Successful Team Building in Computer-based Technology Companies

by Adrienne Gans, Ph.D.

Introduction

Why are team building efforts that succeed in consumer product and service organizations so often a disappointment in high-tech departments and companies?

The answers lie in the unique organizational characteristics inherent in technology product development groups and how these impact team process and training. Hi-tech companies employ more scientists, engineers, and technology specialists whose motivations, cognitive style, and personality are different from those found in other parts of the organization or other sectors. In addition, product development cycles at technology companies are highly accelerated and undergo continuous change, creating a different work ecology.

The following are research-documented differentiators of the high-tech culture with corresponding tips for effective team building within this type of organization.

Seven Tips for Successful Team Building

1. Technical professionals often identify more strongly with their niche technical community than with the company that employs them. Organizations can build *company loyalty* by providing employees opportunities to learn from this community.
   Tip: Foster the team's involvement with its technical community. For example, as a reward for meeting team objectives, sponsor individual memberships in trade organizations. Provide the team with mentoring supervision with a senior specialist. Support continuing education. Or give each team a budget for books and trade magazines.

2. High-tech companies are exceptionally dependent on product development teams to meet business objectives. And while most technical professionals are not motivated to take the spotlight, they respond positively when they see the fruits of their labor visible in product adoption and industry recognition.
   Tip: Be sure to keep product teams apprised of the latest sales, tradeshows, press releases, publication articles, awards, analyst evaluations -- information routinely made available to marketing and sales professionals.

3. High-tech professionals often resist a highly-structured corporate culture. They expect to work hours that are long, but not necessarily rigidly-scheduled.

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Tip: It is important to manage on the basis of meeting deliverables. For example, a responsible employee who works late into the night to meet a deadline should have management's trust and the flexibility to arrive later the following morning.

4. Often, a company's revenue-based goals for bringing new products to market conflict with its technical teams' values about developing innovative, state-of-the-art technology. This creates a significant source of stress that can exact a productivity toll during the product release life cycle. It creates a work team "biosphere" that increasingly "heats up" as resources "burn out."
   Tip: At the product team level, delivery schedule estimates given to management should reflect work under real, not ideal conditions. Assume sick days, vacation days, unpredictable events, meeting times, and a decline in productivity associated with burn-out towards the end of the project. Schedule social time-outs for the team that include family participation. Address developers' frustration about the "pragmatic" scope of the technology vision by encouraging a long-term perspective on their careers anchored in wellness and opportunities for new skill training.

5. The use of self-managed teams in high-tech product development groups, particularly where "the best and brightest" are often the youngest and least mature, is not advised early in the team's development.
   Tip: Product development teams should have technical managers who are respected leaders and can provide flexible project management, facilitate communication, and interface to non-technical layers of the organization as needed.

6. The career promotion from product developer to team leader/manager represents a significant role transition for which many technical specialists are not prepared. Training for team leaders is critical because their entry-level jobs and early career experiences offer few built-in opportunities to learn management skills. Technical specialists are often introverted and autonomous. Yet they have the best potential to manage product development teams because members are more likely to respect and take direction from a knowledge expert.
   Tip: a high-tech "learning organization" will provide opportunities for technical specialists to learn the business and customer perspective through gradually increasing participation in customer meetings, tradeshows, etc. Training for new team leaders should develop both practical skills, such as running effective meetings and project management, as well as communication skills, such as resolving interpersonal conflicts and giving feedback.

7. Team training must simulate the demands of the real high-tech work environment in order to be effective. Traditional training designed to motivate sales teams may be interesting and enjoyable, but will only have a short-term impact on product development teamwork. Similarly, adventure-based training simulates the physically dangerous work context and develops necessary trust among interdependent team members. This

experience might be a great *reward* for a high-tech team that delivers its product on time. However, it would not develop the requisite skills for product team effectiveness because the training does not mirror the idiosyncratic demands of a high-pressure product delivery company.

Tip: develop a training program that truly simulates the requirements of the high-tech environment. Customize materials through collaborative interviews with the team, management, and trainer. The collaboration itself will be an important team-building experience and encourage buy-in among participants.

High-Tech Teams in the Future

Organizations are becoming more extended through alliances, joint ventures, and cooperative sales arrangements. With the increasing complexity of open-architecture products that plug and play across company lines, product developers who stay in research and development will find themselves working on *cross-organizational* teams. A technical professional or product development team can no longer function as an island. As Peter Drucker predicted over a decade ago, companies will adopt a "coordination" vs. "command" model of communication. This requires peer-level dialog designed to reduce cultural differences between organizations by relying on people who "speak the same language." With the rise of outsourcing and offshoring, technical management's leadership, communication, and interpersonal skills will be as important to a high-tech company's success as their technical skills have been in the past.

About Adrienne Gans, Ph.D.

Adrienne Gans combines professional skills as a psychologist with experience as a marketing vice president in a software development firm. Working with companies in a business capacity including IBM, Unisys, Kodak, Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield, Chase Manhattan Bank, NJ Department of Labor provides a foundation for her management consulting practice. She specialize in business strategy planning, assessment and leadership coaching. She has worked with large organizations such as Wells Fargo Bank, the City of San Jose, Merrill Lynch, Scholastic Inc., as well as emerging and rapidly growing intellectual property-based companies**.**

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