10 Rules for High-Performing Teams

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Success in today's work world is more about team than individual performance. A team is more than just a group of workers, located together, doing their jobs. Real teams are interdependent. That means they must rely on one another to get the job done. So what are best practices for effective teams? Here are 10 rules from a chapter on "Best Practices in Team Leadership" by Kevin Stagl, Eduardo Salas, and C.Shawn Burke.

1**. Define and Create Interdependencies.** There is a need to define and structure team members' roles. Think of sports teams, everyone has their position to play, and success happens when all of the players are playing their roles effectively. In baseball, a double-play is a beautiful example of team interdependency.

2. **Establish Goals.** Teams need to be focused on shared goals and outcomes. Commitment to that goal is essential for success. Ideally, team goals should allow both the team as a unit and the individual members to achieve both personal and group goals.

3. **Determine How Teams Will Make Decisions.** Whether the leader makes the decision, or it is a democratic or consensus process, the team needs to understand beforehand how decisions will be made. This reduces conflict within the team when a decision or choice has to be made.

4. **Provide Clear and Constant Feedback.** Teams need to know how they are doing in order to stay motivated and to correct performance problems or inefficiencies. Ideally, a system should be in place so that team members receive ongoing feedback while doing their jobs. A simple example from manufacturing is when the team members do both production and quality control testing. They find out immediately what their success/failure rate is and can take action to improve.

5**. Keep Team Membership Stable.** Particularly in complex tasks, it takes a lot of time for team members to learn to work together at an optimum level. In sports, there is a relationship between how long team members have played together and their winning record.

6. **Allow Team Members to Challenge the Status Quo.** If innovation is important, it is critical that team members feel secure in being able to challenge processes if they feel that there is a way to improve. In order to innovate, teams need to be open to considering and constructively criticizing existing practices when needed.

7. **Learn How to Identify and Attract Talent.** Just as processes sometimes need improvement, teams can get better by attracting new talent. Organizations that put a lot of resources into identifying and recruiting talent simply do better.

8. **Use Team-Based Reward Systems.** Too much emphasis on individual rewards can lead to in-fighting and resentment. A combination of individual and team-based rewards is often best.

9. **Create a Learning Environment.** Emphasize the development of the team, learning through successes, but particularly through mistakes. A team with a culture of continuous improvement and where members are motivated to develop their skills and knowledge are high-performing teams.

10. **Focus on the Collective Mission.** Mission-driven teams and organizations perform better because they see beyond their individual workload and tasks and feel as if they are working for a higher purpose. It is imperative that team members be committed to the shared mission, or they should be replaced.

These rules apply whether teams have a formal, appointed leader, or whether they are self-governing. The key is to put in the time and energy needed to adhere to these best practices.

Reference: Stagl, K.C., Salas, E., & Burke, C.S. (2007). Best Practices in Team Leadership. In Jay Conger and Ronald Riggio (Eds.). The Practice of Leadership (pp. 172-197). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.