

12 Rules That Create Great Front-Line Teamwork

David Drennan

Whether they are producing a complete product, or offering a service to customers face-to-face, most managers believe that good teamwork among their front-line employees will deliver better and more consistent results. But good teamwork doesn't just happen by accident. It happens when you put in place the conditions which *encourage* teamworking, and make it into an everyday habit. Here are twelve rules to help you do just that.

1 The team should deal with a complete product, process or service

Many companies are not organized in quite this way, but it is fundamentally important if you want truly effective teamwork. Where team members can see and understand the whole product or service for which they are responsible, the more they feel ownership and commitment to its quality. Where they are only responsible for elements of the product, the more they will blame others when things go wrong (and they do!).

Now this may mean reconfiguration of how the work is currently structured in your company, but until that happens, departments will remain merely a group of individuals, each intent on looking after their own job and staying out of trouble. Even if the team cannot be responsible for the full product or service, they need to know the specific part of the process for which they *are* accountable. What defines a team is the product or service for which the group feels collectively responsible. It is the common purpose that makes people feel like a team. Without that, teamwork does not exist.

2 All the skills necessary should be within team to do the complete job

That may mean transferring both people and equipment from the specialist departments where they have been previously located. For example, where completing the process requires simple interim lab tests of the product, that test (and the person who conducts it) needs to be brought within the team. Similarly, where quality tests are needed, these tests should be conducted by members of the team. The quality of the product needs to rest firmly with the production team, not with someone outside the group.

There should be no hand-offs to other functions in completing the full product or service. That way you will know where the responsibility lies if things go wrong, but also the team will have the full power to put things right when needed. Equally, when things go well, they will be able to take justifiable pride in their achievements.

3 There should be unbroken visual contact between team members

There is much greater team feeling and commitment among people who can see and interact with each other closely every day. Barriers caused by visual blockages or distance adversely affect team feeling and co-operation.

Operators may realize that what they do is part of a process, but if their colleagues are hidden behind a wall or bulky machinery, they inevitably identify more with their own part of the process than with the product as a whole. Similarly, people based in different geographical locations find it difficult to feel part of the same 'team'. And that's still the case even when they are communicating by phone, email or even video-conferencing on a regular basis.

The best conditions for creating teamwork feelings is where team members can see everything everyone else is doing, and where they interface and converse with each other every day.

4 The work area should be clean and visually well organized

It is obviously easier to work in an area which is clean and well organized. One specialist consultancy business claims it can improve productivity in any manufacturing company by 10% or more simply by painting the walls pale grey from six feet up, a darker grey down to the floor, and painting the workfloor areas green. We know from experience that the visual impact of what appears to be a clean and cared-for work environment has a daily positive effect on the people who work there.

It also means the work is likely to be safer, and less likely to suffer quality contamination through dirt, etc. Needed items become easier and quicker to find when there is a place for everything, and everything is in its place. And the daily discipline of keeping the work area clean will carry over to following Best Operating Practices faithfully (see later), and getting the product 'right first time'.

Importantly, there is no disadvantage in having a visually well organized workplace. That applies whether we are talking about the employees who work there, or the visitors who may come to see if you are the type of company they want to do business with. A clean and tidy workplace implies to them a well-organized company, and that often results in your getting more business than you expected.

5 Visible measurement systems should show in every area

Visible measurement systems - graphs, charts and information sheets on the wall - help focus staff attention daily on the need for continuing good performance. It is a daily reminder of what is expected of the department. For greatest effect, the charts need to be close to the work area, and to show target lines as well as actual performance. It is even better if team members themselves enter the performance data on the charts - that way the results belong to the whole team, and not just the manager.

The open nature of this kind of data is also useful for visitors to understand what is going on in every section. Ideally, they should be simple and clear enough to be

understood without having to ask staff to explain what they mean. And visible measurement systems undoubtedly have a positive motivational effect on the staff themselves i.e. no-one likes to show failure publicly.

6 Multi-skills, flexibility and job rotation should be standard practice

Multi-skilling helps in a number of ways :

- Individuals become more valuable to the company *and* to themselves (in the jobs market-place)
- Being able to flex around a number of jobs makes what can be repetitive jobs less boring
- It is also one of the ways to improve productivity i.e. less standing around and waiting
- The product or service can still be delivered in cases of absence
- Staff may be able to enhance their status and/or their pay by being able to perform a number of different jobs
- The section is never dependent on one key person, and can deal with problems or questions promptly as they occur
- Team members don't say "It's not my job" any more

7 Best Operating Practices are captured and used

Managers – and team members – can always tell you who does which job best. High performance teams always want to capture that 'best way' and make it available to everybody in the team. They do that by writing down the method in detail, and insisting that everyone use that method, because it's the 'best way we know how'. That becomes the team's BOPs i.e. Best Operating Practices.

If someone comes up with an even better way, then the BOP is altered to include that improvement, but I have never met a team who didn't want to do the job 'the best way we know how'. It soon becomes a source of pride within the team that 'no-one knows how to do the job better than we do'. They begin to act like champions, because they are.

8 Team members "muck in" to help each other

Unforeseen problems occur in even the best run operations. That's when good teams all 'muck in' to help each other out. In fact, it's the essence of good teamwork - working together to achieve a common goal.

In high-performance teams, single jobs in isolation don't exist any more. They are only one link in a whole process for which team members feel collectively responsible. That's why they jump to it when any blockage occurs and threatens the process - the process is their baby.

9 Great teams know who their customers are

A surprising number of workers have no idea who gets the result of their work. They assume it perhaps goes to someone in another department, but they've never been introduced, or communicated with them directly. They think that's their

boss's job. Others may know their product goes to some paying customer outside the business, but they've never met them either. As a result, they simply do as much as they need to, to please the boss, as that is the person they have to face up to each day.

But when they do know who their customers are, have met them and know how they use the product, they are much more likely to make a product that fits the customer's needs. Great teams make it their business to talk directly to their customers, because they know that will affect how they do their work. After all, quality is not what we think it is, it is what the customer says it is.

10 There is a daily communications process

The favoured communications process is a ten-minute start-of-day meeting in the work area (preferably where the visible measures charts can be seen). This system has a number of benefits :

- It's a roll call of staff (are all the jobs covered? have we any gaps?)
- Team members can all be updated on the day's work schedule in one go i.e. better use of management time
- Work tasks can be rapidly allocated so that everyone knows exactly who is doing what
- Any problems which have developed in the previous 24 hours can be discussed and quickly corrected
- It reinforces teamwork on a daily basis

And think about this. Any work group that meets five days a week for around forty-six weeks a year (that's well over 200 times a year), talking about the details of their work each day, are going to feel and act like a team even if their boss never actually mentions the word 'teamwork'.

11 Continuous improvement and continuous learning become part of everyone's job

In the 70's and 80's the Japanese took great lumps of market share from European and American companies by concentrating on quality, and they engaged all their front-line employees in doing that. They also encouraged team members to contribute regular ideas on making the work easier, better, cheaper, faster, or safer. Considering that in many companies something like 80% of employees do front-line jobs, there is often a lot of unused brain-power right inside the building, and it would be quite profligate not to use it to the full.

We all learn by experience, but high performance teams like to encourage team members to take on specific personal learning objectives on a regular basis. That is part of the six-monthly performance review process in one company, where employees are expected each time to propose a new learning objective for themselves, and their boss sees it as part of their job to help them achieve that. These companies realize that any new asset they buy will inevitably deteriorate and lose value over time, but by continuous learning their people actually become the only *appreciating* asset in the business.

12 Team members are treated like mature adults, and expected to act like mature adults

Supervision in many companies is based on the notion that employees will slack off and avoid work unless they are closely watched. It is a quite different philosophy that applies in high performance teams. Front-line staff are treated like adults and expected to behave like adults i.e. it is assumed and expected that they will get on with the work without the need for policing or supervision. And that approach can pay-off handsomely.

One company decided to embark on introducing 'autonomous work groups'. They told their first group that they could either continue working as they were (with a supervisor), or decide to organize their work as a team (without a supervisor). They were rather apprehensive about the idea, but decided they would like to give it a try. After five months of operation, their productivity had jumped by more than 25%, and their on-time delivery never fell below 98.5% in any week. And that was with the reduction of one team member (the supervisor) out of a team of eight. Front-line teams can often deliver astonishing results when they're treated like adults.

© Copyright

GPM International, Oakham, Rutland, England LE15 6AL

Telephone : 44-(0)1572-757042

Fax : 44-(0)1572-717320

Website : www.gpminternational.com

E-mail : office@gpminternational.com