. Be straight with your team by acknowledging that things aren't working.

As you begin the process of moving from being a functionally driven to a horizontal, high-performance team, consider taking these five actions.

1. *Meet with key functional stakeholders to understand their expectations.*

Communicate to the team a clear, consistent picture of the expectations and recontract with key stakeholders, letting them know your team's plan to bridge the expectations/reality gap.

2. *Construct ways of working that are explicit and transparent, so that everyone on the team knows how things should work.*

Given the centrifugal forces naturally at work on cross-functional teams, one of the most important ways of working, or protocols, involves conflict resolution. When there is a difference of opinion between where the team and functions want to go, knowing how to escalate the disagreement to get closure is essential. A second key protocol: how team decisions get made. What's the role of the team leader? Should the team function as equals, or does the leader have greater decision-making clout?

3. *Build a compensation plan that reflects performance as a team member rather than as a functional player.*

Make no mistake about it, breaking the iron grip of functional thinking on a cross-functional team is a big challenge. You're asking team members to play the role of a dual citizen, which is something of an unnatural act. A compensation system that optimizes cross-functional behavior provides the "WIFM" logic needed to shift mind-sets.

4. *Be sure that you, as the team leader, understand and are adept at handling the complexities of the inter- and intra-team environment.*

Team leaders provide strategic leadership to ensure alignment with the overall organization strategy; stakeholder management to ensure that leaders across relevant functions are in sync on expectations and issue resolution—especially those dealing with resource allocation; and provide feedback to team members regarding results, along with monitoring behavior for signs of functional "creep."

5. *Make sure that team members "get it" and have the skills to operate cross functionally.*

In a sense, cross-functional teams are similar to other teams in terms of their skill requirements. They require the same repertoire of leadership, conflict management, influencing, assertion, and listening skills.

In addition, two other skills are paramount. First is stakeholder management. Team members must be adept at knowing who beyond the team should be brought into the decision-making and issue-resolution processes. And they must be equipped with keen conceptual skills to anticipate the impact of their actions across the organization: how the dominoes will likely line up, resist, or fall.

A cross-functional team is a constructed workgroup, blended from different functions, with shared accountability for playing by the ground rules and meeting key deliverables. Think e pluribus unum, and you've nailed the cross-functional concept.

It's a delicate construct, requiring vigilance to avoid functional regression. "How are we doing, in terms of outcomes?" "Are we adhering to agreed-upon protocols?" "What about managing key stakeholders?" Simple questions? Undoubtedly so, but when asked as part of a periodic self-assessment, such vigilance proves invaluable and key to achieving rapid results and lasting value in the demanding cross-functional environment. 🍎