

# What New Team Leaders Should Do First

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Getting people to work together isn't easy, and unfortunately many leaders skip over the basics of team building in a rush to start achieving goals. But your actions in the first few weeks and months can have a major impact on whether your team ultimately delivers results. What steps should you take to set your team up for success? How do you form group norms, establish clear goals, and create an environment where everyone feels comfortable and motivated to contribute?

## What the Experts Say

Whether you're taking over an existing team or starting a new one, it's critical to devote time and energy to establishing *how* you want your team to work, not just what you want them to achieve. The first few weeks are critical. "People form opinions pretty quickly, and these opinions tend to be sticky," says Michael Watkins, the cofounder of Genesis Advisers and author of the updated *The First 90 Days*. "If you don't take time upfront to figure out how to get the team working well, problems are always going to come up," says Mary Shapiro, who teaches organizational behavior at Simmons College and is the author of the *HBR Guide to Leading Teams*. "You either pay upfront or you pay later." Here's how to start your team off on the right foot.

## Get to know each other

"One of your first priorities should be to get to know your team members and to encourage them to get to better know one another," says Shapiro. To that end, "resist the urge to immediately start talking about the work and the task outcome," and focus instead on fostering camaraderie. In practice, this may mean holding a retreat or beginning meetings with team-building exercises. For virtual teams, it might mean starting calls by getting updates on how each person is doing or hosting virtual happy hours or coffee breaks. One particularly effective exercise is to have people share their best and worst team experiences, says Shapiro. Discussing those good and bad dynamics will help everyone get on the same page about what behavior they want to encourage — and avoid — going forward.

## Show what you stand for

Use your initial interactions with team members as an opportunity to showcase your





values. Explain what's behind each of your decisions, what your priorities are, and how you will [evaluate the team's performance](#), individually and collectively. Walk them through what metrics you might use to gauge progress, so that they understand how they'll be evaluated and what's expected of them. "Team members will want to know how you define success," says Shapiro. By communicating your vision and values, you will show your team that you're committed to a healthy degree of transparency, says Watkins, and "create positive momentum around yourself in the new role."

### **Explain how you want the team to work**

You also need to explain in detail how you want the team to work. When you have newer team members coming on board, don't assume that veteran team members will explain to the new recruits how meetings are supposed to be run or the best ways to ask for help; it's your job as a leader to set expectations and explain processes. If you don't make those norms clear for everyone, you risk creating an environment where [people feel excluded](#), uncertain, or unwilling to contribute.

### **Set or clarify goals**

One of your most important tasks as a team leader is to set ambitious but achievable goals with your team's input. Make clear what the team is working toward and how you expect it to get there. By setting these goals early on, the group's decision making will be clearer and more efficient, and you'll lay the framework of holding team members accountable. Many managers inherit their teams, which often means they aren't creating new goals, but clarifying existing ones. "It's actually rare that someone gets to come in and redefine the goals for the group in a profound way," says Watkins. In those instances, your challenge as a manager is to reorganize roles or rethink strategies to best achieve the goals at hand.

### **Keep your door open**

If there's one thing that new managers need to remember, it's that over-communicating in the early days is preferable to the alternative. "It's always better to start with more structure, more touch points, more check-ins at the beginning," says Shapiro. How you do that — via big meetings, one-on-ones, email, or shared progress reports — will vary from team to team and manager to manager, but whatever the communication method, "do as much as you can," says Shapiro. Watkins agrees: "I've never encountered a situation where a team member says, 'Gosh, I wish the boss would stop communicating with me. I'm so sick of hearing from her.' You just never hear that."

### **Score an "early win"**

Identifying and solving a business problem that has a quick and dramatic impact early on shows that you can listen and get things done, says Watkins. Perhaps there is a longstanding employee frustration or an outdated work process. Maybe there is a project that you can easily fund or prioritize. Taking swift action demonstrates that "you are connecting and learning." But most importantly, [achieving an "early win" builds team momentum](#). "It motivates people," says Shapiro, "and can win you goodwill you might need later if the going gets tough."



## Principles to Remember

### Do:

- Be clear about what goes into your decision making and how you'll evaluate the team's progress
- Encourage team members to connect — better communication early on will help avoid misunderstandings and poor results later
- Look for roadblocks or grievances you can fix — it will earn you capital and inspire the team

### Don't:

- Jump into trying to accomplish the work without building relationships with the team
- Assume that new team members understand how you or others work — take the time to explain processes and expectations.
- Be afraid to communicate often early on — you can always pull back when the team is working well

### Case study #1: When in doubt, over-communicate

Czarina Walker, the founder and CEO of InfiniEDGE Software, had a crisis on her hands. She had recently taken over the leadership of a combined team of engineers and creative employees for a new project. With a deep well of experience leading technical teams, she assumed that the minimalist management approach that had worked for her for years would also work with this hybrid team. "I figured the non-techies had some understanding of our technical team's processes, and knew how we worked by virtue of shared office osmosis," Czarina says.

But the team dynamics floundered from the beginning. "My technical team didn't have a problem getting in a room and talking about what was going well and what wasn't," says Czarina. But this standard tactic of identifying improvement areas with her engineers felt like a blame game to the new creative members. "They felt thrown into this process; it was like being invited to a firing squad." Resentments festered, and soon she was having difficulty getting everyone to attend the weekly status meetings. "As a result, the project started off the exact way you hope it never does — with a lot of frustration and animosity," she says.

Czarina recognized that her failure to establish communication norms was partly to blame. She hadn't made the purpose of the status meetings clear, and hadn't explained that her





agenda was not aimed at criticizing, but at getting everyone on the same page. “So I had to do something I never had to do before: over-communicate,” Czarina says. She sat down with both groups to go over the purpose of the meetings, and how she expected them to be run, while addressing each groups’ concerns.

The extra work paid off. The project was completed on deadline, and the creative team members reported that they felt the process had been a valuable learning experience. “Even though I had to over-communicate,” Czarina says, “it was well worth it, because the next project is going to go so much smoother.”

### **Case study #2: Build connections outside the office**

For the past decade, Nate Riggs, the founder of marketing firm NR Media Group, has run a virtual office, with employees scattered across the country. But this year, after realizing the company needed a brick-and-mortar base to grow its video production unit, Nate transitioned the firm to the new Columbus, Ohio, headquarters.

Because some employees still worked remotely and others reported to the office each day, Nate recognized that challenges and miscommunications could arise among the group, some of whom were new employees. So he held a team retreat in Columbus, a combination of strategy sessions, client meet-and-greets, and after-hours social events. “The team cohesiveness that was developed on that retreat has been amazing,” says Nate.

The team-building efforts had immediate benefits. “We left with a lot of momentum. Our first week back, we were meeting deliverables in about half the time that it took us before the retreat,” says Nate.

In order to maintain the energy, the team now gathers each week in a virtual Google Hangout with a set agenda. Nate also has regular one-on-one meetings with each team member to get status updates and reassess goals. “We try to keep high-frequency touches with the team, but not so much that it interferes with getting work done,” he says.

He has also encouraged the team to maintain the social connections they established at the retreat. To mimic the banter that might have happened around the office water cooler, employees have recently launched a group texting thread, regularly sharing jokes, interesting news, and funny stories with coworkers. “To me, that’s the indicator of a team culture, right?” says Nate. “We all have something that we can laugh at together.”





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