

# Five Tips for Building High-Performing Nonprofit Leadership Teams

Here are five suggestions for building a high-performing team:

- 1. Select the A team.** Make sure that you have the smartest, most productive, and most collegial people on your team. When you have hiring opportunities, do not settle for less. And if you have inherited subpar members, work behind the scenes to improve their performance. If that doesn't work, start having the tough conversations and make changes as soon as possible. It is very disheartening to excellent team members to have to manage around the deficiencies in their peers so set high standards, support individuals' efforts to meet those, and move people out that don't measure up.
- 2. Build strong one-on-one relationships.** Each member needs to have a healthy rapport and unlimited access to you. Schedule regular meetings with each person and make those engaging dialogues. Use some of the time for updates but probe beyond the day-to-day to learn more about what makes the person tick. What is frustrating? What is stimulating? What new ideas does s/he want to try? You need to develop mutual trust that you will both follow through on commitments and you need to hash out your differences in private. Without a strong connection to you (the leader) team members will vie for your attention in unproductive ways. They may become competitive, passive aggressive, unsupportive, or cliquish. This is what creates some of the dysfunctional dynamics.
- 3. Create collaborative goals.** To develop an esprit de corps, members need to experience in daily reality their interdependencies. "I can't complete my goals unless you complete yours." This collaboration-by-design serves the mission and minimizes individual stardom. Working in smaller subgroups members are more able to sort out their tensions. These shared goals provide the structural glue that pulls the team together.
- 4. Work out issues between meetings.** Have you ever witnessed a skilled leader facilitate decision making around a sensitive and contentious issue? She presents the dilemma, lays out the various points of view, and describes the end goal. The team conversation is insightful and calm. When she recommends a course of action, everyone affirms in unison. She is not a wizard at managing group dynamics. She has had numerous conversations with individuals long before this team meeting. She has listened to everyone, incorporated input, and persuaded members to make a commitment to her solution. The real work has happened outside the room so the meeting is a formality to signify solidarity.
- 5. Respect is the only required team norm.** When you strip it down, there is only one behavioral guideline that facilitates high performance: uniform professional respect. Each member must look at each colleague and believe "s/he is fantastic at what s/he does and brings so much value to our organization." Period. This doesn't mean that members adore each other at a personal level. It just means that they know they are in the boat with only the most talented peers. With this as the baseline there is continuous collaboration outside the team meetings as well as inside the room.