



LEADING A MULTI-FUNCTIONAL TEAM

Over the years, leadership has been a subject of great discussion and much debate. Various people have emphasized visionary leadership, shared leadership, empowered leadership, values-based leadership, charismatic leadership, and even tough-minded leadership. Leaders of multi-functional teams in the context of spine surgery must possess all of these characteristics—and more.

A multi-functional team is composed of people from a variety of departments, disciplines or functions whose expertise is needed for the achievement of the team's goal. For example, a drug development team in a pharmaceutical company typically includes representatives from clinical research, marketing, regulatory affairs, drug safety, biostatistics and project management, among others. A product team in the computer industry may be composed of experts in software development, computer hardware, engineering, marketing, sales, manufacturing and service. Closer to home, a spine surgery team may include some or all of the following:

- Senior chief surgeon—team leader
- Assistant surgeon
- Resident surgeon
- Operating room personnel
- Chief anesthetist
- Various assistants in patient care

As a result, leaders of spine surgery teams must manage a diverse group of health care professionals, often with a wide variety of backgrounds, cultural values, languages, team-player styles, training, and interests. In addition to the people-management skills required, a team leader must also have very high level surgical skills. Frequently, all of this must be accomplished without the authority that is usually associated with a team leadership position in a functional organization.

Would you apply for or accept this position? Your job, as leader of a multi-functional team, would be something like this: you'll be managing a group of people from different disciplines, departments and cultures who may have little or no experience in working together. You will be given little or no authority over their performance; however, you will be held accountable for the success of the team. You must have sufficient medical knowledge to understand the obstacles and the surgical skills to achieve a positive

outcome. And you should have the group process skills to engage the energy, facilitate active participation, encourage open communication, build trust and resolve conflicts among team members

Leaders with group process skills

The successful leader of a cross-functional team must have the necessary technical expertise to understand the issues and keep the team focused on the goal. Many team leaders are able to meet this requirement. However, although an understanding of the technical issues is necessary, it is not sufficient to ensure the success of the team. The successful leader is also able to understand and facilitate the human dynamics of the team—what I call providing “positive process leadership.” Process leadership involves bringing together the strangers who do not know each other, colleagues who have worked together on other tasks, and, perhaps, “enemies” who have participated in some past organizational battles.

Some of these positive process skills include the following:

- **Asking questions that bring out ideas and stimulate discussion.** Effective leaders use a repertoire of open-ended questions designed to bring out the necessary information.
- **Using paraphrasing and other effective listening skills to ensure effective communication.** A willingness to listen and having the skills to do it well are critical to a successful leader of a multi-functional team.
- **Managing group discussions to encourage quiet members to participate and talkative members to adhere to limits.** Studies of teams in critical and stressful situations show that key information often does not surface because some team members do not share data that could have saved lives or minimized problems.
- **Establishing an informal, relaxed climate where members feel free to candidly express their point of view.** It is important for a leader to present him- or herself as open to new ideas, reasonable risks, and out-of-the-box thinking.



- **Using the consensus method to reach decisions on key team issues.** Although at critical times the leader has to be willing to, “make a decision, take action and move on,” key decisions are best made with the active involvement and commitment of the team.
- **Involving members in the setting of team goals, objectives, and plan.** Overall goals are handed to the team or apparent from the problem; however, the team leader should then work with all team members to develop the specific plan by which they will accomplish the overall goal.
- **Insisting that team members respect each other and that each person’s contribution is valued.** Because team members come with different skill sets and expertise, it is important that everyone realize that all functions have a different but essential role to play in the success of the team.
- **Facilitating interaction among members.** Effective team leaders encourage team members to express their differences in a way that stays focused on the specific task at hand, e.g., how will it help accomplish a successful spine surgery.
- **Identifying and dealing with dysfunctional team member behaviors.** The leader must deal with persistent behavior such as arriving late, coming unprepared, being disrespectful, etc., that interferes with the team’s ability to use all its resources and achieve its goal.

- **Celebrating team accomplishments.** Great team leaders encourage team members to plan celebrations to acknowledge the attainment of team successes, e.g., completing a difficult surgery, bringing a new cancer drug to the market, increasing customer satisfaction.
- **Using recognition methods, task assignments, and other techniques to motivate team members.** As someone once said, great team leaders share the limelight and shoulder the blame.

Leaders who can set goals

Effective leadership also involves setting a direction for the team. Setting goals is, of course, important to the success of any team. However, it appears to be especially critical to the success of multi-functional teams. In addition to the typical reasons (provides direction, creates a scoreboard) for having team goals, leaders of multi-functional teams use the goals to resolve conflicts among members and obtain needed resources from important stakeholders. While conflicts among professionals are inevitable on interdisciplinary teams, most can be resolved if the team has agreed on a clear goal.

Leaders who are flexible

Flexibility is another key characteristic of the effective leader of a multi-functional team. A rigid, highly structured person who likes lots of clear rules and regulations will have great difficulty in this environment. Multi-functional teams operate in a fluid, changing arena. As hard as we try to clarify authority, establish policies, and publish manuals, the day-to-day functioning of the team will be changeable. As a team leader, you must be prepared to react and adapt with ease. A team leader must have an ability to deal with some ambiguity and respond when the real-world situation differs from your initial assumptions.

Leaders who can resolve conflicts

We assume there will be some conflict on a multi-functional team. In fact, it is a given; the diversity of ideas, expertise, and styles is the very strength of a multi-disciplinary team. The effective leader needs therefore to understand that conflict is not bad and that disagreements on the team are to be expected. Viewed from a different perspective: If there is total agreement throughout the life of the team, something is wrong. Either we don’t have a diverse membership or the diversity exists but is being suppressed or smoothed over. The effective leader thus:

- encourages the expression of opinion,
- helps the team look at both sides of issues,
- forms subgroups to study problems,
- keeps the team goals and the patient or customer in view, and
- uses the consensus method to make key team decisions.

However, beyond the internal dynamics issues such as goal setting, conflict resolution, and empowerment, the effective leader must also address a series of external factors.

Leaders who can maintain good stakeholder relationships

It is virtually impossible for a multi-functional team to be exclusively focused on the internal operation. Even with the best technical work and group process, the team will fail if members are unable to work effectively with other

key stakeholders outside the team (Directors of functional departments, upper management, regulatory bodies, patients etc). The team leader is often the key facilitator of the interactions with the team's stakeholders. This function requires good communications skills such as listening, negotiating, and resolving conflict.

Leaders who can obtain resources

The effective leader of a multi-disciplinary team is more often than not able to "simply get the team what they need, when they need it." The needs of team members vary widely from laboratory time or computer support to less tangible items such as fast turnarounds on approvals or freeing up of team members. Effective team leaders have to be tenacious and they must be willing to make noise at the top and ask embarrassing questions when obstacles arise.

Leaders who can orchestrate communications

Multi-functional team members need to know that management supports them; therefore, they want to get regular feedback from the management sponsors of the team. Because it is often difficult to get top managers to come to team meetings, the team leader has to communicate with

Dimensions of successful multi-functional team leadership.

- Know your business. Demonstrate a working knowledge of the technical, scientific, and business issues.
- Work and play well with others. Have the skills or the potential to develop the skills to facilitate the group process issues of a diverse team of people and make it fun.
- Initiate, interact, influence. Be able to work with little, no, or at best, unclear authority.
- Stoke (and stroke) the stakeholders. Practice effective relationship management up, down, and across the organization.
- Set and stay the course. Facilitate the establishment of team goals and an implementation plan and then keep focused on targets.
- Get the goods. Be assertive about obtaining the resources necessary for the team to be successful.
- Bar the door. Protect the team from undue and unproductive outside interference.
- Show persistence, perseverance, and passion. Demonstrate a commitment to and belief in the value of the work and a willingness to work through obstacles.
- Bend without breaking. Be open to change and help the team adjust to changing conditions and priorities.
- Be Comfortable with Lack of Clarity. Be able to deal with ambiguity and act without complete information.
- Keep it real. Be authentic; make honest commitments, tell the truth, and act with integrity.

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these managers about the team's work, get their reactions, and report back to the team. On the other hand when the team simply wants to be left alone. The effective team leader provides upper management and other stakeholders with enough information to satisfy their curiosity and keep the team insulated.

Development of team leadership

The challenge for many organizations is how to develop existing team leaders. More specifically, how do you take a talented surgeon, a skilled researcher or a experienced engineer and turn him or her into a person capable of effectively leading a multi-disciplinary team. They have the technical or scientific skills but lack the process leadership necessary for successful team leadership. There are a number of possibilities.

1. Coleadership. Coleadership is an approach being tried in a number of organizations. When there is a natural division of responsibility, this approach makes sense. One division of leadership roles that seems to work is the splitting of

technical and process leadership functions. In this model, the expert-leader (for example, an engineer or physician) focuses on the task while the facilitator-leader, with group dynamics and team management experience, addresses the team meeting and other process issues.

2. Coaching support. Some organizations provide the team leader with a trained professional to coach the team leader. In this model, there is one team leader, usually a technical or scientific expert, backed up by a human resources staff person or other professional with good group coaching skills. The coach helps the team leader adjust his or her style to make effective use of team resources, offers advice and coaching on dealing with difficult interpersonal issues, and provides feedback to the leader on an ongoing basis.

3. Rotation of team leader. This model applies to some long-term projects that have a series of key phases. The leader changes as the project moves into a new phase, with the leader coming from the function that is carrying the ball during the particular phase. As a result, the leader is the person most knowledgeable about the current work of the team. In another variation, the formal leader (eg, Chief Surgeon, Senior Clinician) may ask another team member (eg, assistant surgeon, clinical trial leader) to lead the team for a specified period of time as a development opportunity for that person.

4. Leadership training. This approach simply says that every multi-functional team leader needs solid leadership training. The training tends to be focused on the group process

aspects of the position because these skills are usually the most poorly developed. The curriculum should include topics such as:

- Developing an effective team leadership style
- Improving listening and other communication skills
- Resolving conflicts constructively
- Creating open communication and trust
- Providing performance improvement feedback
- Planning and managing team meetings
- Facilitating effective relationships with stakeholders
- Recognizing and motivating team members

Leadership requirements for multi-functional teams

Some universal truths cut across all types of teams. There are some common characteristics of effective team leaders that apply to self-directed work teams, top management teams, planning teams, temporary task forces, quality action teams, committees, and plain old-fashioned business teams.

Effective leaders have a clear vision and are able to communicate that vision to the members of the team. They develop a sense of urgency about the team’s work, involve team members in goal setting and decision making, and foster a climate of openness and honesty. People want to work for them; they have, dare we say it, charisma!

Beyond these common characteristics, however, leaders of multi-functional teams need something more. The unique features of this type of team call for some special characteristics—or a different spin on some familiar qualities.

Leaders of multi-functional teams have a difficult job because it requires pulling together a group of people who may be close friends, archenemies, or just strangers. It requires dealing with upper management, functional department heads, customers, users or patients, and other stakeholders who may or may not support the team’s goal. The keys to success are to (1) select the right person, based on the criteria suggested below and (2) provide training and support on an ongoing basis.



THE AUTHOR
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Author and consultant Glenn Parker works with organizations to create effective team players and team-based systems. He is the author of the best seller “Cross-Functional Teams: Working With Allies, Enemies and Other Strangers” (Jossey-Bass, 2003) and has written numerous other books about the subject of team-building. In the field of health care he worked with Pocono Medical Center, Palomar-Pomerado Health System, St. Rita’s Medical Center, Monmouth Medical Center, Riverside Health Care Center and pharmaceutical companies such as Novartis, Aventis, Merck, Johnson & Johnson, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Hoffmann-La Roche, Rhône-Poulenc. Glenn Parker holds a BA from City College of New York, an MA from the University of Illinois and has studied for the doctorate at Cornell University.

REAL WORLD: SOME QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Think about a team leader of a spine surgery team that you admire. What are the person’s strengths? What does he or she do well?
2. How do you react to the conclusion of this chapter that group process skills are the critical differentiating characteristic of effective team leaders? To what extent is it consistent with your experience in spine surgery?
3. Look again at the dimensions of successful multi-functional team leadership again. Which is the most important for leaders in your organization?
4. How would you feel about selecting a leader for a spine surgery team that does not have high level surgical skills but is very strong in team process skills? Would such a person be selected in your organization? If you did select such a person, what would you do to ensure that the leader and the team is successful?