

Hogan case study: The nice team that went nowhere

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Team performance depends on having a clear mission—a sense of purpose—and the right people to deliver it.

In the face of widespread and systematic safety failures, including worker deaths, a large organization created a new health and safety team and gave it power and autonomy to identify and fix the problems and policies that were putting their workers in danger. Six months into the mission, the team was meandering and hadn't made any impact.

Although the mission was really clear, the team consisted of people who were powerfully driven by relationships but with no drive or ambition. They were genuine, friendly people who put a lot of effort into reaching out across the organization, but couldn't deliver results.

People have two roles within a team: functional and psychological. Functional roles are determined by a person's position or title—Chief Financial Officer, lead engineer, accountant, etc. Psychological roles are informal roles which people naturally gravitate to based on their personalities.

“When individuals are formed into a team with a designated task, there is an awkward phase in which everyone is searching for how he or she fits in—his or her psychological role,” said Dave Winsborough, VP of Innovation at Hogan X. “We found that there are five psychological roles to which people naturally gravitate: results, relationships, process, innovation, and pragmatism.”

For a team to function properly, its psychological roles have to be balanced. First, there has to be enough diversity among team members that each role is filled. This sounds simple enough, but people are naturally attracted to others who are like themselves, meaning self-formed teams are likely to be fairly homogenous. In this case, the team was heavy on people in the relationships role—concerned with keeping peace within the group and with outside stakeholders—with none in the results role, which focuses on clarifying goals, driving action, and holding team members accountable for their work.

Second, there have to be enough individuals in each role to provide critical mass. In other words, no single person can fill more than one role. Some roles may require the efforts of more than one person, so there have to be enough people to get the job done. When psychological roles are correctly balanced, the natural push and pull between the different roles creates healthy conflict that can help teams function.

In this instance, our advice to the CEO was changing the team's membership, starting with putting someone in the results role — a stronger, more assertive leader. That was a tough call, and in light of the recent shift to install this group, one he was reluctant to take.

He persevered with the current membership for another 12 months, providing stronger and stronger direction for the team. But personality is hard to change. Two years later, there was another restructure, and the team that went nowhere was disbanded.