

Becoming a Shadow of Influence

Workplace Dynamics

In speaking with purchasing and supply professionals at all levels, many are struck by the growing importance of cross-functional teams. According to one organization's chief procurement officer, "Teamwork is becoming more and more important, both internally with other business units and externally with suppliers. Many people simply don't know how to be effective in a cross-functional team environment." Increasingly, purchasing and supply professionals are being thrust into important cross-functional team meetings. Often, they lack the skills and knowledge necessary for them to be influential and effective in that setting.

Test of Supply Chain Team Performance: Can We Handle Contention?

It's easy for most individuals and teams to function smoothly when things are going well. However, when tough, contentious issues arise — as they inevitably do in a cross-functional team environment — many people are ill-equipped to handle them. Unfortunately, inherent discomfort with conflict reinforces ineffective behavior inside of teams.

For example, in order to maximize the value of the total corporate spend, one well-known technology organization empowers its global commodity managers to involve representatives of other internal business units in cross-functional meetings. In those sessions, difficult issues typically arise regarding a number of topics, such as optimization of the supply base. Sometimes, the local facility wishes to use a local supplier, rather than the supplier that can best help leverage the spend. When these kinds of potentially contentious issues surface, the following behaviors are typical:

- Attempts to "smooth over" and "manage away" tough issues rather than confronting them assertively
- Overly aggressive positions taken, which "draw battle lines" and cause people to become even more entrenched and defensive of their "silo"
- Avoidance of discussion of contentious issues altogether

Some purchasing professionals thrive in cross-functional team situations, no matter how intense the issues become. Their teams seem to handle those issues in ways that produce innovative solutions and greater commitment to the objectives of the total supply chain. Rather than disengagement from tough issues, these top performers find ways to maximize their own influence, and the contributions of others, to develop innovative team solutions. The following provides guidance to help purchasers develop top-performing cross-functional teams.

Guiding Principles for High-Performing Players

Based on ongoing research in this area for more than a decade, BayGroup International has

An effective cross-functional team requires a leader of influence to facilitate good teamwork.

concluded that these high performers, whether consciously or unconsciously, observe the following four principles:

• Maintain Mutual Esteem

Top performers seek out ways to build the esteem of all parties involved. They recognize that a strong foundation of mutual esteem and respect is essential to inspire teamwork throughout the supply chain, particularly when difficult issues need resolution. They know that to influence other people, you must first understand them. If their egos and esteem are threatened, they may never open up. Therefore, top performers seek out opportunities to reinforce others for staying positively engaged in team discussions.

• Maximize Information Flow

When the mutual esteem of all team members is maintained, they are willing to share data that impacts team issues. High performers prompt this "information flow" by encouraging extensive sharing of team knowledge by asking in-depth questions and summarizing what they have heard to ensure mutual understanding. They listen carefully and thoroughly before drawing conclusions. They help the team "diagnose before it prescribes." In the process, they avoid the typical "attack your position, defend mine" cycle which can easily occur in cross-functional interactions between the purchasing and supply professionals and those from other business units.

• Foster Creative Solutions

When the flow of information and perspectives is maximized, the chances of finding an innovative, cost-effective solution increase significantly. Top team performers foster creativity in a variety of ways. They avoid the tendency to prematurely end difficult discussions with "quick fixes." Instead, they "stay with the tension" of the situation, going beyond the first proposed solution to explore second and third alternatives. Often, this additional exploration of alternatives improves the initial solution or completely replaces it with a more innovative one.

• Find the Higher Business Purpose

The very best purchasing and supply professionals help avoid turf battles and parochial power plays. They actively seek out areas of common ground and, when the need arises, refocus the discussion on shared higher business purposes, such as total supply chain objectives. Instead of focusing on why something cannot be done, the team begins to ask itself, "If we could get it done, how could we do it?"

By following these four principles, top performers influence and inspire the teams on which they participate. The results: better dialogue, improved relationships, and more innovative approaches to resolving tough issues to the benefit of the entire supply chain. ■



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