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Coaching Teams . Changing Cultures

How to manage a team when you all have radically different work styles - by Gwen Moran

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Just because your team members prefer to work differently doesn't mean that your team can't be harmonious and productive.

Managers have long been warned of the dangers of team homogeneity. If the team members all think alike, they may overlook important aspects of the project, audience, or other factors essential to success.

But, while a diverse mix of people with varying perspectives and work styles on a team might yield better and more informed outcomes, these groups are not without their challenges. A recent survey from performance management software platform Reflektive found that nearly half of respondents say their biggest problem working on teams is different work styles.

Reflektive's survey found more than eight in 10 people frequently work as part of a team. Often, those teams are cross-functional and project-based. But that also adds new wrinkles to the team's challenges, as competing priorities are added to the mix.

DEFINING THE STYLES

Different work styles may be defined in different ways, depending on whom you ask. Leadership expert Robb Holman, author of *Lead the Way: Inside Out Leadership Principles for Business Owners and Leaders*, categorizes them as:

- Go-getters: Driven by ideas and make things happen, building momentum
- Enhancers: Managers who mind the details while ensuring the people are taken care of
- Task masters: Devoted to accountability and getting things done

Others use the characteristics favored by time-tested personality profiles like DiSC or Myers-Briggs Personality Test to get a better sense of the individual and how he or she is likely to interact with others and perform on the job.

The first step in creating a harmonious team is knowing your own personality type and communication style, says researcher and organizational psychologist Elnaz Reznia, a research scientist with Multi-Health Systems, Inc. Then, you need to understand the same things about each of your team members.

“What are their styles? How do they see the world? How do they actually digest the information and make their decision and communicate?” she says. It sounds basic, but that awareness of yourself and others is going to help you understand how to



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help everyone work together more harmoniously. Then you can take specific steps to create an environment that supports different styles.

MIND THE SIZE

When teams get too large, things can become unwieldy and hard to manage. Reflektive's research found that 90% of respondents say groups of six or more make it difficult to contribute in a meaningful way. The optimal size of your team will depend on your company, goal, the project at hand, and other factors, but keeping teams lean can help mitigate conflict related to differing work styles.

GET ON THE SAME PAGE

When you take time to ensure your teams are aligned upfront—that everyone knows what the goals are and why you're taking on the project—you can minimize the impact of varying work styles, says executive consultant Shani Magosky, founder of The LeaderShift Project. She recommends working together to create “shared agreements” with your team that specify important pacts, such as:

- What you're committed to as a group
- Type of working environment you want to create
- Individual and team expectations
- Communication protocols
- Response time guidelines
- How conflict will be handled

By setting ground rules and expectations upfront, when everyone can address them objectively and with cool heads, you can eliminate assumptions and define how your group will work together. These details also help prevent misunderstandings such as how soon responses to communication are expected and what the overall goals of the team are, she says.

UNDERSTAND THE OVERALL AND INDIVIDUAL PURPOSE

With cross-functional teams so prevalent today, it's probably not surprising that the Reflektive survey found that 69% of workers said that company-wide goal alignment is key to their success. When you can find the common ground—the goal you're all working toward or the problem you're trying to solve—differing work styles may diminish in importance, says Courtney Bigony, director of people sciences at 15Five, a continuous performance management platform.

Similarly, role clarity goes a long way toward minimizing conflict. Bigony says roughly half of workers really know what's expected of them in their roles. “Just clarity about what the role entails, the responsibilities, the performance metrics,” she says. “People are unclear about working styles on top of unclear roles, and the role clarity piece is so critical for psychological safety.”



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DON'T FIGHT THE STYLES

Getting people to change their work styles probably isn't going to work, says career coach Flame Schoeder. She and one of her business partners, Nancy Dennis—both certified by the International Coach Federation—came up with a tool to help managers, called the ECE model, an acronym for Expectations, Communication, and Execution, she says.

“One of the keys for managers is not to fight the styles that are on the team. You're probably not going to change someone who is very detail-oriented into someone who is very big picture, right? But you can say to the whole team, ‘These are my expectations.’ Then communicate that very clearly and set up chains of communication between you and the people working for you as well as between the people who are working for you,” she says. “They have to have communication channels, and then the execution can only happen after that alignment of expectations and communication has happened.”

EMBRACE HEALTHY CONFLICT

Virtually every team will have conflict at some point. The key to avoiding the productivity hit is how you manage it, Holman says. “How do you actually engage in the messiness? I think it's helping the average person, the average team member, actually learn how to engage in conflict in a healthy way,” he says. Holman helps teams master self-assertion without making others feel defensive, as well as helping team members see each other's points. Conflict doesn't have to be a bad thing, he says. It can help us raise our contributions and performance levels.

When managed properly, with care and awareness, teams with multiple working styles can produce exceptional results. By understanding the different styles people have and what they need, as well as ensuring that the team has clarity about roles and goals, you can minimize conflict while gaining the depth that differing voices bring.