



## SkillSharpener Web Extra

# Turn your service unit into a well-functioning team

Customer service managers often seek to develop self-motivating and self-directed teams. "It goes back to the old saying that two (or more) can do things better than one," says Renée Evenson, author of *Award-Winning Customer Service*, "as long as the two (or more) are working towards the same goals."

Effective teams, Evenson says, "Have a strongly defined purpose, they know what their goals are, they have a central role in setting and achieving those goals, and perhaps most importantly, they know how to communicate effectively among themselves. Often they will have decision-making authority and can identify and solve problems on their own rather than having to bring them to a manager."

If a team-orientation is something that you think could be helpful in your organization, Evenson warns that you must also keep in mind that "a strong team begins with effective leadership, with an involved manager who understands the importance of teamwork and what goes into creating a well-functioning team."

### Team building starts with open communication

"Communication, first of all, has to be honest and open, so that team members feel that they can offer their opinions in a safe environment, without repercussions," Evenson says. The manager can help by promoting what she calls "Team Think." That is, reinforcing the team concept by calling the group a team, and using words like "we" and "us" rather than "I" and

"me." The manager sets the example and sets the tone in this respect.

"Emphasize the team as a collective unit, where each member has an equal voice, and 'we're all in this together,'" Evenson says. "Hold frequent team meetings, if possible, as a way to promote the team concept and to share what is going on with the

### The five C's of effective teamwork

Thinking of turning your service unit into a high-functioning team? Renée Evenson suggests that team-building is a five-stage process. Where does your service team currently fall in this progression?

- **Communication.** Start with an atmosphere of open communication, where you talk about the team's mission and goals, and get people using a team-oriented vocabulary.
- **Cooperation.** Open communication among team members should develop into trust, mutual respect, and cooperation among team members. At this stage, the manager can start to delegate more responsibility, but should also show appreciation and praise team efforts.
- **Creativity.** As cooperation develops and close relationships form, the team should be able to work through problems and conflicts with less help from the manager. But be ready to let the team make some mistakes.
- **Cohesion.** At this stage team members are less likely to go to their manager for help, and it is easier to delegate work to the team and to let them meet and work on their own to some extent. But the manager needs to be there to praise, coach, and make sure things stay on track.
- **Continuity.** Your team is largely self-directed and self-disciplined, but you still need to be there to observe, ask questions, and to listen.





company and how it affects the customer service team. When people understand what is happening and why something is happening, they accept it better.”

Part of the communications effort should also be to have team members get to know each other better on a personal level.

The manager should also set ground rules for communication within the team — “that no one is to be ridiculed, and that you expect team members to support each other and to communicate in a positive manner,” Evenson says. “And if there is a problem, if there is a conflict, then the manager should direct the team to resolve the issue in an honest, open manner.” And if the manager hears a team member putting another team member down, she adds, he or she has to pull that person aside and correct them.

Finally, it’s the manager’s role, at least initially, to talk about the goals of the team and to recognize and celebrate the progress that is made.

### Cooperation, creativity, and cohesion

When you see that your team is really beginning to communicate openly and positively with each other, Evenson says, “then respect is going to develop and you will see that they are going to start trusting each other, and you are going to see cooperation developing.”

When that happens, team members want to work as a group to help each other and support each other. Then they are going to get creative and start to identify problems and issues that get in the way of their goals and performance. “They will start coming up with their own ideas about how to do things, and you really want to encourage that,” she says.

*“Communication has to be honest and open, so that team members feel that they can offer their opinions in a safe environment.”*

“When you see this happening,” Evenson says, “then it is time to start to delegate more responsibility to the team, address productivity issues, or customer satisfaction issues. For example, you may allow them to plan and conduct their own meetings.”

Of course, she adds, “you can’t delegate without training.” You have to make sure that your team has the necessary problem solving skills, and that they understand your expectations.

Evenson says that she probably wouldn’t appoint one person as a team leader, because that might interfere with the cohesiveness of your team. Instead, rotate leadership and who gets to run the meetings among different members of the team.”

And at this stage, as manager, “your role is going to evolve into one that is going to support the team,” Evenson says. “You are going to be at those meetings and on the floor of the customer service center as a guide, to keep them on track, as they are coming into that cohesive state.”

In addition, you want to allow them to make their own decisions, understanding that they will make the occasional mistake. “And when they do, your job is to get them back on track, guide them through the pros and cons of the decision they have made, or are about to make, and ask open ended questions,” Evenson says.

You should also encourage team members to approach problems and issues from different perspectives — think of themselves as the owner of the company, for instance, or think of the impact of their decisions on the customer experience.





### Maintaining the continuity of the team

At this point — when you have trained your team members to work together as a cohesive unit — the manager can step back a bit and take more of a leadership role with the team. “You will have more time for other management responsibilities,” Evenson says, “but you never want to give up being a hands-on leader. You always want to stay involved in the team. Go to the meetings — though maybe not every one, because you want your team to develop the confidence that they can handle meetings on their own. But stay involved — or your team will backslide.”

Managers will also want to make sure that they maintain relationships with team members as individuals. Not all of the goals and objectives of your people are going to be team-oriented. “You want to continue to praise individuals, as well as praising the team for meeting team goals,” Evenson says. “Peo-

ple want to know how they are doing as individuals as well as how they are contributing to the team. And if they are not contributing as they should to the team, teach them, coach them, and work with them to become better contributors. That’s a great developmental tool.”

The only way to guarantee that a team maintains an effectively high level of team performance over time is for the manager to stay involved, even if at a slight distance. “It will be more of a supportive role, but you want to be able to see if they start to slide back,” says Evenson. “You’ve got to observe, watch what is going on, ask questions, and listen to what the team members are saying. Spend time with them and watch how they interact with each other. And continue to look for those little teaching moments.”

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