Cross-Functional Team Leadership



In a demanding and complex business environment, coworkers from different departments often find themselves stepping outside their primary roles to becoming teammates in shared initiatives, sharing skills and collaborating to achieve common goals.

Cross-functional teams bring together a skilled, talented group of people—many of whom may be relative strangers—from across the various functional areas of the business to produce project-specific deliverables to stakeholders both internal and external.

But successful cross-functional collaboration doesn't just happen on its own; these teams need *cross-functional team leadership* to thrive.

By following a few best practices and prioritizing both clear communication and proactive collaboration, you can lead your team to victory and support your organization's goals, from better decision-making to a stronger bottom line.

Why Cross-Functional Team Leadership Matters

Professionals in all disciplines quite often wear multiple hats—including taking

part in team collaboration—in the course of performing their duties, as broader organizational goals require more time, talent, and energy than any single department could reasonably provide.

Folks working at startups with a modest staff often find themselves focused on problem-solving and working in teams to handle the responsibilities for multiple departments out of simple necessity.

At larger corporations, team members from disparate functions and locations near and far must find a way to mesh their skill sets to achieve specific project goals that are smaller parts of larger business goals.

For example, when the procurement and finance teams collaborate to not only perform, but monitor and improve, the procure-to-pay process, that's cross-functional collaboration.

The immediate purpose is to secure goods and services with optimal efficiency and the best possible pricing and terms, but it is accompanied by larger company-wide goals such as integration of continuous improvement and shifting the role of procurement to one of value rather than simple savings.

Other examples include the union of marketing, research and development, and engineering to design and promote new products, or human resources, marketing, and the sales team to secure local talent and develop promotional strategies in foreign markets.

A project team assembles different skill sets to get the proverbial job done, but not every team so assembled is an *effective* cross-functional team.

Personality conflicts, lack of clear goals, incomplete buy-in, and, of course, lack of proper leadership can all contribute to the rather chilling 25% success rate for cross-functional teams reported in a study by the *Harvard Business Review*.

In order to beat those odds, cross-functional teams need engaged, proactive leaders who are focused on effective communication and collaboration. This is particularly true in today's market, when major supply chain disruptions can threaten business continuity, and the COVID-19 pandemic has forced businesses in all industries to develop, implement, and improve their strategies for building and managing remote teams.

Because team leaders set the parameters for the project as well as hierarchies, procedural processes, and performance expectations, they effectively set the "vibe" for the team itself. Consequently, truly effective cross-functional projects begin with effective and engaged team leaders.

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Best Practices for Leading Cross-Functional Teams

Combining advanced project management with sometimes intense collaboration with large groups of people to produce deliverables for a range of stakeholders, cross-functional team leadership requires a deep understanding of how to bring skilled people together to form a cohesive whole.

You can make the process easier by following a few straightforward best practices.

Understand, and Compensate for, Common Roadblocks

Every team begins with individuals who have their own agendas, needs, and desires.

Corralling folks from their individual silos in different departments and helping them understand why breaking down those walls is essential to the team's work can sometimes feel like trying to herd cats into sled dog harnesses.

The process is easier if you understand the most common reasons why cross-functional teams struggle to succeed—and the best ways to address these challenges.

- **The Problem: Minimal commitment, absent accountability.** If team members don't have a clear understanding of the project's goals, why their skills are required to help it succeed, and their role within the

hierarchy of the team, they may lack investment and engagement.

The Solution: One of the most important things a team leader can do is provide clear and complete information on the project, each team member's role, expectations, and obligations, and open, friendly guidance when addressing questions and concerns.

Regular updates and check-ins keep the team on track, show you're engaged with their individual and collective progress, and encourage collaboration to address potential problems or take advantage of new opportunities, further strengthening the team's engagement and commitment to their shared goals.

- **The Problem: Lack of trust.** Lack of familiarity can make it hard for team members to build trust and connect as people first. Strong personalities, different career paths and experiences, and uncertainty about their team members' skills, experience, and talent can create a seemingly uncrossable gulf without intervention. This problem is particularly relevant for those managing remote teams, since a lack of physical proximity and face-to-face engagement, along with wildly different schedules, can make it even harder to connect or build trust and camaraderie.

  The Solution: Build team identity and buy-in before you begin. If they're going to thrive together, team members need to know and trust one another. Kick off the project with a social event that doubles as a project overview. Bring the entire team together for a virtual meeting in Zoom, Skype, etc. You can schedule it at mealtime to provide a "lunch meeting" feel or find a time that works for everyone on the team to schedule a "mixer."

  You can also engage with human resources from the earliest stages to identify potential team members whose skill sets and personalities provide the best fit for collective success, regardless of individual aptitude. Remember, the "right team" is one that gets the job done in the best way possible, not necessarily the one with the most rising stars.

  Your HR team can also provide additional team building exercises (including diversity training) to ensure your team comes together with a shared dedication to both general collaboration and the success of the project itself.

  Your kick-off event should be casual and provide an opportunity for the

team to engage with one another and learn about the project without the pressure of immediately leaping into intense collaboration.

Ideally, this kick-off event will give everyone on your team the opportunity to:

- Connect with everyone else on the team.
- Learn the overall goals and scope of the project and how it meshes with the company's overall goals, as well as its specific timeline and budget.
- Learn project parameters and procedures, including which tools will be used, scheduling and availability information (critically important for remote teams), how information will be shared, and actions they can take to obtain more information or have their concerns or questions addressed.
- Identify the metrics that will be used to track and evaluate progress within the project, as well as contingencies that will address potential delays or disruptions.
- Clarify their own place within the project hierarchy and the deliverables for which they're responsible.

- **The Problem: Lack of engagement and external support**. Even the most engaged team can falter if staff outside the project don't understand its importance, goals, or needs.
- **The Solution: Build bridges with external stakeholders.** Both management and the C-Suite have a vested interest in the success of your project, but they may not understand how to help, or even know their help is needed, without clear communication from you as team leader. Consider making one individual from each different department an ambassador for the project. These ambassadors will provide regular updates to their own managers and any executive sponsors. Where appropriate, they'll also solicit guidance and assistance to provide these external stakeholders with a more direct role in ensuring the project's success.

  This not only helps improve team member engagement by bridging their primary and project-based roles, but helps maintain visibility into the project for, and support from, management. It also provides additional resources your team can call upon for problem solving and conflict resolution.

Give Your Team the Tools They Need to Collaborate, Communicate, and Thrive

In a marketplace where digital transformation has made finding ways to leverage Big Data and next-gen technologies an absolute necessity, cross-functional teams need access to information management tools in order to achieve their goals, communicate effectively, and monitor and improve their own progress.

Collaborate with your team to choose the tools that best fit everyone's work style and technical capabilities. Consistency is crucial, since effective collaboration and clear communication rely on everyone using the same tools and sharing data in the same formats.

If necessary, provide whatever training is required to ensure everyone is comfortable using these tools and is ready to follow project and company protocol for information transparency and collaboration.

- Equip your team with communication tools such as Asana, Monday.com, and Slack to create a virtual office and water cooler in one. Team members can communicate as a whole, in smaller task-specific groups, or one-on-one as the situation demands. These tools also allow for the creation of casual workspaces where team members can blow off steam, share conversations, and build camaraderie in a virtual environment.
- Choose a meeting tool such as Zoom, Skype, GoToMeeting, etc. to hold regularly scheduled team meetings, both collectively and one-on-one. Make sure you provide everyone an opportunity to voice their concerns or ask questions privately, and take advantage of regularly scheduled updates both to promote accountability and to demonstrate your own engagement in the project.
- A centralized data management solution like PLANERGY connects disparate software environments into a cohesive whole. It also provides powerful next-gen tools; automating repetitive processes, streamlining requests and approvals, and collecting, organizing, and storing all relevant data in a single place. Data can be tracked and analyzed in real time, making it easier to measure progress and make adjustments where necessary, or generate budgets, reports, and forecasts for distribution to stakeholders who need a summary of the project's progress.

Help Your Teams Communicate and Collaborate for Optimal Performance

Whether your team takes its cues from *The A-Team* or the Avengers, successful collaboration begins with, and depends upon, efficient, effective, and intelligent guidance from a committed leader.

Build trust and team spirit, invest in the right digital tools, and prioritize communication and collaboration, and you can tap into your teams' talents to exceed expectations, produce shareholder deliverables, and support your company's larger goals for profitability, innovation, and performance.

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