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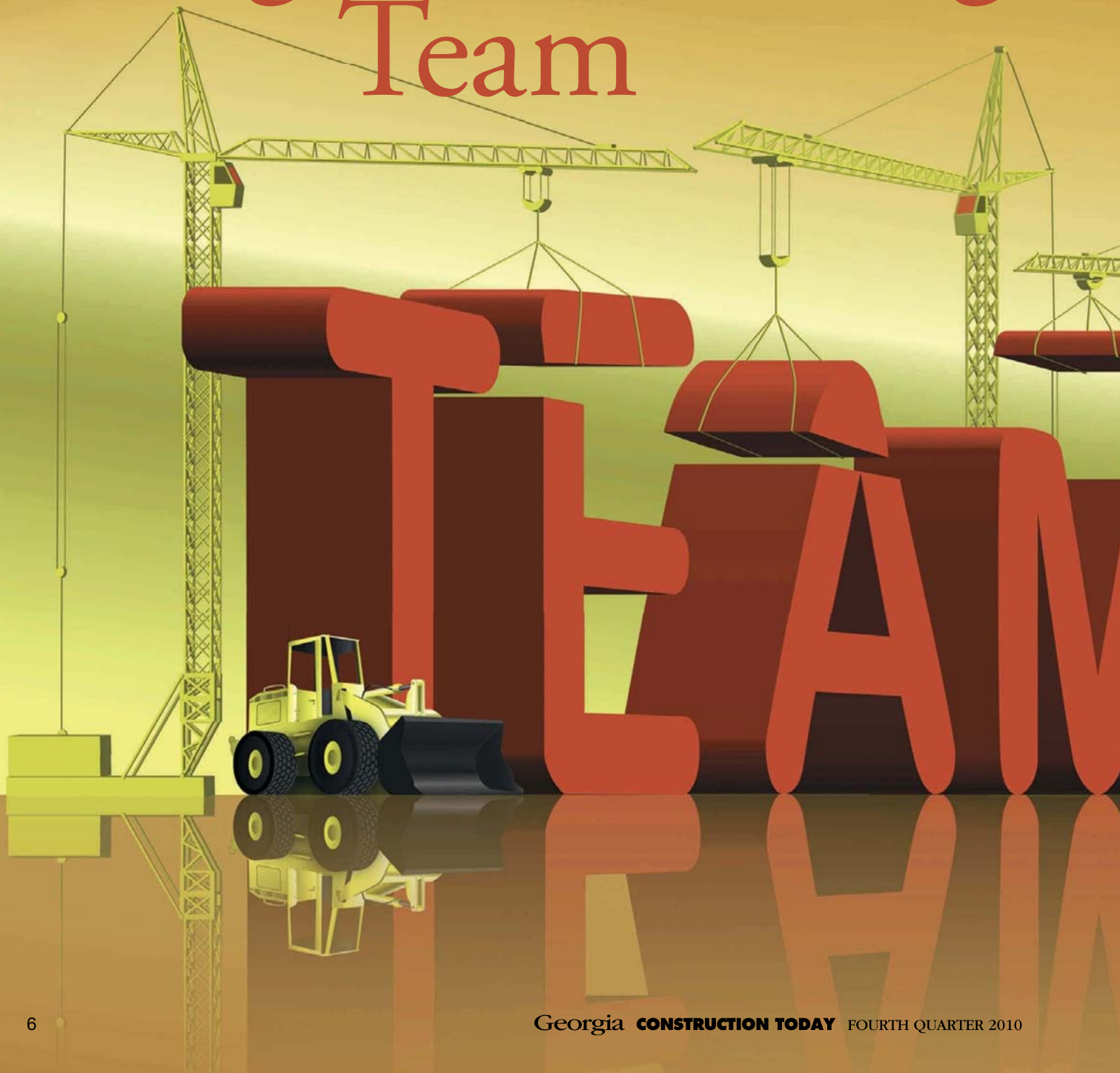


Leading a High-Performing Team

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Leading a High-Performing Team





By Trudy Shay Petty
Petty and Associates

Understanding what it takes to develop, lead and sustain a high-performing team is always of special interest to everyone I interact with in the project-driven AEC industry. In fact, in the AGC forums and contractor meetings I facilitate, “building a cohesive team” is consistently ranked by project managers and superintendents as one of their top issues. When you ask project team members about having a “positive, enjoyable team experience,” only a few if any in each group answer “yes,” suggesting there is room for improvement in this area.

High performing organizations and companies are the result of high-performing individuals, high-performing leaders and high-performing teams. While good managers have always fostered teamwork, it is the highly effective leader who can harness the power of teams for dramatically higher results. So what are these highly effective team leaders doing to make this type of measurable impact? And how can those in the construction industry benefit from some of these best practices to help enhance company and project performance?

Effective teams and especially high-performing ones don’t magically happen. Just because people come together to work for the same company, serve on

the same board, or design and build a new school doesn’t make you a team, let alone a high-performing one. Many “so-called” teams are a collection of individuals who are doing their own thing, working their own agendas and meeting periodically to exchange information as they work toward a goal. The whole idea behind building an effective, high-performing team is reaping the collective input and output of all team members who are working interdependently with each other, which is far greater than what one person on the team can achieve on their own.

Highly effective team leaders pay just as much attention to the people and behavioral needs of the team as they do to the management of tasks that must be performed. For example, these team leaders understand all teams go through specific stages of team development – *forming, storming, norming and performing* (Tuckman, 1965). The implication is team members have specific needs and expectations that must be met at each stage for the team to move forward in the best possible manner. When this doesn’t happen, teams often get stuck (this typically occurs during the *storming* stage when different personalities and conflicts start to surface) and this

eventually can interfere with the team's functioning. For example, at the *forming* stage, it is important for team leaders to help team members get acquainted with each other and to help them understand the team's goal and their role on the team. This is different and in addition to the project goal and client's goal.

Too often on construction teams, the project is already behind when it starts.

Thus, there is a tendency for team leaders to bypass the first critical stages in team development and ask their team to immediately start performing or working together. In hindsight, this is often seen by team leaders and team members as a misstep, saying the team never jelled properly. "We were thrown together and no one seemed to care if we knew who else was on the team," and "everyone

on the team did their own thing without regard for the work of others," is the feedback typically received from individuals working in this environment.

While leading any team requires a great deal of knowledge, skill and energy, the assignment is much more challenging and complex for the team leader on a construction project. Often the team leader is working with team members who are unfamiliar with each other. In addition, team members come from several different companies, each with their own way of doing things. Some leave the team as their work is finished and new team members come on board as the project evolves, creating a challenging dynamic from both a people and work perspective. The team leader's responsibility is to keep everyone moving in the same direction so they can perform exceptionally well. It is important in these instances for the team leader to help everyone focus on the project's goals, the client's goals, and the team's goals. Articulating each of these often is what helps many teams perform at a higher level than other teams.

The team leader's responsibility is to keep everyone moving in the same direction so they can perform exceptionally well.

Team leaders need to recognize using the word "team" can mean different things to different people. How you and your team members go about clarifying the meaning of "team" will help to preclude any unmet expectations or disappointments in how the team is performing. Often the root cause of frustrations with a team can be traced back to different expectations of the team and how it will function, so this is always a good place to start a conversation among team members. For example, when some hear the word "team" they think entirely of sports, where practicing hard to win



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and achieving “individual bests” is what matters the most. Others think about teamwork values like sharing, cooperating and helping one another. Getting team members to agree on this meaning is one of the ways to get your team off to a good start.

For construction project teams to perform exceptionally well, team members have to fully understand and execute the scope of work in a highly efficient and effective manner. At the same time, they have to insure everyone, including owners, architects, suppliers and vendors, have a positive, enjoyable experience. When a team’s goal is to exceed a client’s expectations by completing projects ahead of schedule and under budget while insuring this positive customer experience, a high-performing team will help you get there. In contrast, low or mediocre performing teams sap the energy out of a team leader and some or all of its team members and overall productivity, client and employee satisfaction and morale suffers. Keep in mind, teams are only as strong as their weakest link, so putting strong, capable team members on your project team or any team enhances overall team performance.

Six Powerful Ways to Lead a High-Performing Team

Here are just a few of the many powerful ways you can help your team excel and realize its full potential, especially when it comes to leading a construction project team:

1. Demonstrate Equal Concern for the Task and People Involved

Team leaders need to invest the time it takes to insure everyone fully understands the scope of work that has to be completed, commitments made to the client, budget, schedule, available resources and expectations/needs of each other on the team to complete assigned tasks. Equally important for the team leader is to show concern and respect for people on the team by taking the time to personally get to know everyone, especially if they are new to

your team. Effective team leaders take the lead and introduce new team members to each other and recognize people for their efforts, no matter how small, so they stay engaged and motivated. They also help people understand their respective roles and contributions they are making to the team effort in addition to what they are contributing to the overall project’s success. Consider including

“Introducing Team Members, Getting Acquainted, Clarifying Roles and Responsibilities, Project Goals, Client Goals and Team Goal” on your project kick-off meeting agenda.

2. Set a Positive Tone and Encourage Collaboration

Team dynamics in general are challenging, and even more so in construction where team issues are



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Insights into Leading a High-Performing Team

What follows are some of the things project managers and superintendents always include on their list when asked (1) what an effective or high-performing team would look like to them and what they expect from a strong team leader and (2) what they consider to be impediments to a high-performing team and signs of a weak team leader:

Attributes of an Effective and High-Performing Team

- Everyone gets along and strives to cooperate
- New ideas, differing opinions and surfacing of unique perspectives is encouraged despite the potential for conflict
- Everyone contributes
- Everyone knows what is expected of them and each other
- Focus is on an end result that makes a difference to the company
- Team members ultimately understand and agree on the goals of the project and what is most important to the customer
- A plan is in place to measure the team's progress
- Each team members' time is valued and respected
- Regular feedback is provided on how each individual team member and the collective team is doing
- All team members are engaged in open and ongoing communication
- A clear process for problem-solving and decision-making is identified
- A sense of belonging is created for team members
- A sense of accomplishment is instilled among team members where both small achievements and milestones are recognized and celebrated
- Team members have fun and enjoy the experience of working together
- A high level of trust among team members is earned and established
- Everyone stays open to the ideas of others
- Collaboration and shared leadership is encouraged

Impediments to an Effective or High-Performing Team

- Wasting time and rehashing issues
- Not learning from mistakes
- Dominating personalities
- Lack of participation and cooperation
- Dishonesty, lack of trust
- Poor and ineffective communication
- Not asking for and valuing input
- Lack of commitment to the team's success as well as to the project's success
- Lack of direction or focus on what it will take for the project team to perform at the highest level
- Unrealistic or unclear goals
- Personal and hidden agendas
- "My way or the highway" attitude
- Stubbornness and coming across as inflexible
- Lack of feedback on what the team is doing well and where the team needs to improve
- Challenges or problems increase at a faster pace than remedies are put in place
- Ineffective or unrealistic scheduling or sequencing of work
- Not being considerate of every team members' needs
- Lack of sufficient pre-planning for every meeting and assigned task
- Reliance on troubleshooting talents and "putting out fire" experience instead of properly planning and anticipating problems
- Lack of understanding what everyone expects from the team and from each other

compounded because team members come from so many different companies and diverse corporate cultures. It is the team leader's responsibility to bring all of these diverse parties together around a common goal, to keep everyone fully informed and on the same page and to set the tone for everyone working harmoniously and respectfully together. This doesn't mean conflicts and differences won't occur, and in fact it is healthier for a team to disagree on things than for team members to stay quiet and keep their opinions to themselves for fear of causing a rift. What if a quiet team member anticipates a potential problem that ends up costing the project thousands of dollars that could have been avoided if they were encouraged to speak? It is up to the team leader to encourage and ask for different perspectives and pose the following types of challenging, open-ended questions if it will get the entire team to a better place: "Tell us what else you think we can do to work better as a team," or "What can I do better or different to help you and your co-workers perform at your best?" A team leader who maintains a positive and upbeat attitude is contagious.

3. Make People Feel Comfortable and Valued

A big part of the team leader's role is to make team members feel comfortable and valued. This is more effectively done in person rather than by email or phone. Setting aside face time on a regular basis for all team members, including the foremen and crew, to say thank you, learn everyone's names, and ask for their feedback is very important and the best compliment you can give someone. It will also open up conversations that pinpoint and anticipate potential problems to benefit the team and project from early resolution and planning. As the team leader, people look to you in setting the example for what they can expect when they are working together. Project managers and superintendents who start off weekly jobsite meetings and owner/

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architect meetings with a smile and personal welcome thanking everyone for being on the team, being on time and completing assigned tasks always makes everyone sit taller in their seats and more eager to do their part in supporting the overall team mission.

4. Make Everything Visible to Increase Accountability

Effective team leaders go beyond just talking about what team members need to do, and they don't rely solely on meeting minutes to keep everyone on track. They leverage a well-known fact that people perform better when things are visible and use innovative ways to apply this to project information and scheduled tasks. One increasingly popular example is when project managers and superintendents make full use of the wall space in jobsite trailers to map out and list detailed work items scheduled for the current week and a look ahead for the next two or more weeks including who is responsible and due dates. This information posted on several movable ceiling to floor whiteboards and rotated as weeks start and end becomes the focal point during owner, architect and subcontractor meetings. This accelerates every team member's ability to plan ahead and perform as expected. Every team member works harder to avoid being the one who is singled out for dropping the ball or letting other team members down.

5. Enhance Communication Effectiveness by 'Asking' vs. 'Telling'

People respond better when they are asked to do something rather than being told to do it. Team leaders who take the time to ask for input, ideas and concerns from team members will motivate them to perform better. I am always reminded of the HVAC superintendent who described his team's first meeting with a general contractor where they were handed the schedule and told "this is what you will follow." He continued by saying, "Being told



what to do rubbed us the wrong way – sure we will do what we can to adhere to the schedule, but when it comes time for us to go the extra mile with this kind of attitude, we will hold back. What we prefer is for the general contractor to put the schedule in front of us and ask us how this looks, do we see any problems in meeting what has been mapped out, what we will need from them if we are to meet this schedule and so forth. Having this type of conversation where we are asked for our input makes us eager to find ways to go farther in supporting the team effort."

6. Recognize Individual and Team Accomplishments

Most of all, team leaders need to take every opportunity to recognize the accomplishments of people on the team including coworkers – whether it is an individual pat on the back or thank you for a specialty contractor having their crew show up on time or if it is a collective thank you to the entire team for working well, respectfully and safely together the last few days. Politeness, courtesy and thoughtfulness are always appropriate and contribute to a more positive, enjoyable team experience. When a superintendent says "why recognize or thank someone for something they are supposed to do," my response is people who feel appreciated are more motivated and productive. They are

more likely to treat others the same who they depend upon to complete their work, and again, the entire team benefits.

To sum up, learning to effectively lead a high-performing team is a worthy and exciting goal that can result in a positive, memorable team experience for everyone involved while significantly impacting your company's bottom line. While some people have a natural knack for leading teams and being a strong team member, most of us need to consciously learn and practice how to get better at performing these roles. Becoming more proficient in understanding team dynamics is also important so as team leaders, we are able to better meet and exceed the expectations and needs of team members who are entrusted in our care. ■

Trudy Petty is owner of Petty and Associates, a Dallas, Texas-based management consulting firm founded in 1989. She helps successful companies in the AEC industry increase market share, enhance customer loyalty and compete more effectively to win new work. As an executive coach, Trudy supports company leaders and teams in the office and field to become higher-performing and more customer-focused. She works with high profile clients in the U.S. and numerous industry organizations, including Georgia Branch, AGC. Contact Trudy at 214.341.1713 or trudy@pettyandassociates.com.