

Career Compass No. 28. My Team Member Is a Slacker!

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest shows us how we can power-up a colleague's potential.

As a mid-manager, I serve on an important cross-departmental team focused on neighborhood revitalization (one of the City Council's strategic priorities). Even though I do not formally lead the group, I am responsible for several significant project results. The problem is that I cannot meet my timelines without the active contributions of a team member from another department. He does not produce on a timely basis. He either drops the ball or calls me at the last minute and asks me to do some of the work.



This team is a high-status assignment launched by the City Manager who also serves as our team's "sponsor." My team member talks a good game in our meetings but does not deliver. His poor performance is hurting our team and making me look bad.

I am committed to this important work. What do I do about this slacker?

Your experience is becoming an increasing problem as more and more of our work in local government is occurring in cross-functional teams. We need cross-cutting teams because no one significant problem (like neighborhood revitalization) can be solved by any one department or any one agency. For example, the Police Department by itself cannot solve the gang problem. The County Public Health Agency by itself cannot address the childhood obesity challenge. To solve any problem, we need to cross boundaries and convene partners inside and outside our department and government. Cross-cutting teams can bring together diverse expertise and perspectives so we can develop creative responses.

"Messiness"

The big challenge is that such "matrix" teams are messy. Your team may have a formal leader but team success requires commitments from different departments and different players from those departments and/or outside groups. Typically, formal authority in a cross-department team situation is insufficient to force compliance and performance.

Given this “messiness,” here are some thoughts on how you can address your dilemma.

The General Approach—Take action yourself

To address your concern about your team colleague, you must first figure out why he is not delivering on his commitments. Once you inquire and identify the reason or reasons, then you can take some steps to address the problem.

While your first inclination may be to complain to the formal team leader and explain why you have not met all your commitments on a timely basis, a preferred approach is to take positive action yourself in order to minimize the problem. To start the process, you need to informally meet with your colleague. As part of the conversation, you can try to understand his motivation and interests as they relate to the neighborhood revitalization effort.

Even though you want to take action yourself and avoid complaining to the team leader, it is a good idea to still meet with her since you may need her assistance at some point later in the process to address the problem. At the meeting with the team leader, you can emphasize your commitment to the neighborhood revitalization initiative and review your assignments and deadlines and the assistance from others that is required for you to be successful in producing results. This kind of discussion will help prepare your team leader if you need her assistance in taking some of the steps identified below.

Possible Steps

1. FOCUS ON THE “WHY”

In investigating why your colleague has not delivered as desired, you may conclude that he does not understand the importance of the neighborhood revitalization initiative. He may regard his team assignments as secondary work or just other “to do’s” among his many duties. If this is the case, you may ask your team leader to schedule a discussion about the “why” or the meaning of the initiative. You or your team leader could request the City Manager who serves as the team sponsor to revisit the group at an upcoming meeting and stress the high-impact significance of the effort and why the City Council made it one of its strategic priorities.

To focus on the meaning behind neighborhood revitalization, you can suggest that the team meet with some neighborhood residents or business people and ask them to speak about the need for revitalization and how project efforts could improve their lives.

People need to know the “why” before focusing on the “what” or the “how.”

2. SPECIFY TEAM ASSIGNMENTS SO THEY ARE NOT VAGUE

You may conclude that a part of the problem is that team goals and assignments are not clear or specific enough for team members. For instance, team activities may not be broken into specific “chunks” assigned to specific individuals. If so, you can ask that clarifying team assignments be discussed at an upcoming team meeting and then put into writing and then reviewed on a regular basis.

3. CREATE TEAM ACCOUNTABILITY

Another possibility is that your colleague may not understand that his lack of performance may be impacting the performance of the team and how one completed assignment fits with another. Therefore, you may wish to ask your team leader to schedule a discussion at the next meeting at which everyone reviews key assignments and the need for timely accomplishment. The discussion

can also make explicit the connection of one piece of work to another. A written summary report can be distributed to all team members as well as the City Manager sponsor.

Going forward, you could develop a team assignment status report form and suggest that it be updated and reviewed at each meeting in order to promote team accountability. You can share the form with the team leader and recommend that it would help you and others stay on track.

To promote accountability, you can go around the room at each team meeting and directly ask if each team member can commit to the next phase of work and deliver as required.

4. RE-ENFORCE THE HIGH VISIBILITY OF THE INITIATIVE

If the other team member volunteered for the team because it is a high-status opportunity, then it would be helpful if your team leader invites (or ask if you could invite) the City Manager to have a check-in with the team at which time he could review the work of the team and the status of key assignments. The City Manager could also be asked to meet on a quarterly basis to review everyone's progress.

To promote the importance and visibility of the initiative, you could work with the team leader to schedule a quarterly or six-month update presentation to the Planning Commission and/or City Council and include a periodic news item in the City newsletter to the community.

5. CONSIDER THE "FIT"

Perhaps your colleague is not a good "fit" for his assignment. Either he does not have the necessary skills for his team responsibilities or he is not energized by the particular assignments.

If your colleague does not have the right skills, perhaps a mid-course assessment could be scheduled and the team could discuss swapping some responsibilities so there is a better alignment for all team members.

If your colleague is not energized by the specific assignment, perhaps it is time to reshuffle responsibilities. You could suggest that the team leader not assign work but rather ask for volunteers to commit to different tasks going forward in order that people work on issues or activities that energize them.

6. STOP ENABLING POOR BEHAVIOR

If the team member continues to dump his work on you, you must stop accepting the work even though you are committed to making the team successful. It may be difficult to say "no." However, if you continue to respond to last minute calls for help, you are simply enabling this kind of behavior and it will persist.

7. GET THE PERSON OFF THE BUS

If all else fails, the team may need to get this person "off the bus" (using a Jim Collin's term). To do so, you may encourage a mid-term assessment of the team effort and discuss a re-enrollment process. Given their commitment and interest in neighborhood revitalization, some team members may wish to re-enroll and recommit. As part of the re-enrollment process, team members may suggest some additional members to help build on the work and momentum of the team. Given a lack of interest or commitment, others (like your colleague) may be encouraged by the team leader and other team members to no longer continue.

Of course, a last-ditch response is to encourage the team leader to have in private a courageous conversation with the colleague in order to relieve the person of the team assignment.

A Team Leadership Role

If you are committed to the work of the team, you must assume a leadership role even without formal authority and exert positive influence—for your benefit and the benefit of the team and the organizational enterprise.

This kind of leadership role is especially important as more organizational work happens in cross-cutting teams. In such environments, dealing with messy problems and challenges is not just the responsibility of the formal leader—it is your responsibility as well. Everyone needs to lead.



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future *Career Compass*, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.