Five Tips for Creating Effective Teams Quickly

By Steve Harden

A leader’s strength is often measured by his/her ability to facilitate effective teams. Managing diversity among human resources and building effective teams is challenging. High reliability organizations, such as healthcare and aviation, often call for skilled professionals to work together with little or no previous knowledge or history of each other. This need, to create effective teams quickly, is being practiced daily/hourly in aircrafts and cockpits around the world. The following lessons apply to all high reliability organizations. They are proven and practical and, when followed, will help build effective teams quickly.

Often a flight-deck team is formed in less than two minutes' time. Our experience is that two minutes are easily found at the beginning of most routine procedures and certainly at the beginnings of most shifts, so that healthcare teams may follow a similar team-building script.

Tip 1: Use Interpersonal Skills

Members of effective teams use interpersonal skills at the most basic and common-sense level. Examples of these skills include:

- **Introduce yourself.** It's easier to communicate with someone you know. Airlines use a flight roster with the names of the crew to make introductions. Many hospitals post the names of the staff involved in a procedure on a white board in the OR to facilitate these introductions.

- **Make eye contact.** Studies suggest that body language conveys the bulk of the message when we communicate. Make eye contact when communicating to more effectively express your meaning.

- **Support words with actions.** Actions often speak louder than words. A slight change in body language and tone of voice can dramatically change the message of "Any questions?" An open expression and friendly tone convey, "How can I help you with your questions?" Meanwhile, a grim, stony face, and clipped tone convey, "You don’t really have any questions do you?"
Tip 2: Prebrief: Clearly Provide the Big Picture

Flight crews discuss the flight in general terms and then discuss specific actions at critical points expected during the flight. The effective healthcare team leader will do the same by discussing the case or procedure in general terms and then emphasizing critical decision points. For example, a surgeon might announce the procedure he intends to do, highlight the critical point in that procedure, and discuss any expected contingency actions if adverse events occur at that point.

Tip 3: Invite/Expect Team Participation

Team leaders explicitly task team members to provide information, express their concerns, and speak up when necessary. After years of assuming that copilots would naturally speak up if they saw something amiss, and after seeing the continued disastrous effects when they didn't, commercial aviation realized that captains would have to insist, as part of their preflight team-building activities, that the comments and concerns of the copilot were important and welcomed. Today, it would be extremely rare to see a crew conduct their preflight activities and not hear a captain say to the copilot, "If you see anything that appears to be unsafe or otherwise causes you concern, please bring it to my attention immediately." This sort of explicit request is necessary to break through the natural reluctance of most team members to appear to be questioning the actions of the acknowledged leader. If there is a reluctance to speak up on the part of a copilot, who often has the same level of experience and training as the captain, imagine the level of reluctance that exists on the part of nurses and other staff to express a concern to physicians. Many healthcare organizations are now adding this sort of safety statement to their pre-shift or pre-procedure briefings.

Tip 4: Establish Two-Way Communications: Ask Questions to Check Understanding

The goal of team building is to establish the free and open flow of critical information within the team. One of the simplest methods to accomplish this goal is to ask questions of the team. Questions invite a response. It's a simple pattern - I talk, you respond, and then you talk and I respond. Thus, a pattern of response is established and the communication flows more easily. Physicians and other healthcare leaders can follow the example of flight crews. A few moments of thought will reveal three or four easily answerable questions that can open the lines of communication within the team. When developing questions, leaders should be careful to avoid asking ones that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Questions should be easy, have a ready answer, and not come across as a "test" of knowledge or an oral examination. For example, a surgeon may ask an OR nurse, "How long has it been since you and I have done an open cholecystectomy together?"
Tip 5: Acknowledge all Communications

Simple communication theory tells us that all effective communications are "loops." When information is transferred, for the loop to be complete there must be feedback or acknowledgement. NASA research has demonstrated a clear relationship between acknowledgments and communication errors. More acknowledgements lead to fewer errors. Fewer acknowledgements lead to more errors. Effective leaders make it a personal habit to acknowledge every communication with either a verbal or nonverbal response. Like airline captains, physicians should tell their teams, "If I don't acknowledge your comment or question, assume I didn't hear it and ask it again."

Summary

With practice and forethought, a team leader can build an effective team in approximately two to three minutes by introducing herself to the members of the team, learning the team members’ names, making eye contact while talking to them, providing a brief overview of the task ahead, and covering the actions to take in the most likely contingencies. The leader will ask two or three open-ended questions, acknowledge all communications, and finish up by asking explicitly for inputs if something looks amiss. As a result, the team will provide the leader exactly what is sought: information to help make the best decisions possible in the care of the patient.