

# Coaching Teams

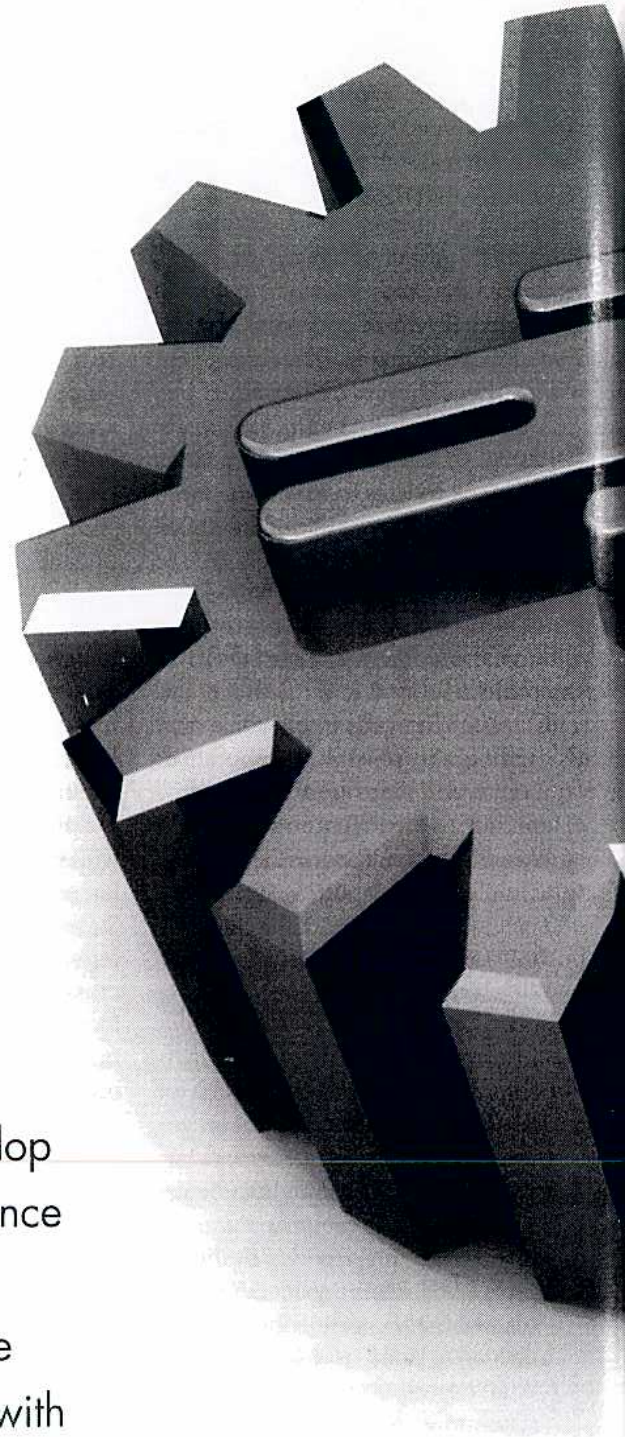
## for Emotional Intelligence in Your Diverse Workplace

By Lee Gardenswartz, Jorge Cherbosque, and Anita Rowe

Teams as well as individuals need to develop emotional intelligence skills that help enhance teamwork, improve group dynamics, and ultimately, increase performance. Stimulate this development by using these activities with your team.

### **Affirmative introspection—taking a look inside**

Team members can create synergy and nurture one another's creative spirit. Or they can maintain rigid, stereotypical perspectives about one another that prevent the team's overall effectiveness. Identifying team members' stereotypes and hot buttons will encourage growth and productive work relationships.





These are times of great uncertainty, so it is little wonder that team members are unwilling to embrace change and at times, sabotage new initiatives. Self-governance skills will help team members support one another as they experience emotions elicited by today's pluralistic, ever-changing society.

**Helping the team know what makes it tick.** Developing a team atmosphere where curiosity and nondefensive attitudes dominate is a desirable goal for most leaders. You can help the team establish norms that enable it to become more introspective and affirming by using the following techniques:

- **Begin staff meetings by checking with each member to see how the person is doing and feeling at work.** You can use quick warm-ups such as a word or phrase that expresses how each person feels about the week's accomplishments and that expresses where the person is at the moment.

Or you might ask team members to share the best and worst thing that has happened to them during the past week.

- **Have members share their work challenges in an introspective way.** Ask team members to indicate why the challenge is important, what some impacts of the challenge are, how they feel about it, and what have they learned from dealing with it.
- **Make time on a routine basis for the team to assess its own effectiveness, and be willing to comment on the team's dynamics or processes in a nonjudgmental way.** For example, ask them to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 low and 5 high) their satisfaction with their process in completing a recent project. Have team members share their ratings and discuss their perceptions. End by having each team member suggest one thing that could improve both product and process next time.

**Helping the team be more comfortable in its own skin.** Work teams become more synergistic and effective when trust among the members allows for risk taking and creativity. You can help the team develop comfort among themselves in the following ways:

- Establish ground rules that encourage safety, and develop a common team vision.
- Develop a clear understanding of what constitutes a respectful environment.
- Use activities during some staff meetings in which the objective is to help members know one another better.
- Teach respectful ways to provide feedback, and encourage openness by institutionalizing 360-degree feedback and using feedback sessions as a tool for development.

**Helping the team be aware of its own biases and hot buttons.** Diverse work teams can be synergistic and creative, but the more diverse the team, the

more susceptible the members are to biases and hot buttons.

In genuine relationships, conflict and annoying behavior are unavoidable. Effective teams have a commitment to talk openly about these issues and to resolve their conflicts in constructive ways. You can help your team be in tune with its own biases and hot buttons when you

- Help team members be honest and open in identifying situations in which diverse conflicts and hot buttons are affecting them. You might have a regular “ouch time” at each meeting when members can bring up issues that could lead to conflict.
- Help team members identify their personality and work style preferences and explore areas of potential conflict with others. Using questionnaires that help team members understand one another’s styles can be helpful.
- Help team members identify and share behaviors that might be the source of irritation for themselves and others.

### **Self-governance—getting a handle on your feelings**

These are times of great uncertainty, so it is little wonder that team members are unwilling to embrace change and at times, sabotage new initiatives. Self-governance skills will help team members support one another as they experience emotions elicited by today’s pluralistic, ever-changing society.

**Helping the team make ambiguity an ally.** One aspect of group dynamics is called “group think,” which is the pressure that group members often feel to agree and achieve consensus. At times, this pressure to come to a quick agreement comes with a high cost because it prevents the group from using the ambiguity of the situation to allow for synergistic, creative solutions.

You can help your team be more effective if you coach team members to tolerate ambiguity using the following techniques:

- Help team members engage in a debate without coming to a final conclusion. Push them beyond either/or solutions, and ask them to discuss multiple options.
- Teach the process of brainstorming ideas, in which team members generate as many ideas as possible without censorship and without judgment.

**Helping the team become a change master.** Leaders are often change agents and implementers of change. Therefore, you need to encourage the team to be open to the changes that leaders need to implement. You can help team members navigate through the process of change by using the following techniques:

- Help team members identify gains and losses as a group when they are facing difficult changes.
- Help team members identify a new vision for the group that the change will represent, focusing on how the team will function within the new reality.
- Involve team members in the planning and implementation of the change by getting their input and using their suggestions.
- Communicate clearly the reasons why the change is needed and desired.
- Help members navigate through the change process by identifying controllable aspects and specific actions they can take.

**Helping the team get in charge of its self-talk.** Like individuals, teams have collective inner narratives or self-talk stories. Stories such as, “We are a resilient group,” “We are the champions,” or “Our diversity is our formula for success,” could be productive.

Other stories, such as “The good old days were the best,” “People with diverse backgrounds don’t belong here,” or “The new reality is very depressing. We are doomed to fail,” could be destructive. You can help your group develop more positive self-talk and

challenge their pessimistic, unrealistic self-talk when you

- guide them through the process of creating a vision and mission statement that is inclusive and empowering
- help them develop a group tagline that will foster optimism
- develop group norms by which members express their gratitude for one another (For example, end a meeting with a “symbolic toast” in which each team member toasts a colleague to the left or right (or both) for something that person has brought to the team or a way in which the individual has helped in the past month.)
- challenge the group’s self-talk messages by reframing them in a positive way. Have the team identify the three most negative self-talk messages operating in the group and come up with more realistic and accurate messages to replace them.

### **Intercultural literacy—reading others accurately**

Team members often find themselves locked into inaccurate and limiting assumptions about or judgmental reactions to the behavior of teammates and colleagues in other groups. You can help them overcome misleading and hindering views by guiding them through activities that develop their intercultural literacy.

**Helping the team understand the cultural whys behind behavior.** Team members can work more effectively with one another and with those they serve if they correctly decode and do not misinterpret behaviors. You can help them in this process by asking them to share their favorite proverb. You can prime the pump by suggesting a few yourself, such as, “The early bird gets the worm,” “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” “He who hesitates is lost,” and “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

Once they have their proverbs in mind, ask each person to share the

proverb with the team along with the value that underlies it. Once all have shared, lead a group discussion about how those values play out on the team and affect interactions and performance. Then discuss how those values might influence behavior and communication in the group.

For example, the value of caution may help the team be diligent in gathering all the facts before they proceed with a project; or the value of risk taking may make the group more tolerant of failures as long as they can learn from them. Also discuss how knowing what each team member values helps in positioning feedback they would give one another. Finally, have them write a proverb that is representative of some of the values of the team. For example, "The team is where the heart is," "A risk-free team is not worth being on," or "Healthy fruit comes from strong roots."

**Helping the team see the upsides and downsides of all cultural norms.** Team performance is enhanced and relationships are strengthened when team members increase their sensitivity to the impact of their behavior on others in the group. Ask team members to make a list of three norms or preferences each brings. Then ask them to list the ways these benefit the team and the ways each norm can be overdone and hinder the group.

For example, a preference for a strict adherence to schedules may help meet deadlines and not waste time, but it may also limit creativity in a rush for completion so that the team meets a deadline but misses the objective. Have team members share these preferences with the group and then discuss their learnings and how they can apply these to the team's processes.

**Helping the team transcend its own perspective and show empathy.** Teams are hindered when they take a judgmental and adversarial stance in dealing with other work groups. When one team is experiencing difficulty with

another team or department, divide the team into two groups and have half take the part of their own team and the other half take the part of the "difficult" team or department.

The process requires that you and everyone present be open to taking the data where it goes. You will not be effective if your expectations are preset and you are trying to lead people to say what you want.

Give each group time to discuss how they see the situation and why they act and react the way they do. Then have each group explain the situation from its own perspective. Once the groups have heard each other, ask each to take five minutes to discuss in their small groups what they heard, and then tell the other group what they heard. Finally, lead a total group discussion about their learnings and insights into ways to resolve the problem.

#### **Social architecting—enrolling and engaging others**

Social architecting fosters joy, human connection, and a sense of belonging in the workplace. The skills used here increase understanding between team members and are the ticket to high spirits and mutual support.

**Helping the team serve as a cultural interpreter.** Interpersonal understanding is essential on a team. It engenders commitment, support, and loyalty. This understanding may not happen by itself but requires building bridges with others. The suggestions presented here will help you develop this ability on your team.

In a large group, have people brainstorm some of the behaviors they identify as resulting in miscommunication and lack of connection between members of the team. Maybe the behavior is people always coming late to meetings; maybe it is people not speaking English even though they know how to do so, to make others feel left out.

Those who make suggestions and observations in the brainstorming are not necessarily talking about their own realities or observations, and not everyone has to agree with each perception. You want people's realities to be on that flip chart, but everyone's view counts, and there does not need to be consensus on perceptions.

Then in groups of not more than four people, have each individual within the small group select one of the situations that is both relevant and difficult to deal with. The goal is to be able to reinterpret or reframe that difficult or problematic situation. The group essentially serves as the cultural interpreter to the person with the difficulty and helps him or her expand the viewpoint and feel the points of connection.

One at a time, in round-robin fashion, each person gets help with realizing that a cultural dilemma can be viewed differently. It always depends on the person's vantage point. The end result is a kinder, gentler interpretation of one's own issue, based in part on new understanding and information.

The best part of the round robin is that it leaves team members with the skill and ability of giving information and perspective to others so that team members really do learn how to function as interpreters for one another.

**Helping the team communicate effectively and resolve conflicts in diverse settings.** A primary criterion for an effective team is how it deals with the inevitable conflicts that arise. To help the team deal with conflict, try the following.

In a group setting or meeting, use subgroups to have team members

identify the areas of conflict that are most destructive to the cohesion and productivity of the group. As a manager, you will be the facilitator of this process. In small groups, you are providing a degree of anonymity for people who, because of individual style or ethnic cultural influences, do not feel comfortable calling out the particular areas of conflict.

Using small groups to talk about what members observe is an easier way for people to bring up a problem. And using anonymous conflicts, no one feels the need for protection. You are providing safety, group learning, collaboration, and a chance for individual and collective skill building.

By demonstrating two rounds publicly, employees will get the knack for how to do it. Then have people divide into pairs and identify and use a situation that is real for them. Encourage them to use the most urgent, real situation they are facing.

To increase trust and openness on the team, you can suggest that members give and get feedback, taking the necessary time. Both options are available to you, and you may choose one at any given time. At a team meeting, have them give feedback to one another by completing the following statements:

- 1| A clear strength of ours as a team in communicating is...
- 2| My dominant mode or style of communicating is...
- 3| I intend this style to be helpful to the team in the following ways...
- 4| We can strengthen our effectiveness if we learn to style shift by doing more of...and doing less of...

Have a whole-group discussion on what team members learned and how they will apply this knowledge to how the team operates.

### Helping the team structure synergistic and compelling environments

Begin by having your work group construct its ideal environment, and by the time it finishes, they will have

created the desired norms for the team. Have team members focus on two aspects: the task, or how they actually get the work done, and the relationship, the soft side, or the power of emotion and its connection to commitment, follow-through, and emotional support. In short, the soft side is the part that looks at how team members treat one another.

The questions you want to explore with the team are the following:

- 1| What do you want to see on this team in both the task and relationship arenas?
- 2| What do you as a team member need from others? What are you willing to give?
- 3| What single behavior, if accomplished in the task arena, would propel the group to greater heights?
- 4| What relationship behavior, if missing, would cause employees to want to leave the unit?

Engaging the team in this conversation, and others like it, will not be a quick process. Have team members write the answers to these questions for themselves first, and let them know ahead of time that there will be a respectful, important conversation in the whole group dealing with the answers to the four questions.

### Success in coaching the team

In these processes, you are a manager functioning as a facilitator. You are the catalyst that leads the team into this discussion, and you or a team member records everyone's responses on flip charts.

Once the responses are public, you can lead the discussion about what to make of the information and how to use it. To create sustainability in this environment, the group needs to articulate its norms. Help the group develop an appropriate list of team ground rules from this discussion.

The process requires that you and everyone present be open to taking the data where it goes. You will not be effective if your expectations are preset and you are trying to lead people to

say what you want. As surprising as that statement may be, it is needed because we have seen the process violated many times, and team members inadvertently set up to give particular answers.

This process should give you and the team conversation that is both real and substantive. It should also plant the realization in team members that soft skills have hard consequences. A set of norms, to which you all agree and that encompasses ways to hold one another accountable and create ownership, is worth gold. Is this team and this organization theirs? Is it going to flourish? If it does, they will make it so.

The writer Terry McMillan has said, "Can't nothin' make your life work if you ain't the architect." For teams, we would adapt her quote to say, "Can't nothin' make our unit work if we ain't the architects." **T+D**

Excerpted, with permission of the publisher, from Emotional Intelligence for Managing Results in a Diverse World by Lee Gardenswartz, Jorge Cherbosque, and Anita Rowe, 2008, Davies-Black Publishing; 1-800-624-1765; www.daviesblack.com. Available at all retail and online bookstores.

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#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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