

Building Effective Supplier Teams

PMM5 Postscript™ Number 14

Background Information: Throughout *Professional Meeting Management*®, fifth edition, various authors stress the importance of working efficiently on teams. Jeffrey Cufaude, in Chapter 1, notes the need for “build relationships among teams and work groups” in order to build professional capacity (Cufaude, 2006, p. 10). Throughout Chapter 9, Kelly Peacy stresses the importance of working effectively with people (Peacy, 2006, pp 115-128). Gail Mutnik introduces Chapter 34 (It’s Showtime) by describing the role of a meeting manager, “...you will need to orchestrate the plan of action. The meeting manager is the focal point of intelligence, determining how, where, and when all things must come together” (Mutnik, 2006, p. 524). In Chapter 47, Mitchell Beer and Joan Eisenstodt discuss the need to “Organize venues and deliver services in ways that better meet the strategic and organizational objectives behind an event” (Eisenstodt & Beer, 2006, p. 729).

PMM5 Postscript™ Use: Clearly meeting managers are team leaders in executing events. The need for enhanced cooperation and collaboration only continues in the meeting and event industry. That is the focus of this PMM5 Postscript™. The PMM5 Postscript™ also includes additional group discussion or research projects to supplement the PMM5 chapter.

Learner Outcomes: At the completion of this reading, you should be able to:

- Define how meeting planning teams differ from other teams.
- Identify the skills necessary to lead a planning team.
- Explain the 4 stages of team development.
- Select strategies to enable you to become a better team leader.

Related PMM5 Chapter: Chapter 1, A Fresh Perspective
 Author: Jeffrey Cufaude
 Chapter 9, Committees, Volunteers and Staff
 Author: Kelly Peacy, CAE
 Chapter 34, It’s Showtime
 Author: Gail Mutnik, MPA
 Chapter 47, The Professional Meeting Manager
 Author: Joan Eisenstodt and Mitchell Beer, CMM, CMP



What is a team?

Jon Katzenbach in *The Wisdom of Teams* differentiates between working groups and teams. In working groups, members interact to share information, share perspectives and maybe even share best practices. In working groups, members make decisions to help individual perform within his or her area of individual responsibility. A team, compared to a working group, has people with complimentary skills who are equally committed to a common purpose to which they hold themselves mutually responsible (Katzenbach, 1994).

On the surface, just looking at a group of people won't differentiate whether they are a team or a working group. Teams have a common pursuit. Working groups have members with individual pieces. Only looking at the group dynamics will allow differentiation.

This Team is Like No Other

Cross-functional supplier teams in the meeting and event industry fundamentally differ from other teams in four ways:

1. **The project with many masters** — A meeting or event is a challenging project because the leader is typically answering to many masters. Stakeholders include the person holding the meeting, the participants, senior management, exhibitors, sponsors and participants. Customers and suppliers can also be meeting stakeholders. And each group may have a different reason, a different objective for the meeting. The stakeholders may define value or success in different ways resulting in even more challenges.
2. **Project teams vs. intact teams** — Teams responsible for executing meetings and events are virtual teams. The team forms to execute a meeting and then the majority of the members will disband for the next meeting. While there are many relationships that extend from one meeting to another, many team members are new to a team. Part of this is the nature of the beast – changing geographic locations often dictates that the supplier faces are new for each meeting. In addition, the desire for something new, different, something not done last time, creates pressure to add new, different suppliers to the team.
3. **Teams are highly permeable** — In many situations, teams are formed at the outset of the project and all the players are identified. The team starts out with all the players (new and returning) in place. Many meeting teams have team members added to a team along the way. They are dropped in; or team members will drop out as their roles are completed. This makes the team structure much more permeable and less fixed.
4. **Scope is a moving target** — More than in other situations, the scope, goals and objectives for meetings are more likely to be a moving target. Often meetings are called to happen, and yet, the reason for the meeting is not fully fleshed out. This is less likely to happen with systems installations, engineering project or other projects.

Building Effective Supplier Teams

Meeting managers often have great discretion or great input on selecting vendors and suppliers. To build effective supplier teams, select team members who:

- Exchange information freely and openly
- Work outside boundaries (who are not prone to the “not my job” attitude)

- Demonstrate a willingness to be team members
- Serve as a single point of contact for their organization

Seek people who demonstrate the intangible ability to see the big picture. Look for vendors who don't see themselves as simply a florist, a DMC or a caterer, but rather who see their role as partners who will help create a unified, branded seamless event.

While technical skills are important, find people who demonstrate the three characteristics of skills, accountability and commitment. Interestingly, the US Army states that they hire for attitude and train for skills. While this mantra will not suit supplier teams seeking specific expertise in the short-run, it does emphasize the importance of commitment and willingness to be a team player.

One characteristic of team players is their ability to support team goals. Teams have an interesting interplay of needs. On all teams, there is a natural tension between:

- My needs
- Your needs
- Team needs

Only when individual team members can support team needs and often dilute their own issues can teams be most effective.

A final issue is team composition. How well do all the team members fit into the overall team? This is a question of how team members manage their personal identity.

Membership/inclusion — Will they feel like an insider? Do they want to belong?

Influence/control — Will they be listened to? Will they be able to contribute? Will they let others contribute?

Mutual loyalty/commitment — How will they get along with other team members? Will they be able to develop a cooperative spirit?

Who to include on a Supplier Team

Think broadly about the supplier team. Expertise and help can be found from various sources. A team will be composed of two kinds of partners. Meeting managers will have suppliers on your team that are:

- **Long-term** — suppliers with a pre-existing relationship or where the meeting manager perceives value in a long-term relationship
- **Short-term** — suppliers with whom the relationship is transactional; it might never develop into long-term relationship

An effective supplier team may include representatives from:

Venues

- Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Hotel sales
- Hotel Convention Services Manager

- Catering managers
- Catering company

Production

- AV companies
- Décor
- Production/lighting
- Teambuilding companies
- Incentive houses
- Trade show producer
- Entertainers
- Modeling agencies

Logistics

- Registration company
- Exhibit designers
- Airlines
- Name badge suppliers
- Ground transportation

Miscellaneous

- Other suppliers
- Internal support (Marketing, Human Resources, Training, Technology, etc)

Tips to Jump-start an Effective Supplier Team

At the outset of a team, the role of a great team leader is to be a:

Visionary — The role of a team leader is not simply reciting lists of specifications and requirements. Rather than being simply a conduit, a meeting manager is responsible for providing the vision and framework for the team. And communicating that vision in way that is understood and motivating.

Master organizer of resources — A team leader will define the roles; determine the gaps and identify where one need to build a team.

Influencer of organizational strategy — To increase program value, a meeting manager must be able to synthesize information. Meeting managers must take in information from the team, from above and from other sources. Daniel Pink in *A Whole New Mind* identifies six skills necessary for future success. One of the skills he calls “Symphony.” He writes:

“Symphony, as I call this aptitude, is the ability to put together the pieces. It is the capacity to synthesize rather than to analyze, to see relationships between seemingly unrelated fields; to detect broad new patterns rather than to delivery specific answers; and to invent something new by combining elements nobody else thought to pair” (Pink, 2005, p. 126).

People who hope to thrive in the Pink’s Conceptual Age must understand the connections between diverse, and seemingly separate, disciplines (Pink, 2005, p. 130).

Like Gail Mutnik, Pink sees the importance of orchestrating (Mutnik, 2006, p. 524). Pink writes:

“In any symphony, the composer and the conductor have a variety of responsibilities...What conductors and composers desire – what separates the long remembered from the quickly forgotten – is the ability of marshal these relationships into a whole whose magnificence exceeds the sum of its part” (Pink, 2005, pp. 136-137).

Great balancer — A team leader understands that at different stages of team formation, teams require different “treatment” from a leader. One well-known team models is Dr Bruce Tuckman’s Forming-Storming-Norming-Performing model published in 1965.

Stage 1: Forming

During this stage, the team has high dependence on the leader for guidance and direction. There may be little agreement on team aims other than those received from leader. Individual roles and responsibilities are unclear. The leader must be prepared to answer questions about the team's purpose, objectives and external relationships.

Stage 2: Storming

During this stage, decisions don't come easily to the group. Clarity of purpose increases but uncertainties persist. The team needs to be focused on its goals to avoid becoming distracted by relationships and emotional issues. Compromises may be required to enable progress.

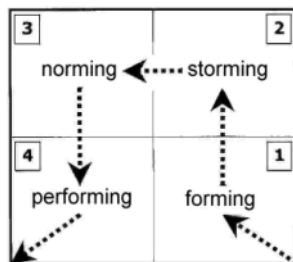
Stage 3: Norming

During this stage, agreement and consensus forms within the team, who respond well to facilitation by leader. Roles and responsibilities are clear and accepted. Big decisions are made by group agreement. Smaller decisions may be delegated to individuals or small teams within group. Commitment and unity is strong. The team may engage in fun and social activities. The team discusses and develops its processes and working style. There is general respect for the leader and leadership is more shared by the team.

Stage 4: Performing

During this stage, the team is more strategically aware; the team knows clearly what it is doing and why. The team has a shared vision and is able to stand on its own feet with no interference or participation from the leader. There is a focus on over-achieving goals. The team has a high degree of autonomy. Disagreements occur but now they are resolved within the team positively and necessary changes to processes and structure are made by the team. The team is able to work towards achieving the goal, and also to attend to relationship, style and process issues along the way. Team members look after each other. The team requires delegated tasks and projects from the leader.

Tuckman’s model shows how teams progress through the four stages of team development:



(Tuckman, 1965)

Tips for Managing Effective Supplier Teams

The management and development of the team (and its people) is ongoing and constant. Management skills are part of a meeting manager's journey of life-long learning. Managing people is a challenge. Tips are useful but must be adapted for a meeting manager's personal style and the specific situation. This section provides information on the seven areas for managing teams. Each section will have a brief commentary and then provide bullet points.

The seven elements for managing great teams are:

1. Create the Purpose
2. Communicate
3. Orchestrate Progress
4. Demonstrate Leadership
5. Manage the Project
6. Share Leadership
7. Facilitate Transitions

Each of these elements is discussed in detail.

Create the Purpose — To manage a great team, a meeting manager must build the common purpose. Begin with the end in mind to create the vision. There is a direct correlation between a clear purpose for the project and project success.

Other actions to take to create the purpose include:

- Identify stakeholders
- Build agreement with stakeholders about goals, objectives and outcomes
- Tie goals, objectives and outcomes to the organizational business plan
- Set the scope and boundaries

Communicate — Establishing the purpose and vision is the first purpose. Then it must be clearly and consistently communicated to the team members with enthusiasm. Strong communication manifests itself in:

- Establishing good communication patterns and strategies
- Communicating to the team members about the purpose and roles
- Communicating to team members about tasks, progress and accountability
- Communicating to other stakeholders

People work more effectively when they understand the goals they are trying to achieve. A leader helps the team see the desired outcome of their efforts and help them set specific goals and milestones along the way.

Rodd Wagner and James K. Harter in *The First Element of Great Managing* write (Wagner & Harter, 2006):

"Knowing what's expected" is more than a job description. It's a detailed understanding of how what one person is supposed to do fits in with what everyone else is supposed to do and how those expectations change when circumstances change. A good team, some say, is a lot like a great jazz band in which each player listens to the other instruments as he plays his own. The better they pay attention to the rest of the band and work their way into the music, the better the result."

A leader is also responsible to communicate up, sideways and outside the organization as necessary. Supplier teams, as a cross-functional team, are unique in that people serve as team members and are also (likely) to function as leaders within their organizations.

Other actions to take to communicate effectively include:

- Respect and understand each others' "diversity"
- Practice effective dialogue instead of debate
- Identify and resolve group conflicts
- Involve members in clear problem-solving and decision making procedures
- Value synergism and interdependence
- Help teams manage the scope of their work
- Communicate your belief in the team concept and the team's potential

Orchestrate Progress — Successful leaders orchestrate progress on a variety of fronts: with team members and the other stakeholders who are involved in the meeting.

Other actions to take to orchestrate progress include:

- Communicate on a regular schedule and be predictable (don't surprise team members)
- Gain commitment for support
- Create a practical system for agreeing and tracking each task the team does for a client.
- Create accountability by indicating individual team members who are responsible and indicate deadlines
- Communicate in actionable terms

Demonstrate Leadership — A leader's role is to lead, not to do the work or make all of the decisions. Meeting managers should communicate to the team what the team leader role is and isn't. Help them see how the leader relies on their experience, knowledge and intellect in the completion of the team's work. However, when the chips are down and a team member experiences obstacles and road blocks and it is the leader's job to remove those roadblocks, find additional resources, and generally provide support. The most effective leaders work to help the team succeed.

Other actions to take to demonstrate leadership effectively include:

- Build relationships for trust and respect
- Champion the overall goals
- Recognize and celebrate
- Raise the bar
- Practice continuous improvement

Manage the Project — A cross-organizational project needs to be well-managed; someone has responsibility to put all the pieces together. A team leader or manager is like a coach for a sports team or, as Pink or Harter and Wagner suggest, a conductor for an orchestra.

Other actions to take to manage the project include:

- Balance task and process
- Plan thoroughly before acting.
- Emphasize and support team goals
- Reward individual performance

Share Leadership — Cross-organizational team members are often already leaders in their own departments or functions. The most successful cross-organizational teams share the leadership role to capitalize on the team's functional and organizational diversity. As a leader, it is therefore important to share leadership. One key way this can happen is for the leader to keep quiet. A meeting manager can encourage input by avoiding being the first person to talk or voice an opinion on a subject.

Other actions to take to manage the project include:

- Allow team members to help develop strategies
- Allow team member to help identify tasks
- Encourage creativity around new ideas and processes

Facilitate Transitions — Cross-organizational teams seldom enjoy constant membership from beginning to end; this is especially true in executing meetings as supplier partners may be added or dropped off from the team. The transitions of team members can make or break a team. It is the meeting manager's responsibility, as team leader, to bring new team members up to speed. They will act at the forming stage of the team despite the balance of the team who may be norming or performing.

Other actions to take to facilitate transitions include:

- Create an energized work atmosphere for everyone
- Develop skills required to work in teams
- Engage and motivate people through transitions
- Model and explain collaborative skills
- Explain the team's culture and challenges
- Maximize everyone's contribution to the team

More Tips

Additional suggestions for meeting managers to become effective team leaders include:

- Involve the operational staff (for example, the banquet manager) in a site visit.
- Provide conference services manager with as much information as soon as possible so he or she can share it with their team at the venue.
- Involve the operational team into the planning process.
- See what additional assistance partners can provide. For example, many hotels or CVBs can help associations by providing collateral materials or creating a website for group registration.
- Use referrals to identify potential partners.
- Use preferred vendors but don't be exclusive. With short lead times, it's good to have a small pool of resources to consider.
- Use the internet and technology to the fullest advantage. For example, subscribe to an e-fax service to receive faxes via email while traveling or on-site.
- Show a clear interest in individuals and actively seek to incorporate individual interests and strengths into some aspect of the team's work.
- Always think of responsibility for the team and its performance as being split 50/50 between the team leader and members. All the team, not just the leader, is responsible for the team's performance, processes and outputs.

The Payoff

Meeting managers' careers are enhanced if they are also effective team leaders. Management skills often are more valued than technical skills. When a meeting manager hoards controls — failing to delegate, they:

- Diminish the quality of the meeting
- Give management the impression that meetings are easy to coordinate
- Paint themselves as some one who lacks the ability to lead
- Focus on everything including things they don't like or aren't good at
- Restrict themselves from larger projects with larger budgets

The benefits to effectively using supplier teams include:

- Increasing program value
- Harnessing power of collective resources
- Increasing credibility and visibility
- Evaluating, learning, refining
- Challenging the status quo

Summary

Creating more value in meeting and events will not occur unless suppliers and vendors actually become part of the team. A meeting manager, functioning as the team leader, has a dynamic role on the team. Meeting managers must communicate vision, allocate resources and set the team direction. They must guide the team through the formation stages. As the team begins to gel (performing stage), they must also relinquish control and share leadership. In a team environment, people understand and believe that thinking, planning, decisions and actions are better when done cooperatively in an environment of trust and open communication. Leading well-functioning supplier teams allows a meeting manager to demonstrate their leadership characteristics and ultimately, enhance their own reputation and career.

Group Discussion or Projects

1. Teams form under many unique circumstances. Meeting managers (especially association meeting planners) may find themselves responsible for executing a meeting using a committee structure. The committees are often composed of volunteers. What are three suggestions you would offer to any meeting manager in that situation to build an effective team of suppliers?
2. List five characteristics of high performing supplier teams.
3. How can a meeting manager create an environment that celebrates individualism, but at the same time supports teamwork. Suggest three strategies for meeting managers to bridge this dichotomy.

4. Often suppliers have overlap in capabilities, products and services. So, one supplier (team member) may be able to do more than they were hired to do. How can a meeting manager improve cooperation inside a cross-functional team under these circumstances?
5. Why is it helpful if team members possess some political pull themselves?

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