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Training Journal

SEPTEMBER 2010

The publication
for learning
& development

Ten management lessons from sport

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Rebuilding a team after restructuring

Be open and honest and willing to learn from past mistakes, says **Bev James**

When you are building a new company and have a brand new team, the atmosphere can be electric: full of optimism and the excitement of going on a journey together. New staff tend to be keen to impress and may stay late to get the new project off the ground. Team training and regular meetings fan the flames of enthusiasm and, all being well, everyone is pulling in the same direction towards the goal of the company.

It would be great if life could remain this way but, inevitably, there will be times of challenge and disaffection, perhaps never more so than in the wake of a period of redundancies, or following a company sale or merger, when staffing has to be reduced or restructured.

The slippery slope to low morale is a very fast one in comparison to the time it takes to build the team back up again, so it is worth planning ahead to safeguard the wellbeing and feelings of the team as much as possible. This goes beyond the process

and procedures that the company will have in place to ensure that the legalities are followed.

Re-motivate and communicate to retain your team

A common mistake in a business turnaround situation is to put all the emphasis on boosting sales and not enough time into rebuilding morale. Be warned: a restructure without practical re-motivation is unlikely to work. It is not enough to expect people to be happy that they still have a job.

Following a restructure, the 'survivors club' can be left feeling insecure and overworked, as they have probably had to take on additional responsibilities to cover staff that have been laid off. After the initial relief that they have survived the culling, they can feel overwhelmed with extra work, and possibly resentful.

When you start to rebuild a team or hire new staff, they may be working in a toxic environment in which the walking wounded can fill their heads with negativity. Survivors can feel battered



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and bruised, with a lack of clear direction. There may be an undercurrent of cynicism among long-serving staff who have 'seen it all before'. Managers may feel defensive and retreat behind closed doors.

The greatest challenge to company morale takes place in people's imaginations. Rebuilding a team begins by anticipating people's fears and anxieties, as well as making clear what the company's future needs and priorities are likely to be – making people feel valued and explaining where they fit in to the new priorities.

Steps to managing the process:

1 Keep the rumour wagon under control

You've been through the downturn, you've taken redundancies on the chin but still there are rumours flying around the company – many of them from external sources. The best way to make sure that rumours are nipped in the bud – or, better still, don't even start – is to make sure that you keep communicating with your team.

Even though you have come through the redundancy phase, your staff will remain on hyper-alert for some time. Unfamiliar visitors, news from any and every source will all be shared and scrutinised.

Counsel leaders and managers to keep the HR team informed of what is going on – and ensure that key information is shared with others in the department.

2 Meet the team on a one-to-one basis and share the plan for the future

It may seem an obvious thing to say but, though you lead a team, you manage people and every team is made up of individuals. An effective manager will have the ability to make each member of staff feel uniquely appreciated.

It is always useful to set aside time to speak to team members on a one-to-one basis. This may never be more important than in the wake of major change in the workplace.



Some people are more vocal than others: you will always know what they think because they will tell you. Others, who are less extrovert, may feel it is inappropriate to speak up, or may dislike voicing their opinions in front of a group. A one-to-one session with each member of the team will make them feel valued and allow them to raise things in confidence.

This is especially important if you are planning to hold a group meeting, or make a team announcement. It is a high-risk strategy to announce major news to a group without having briefed them as individuals first. Dissenting voices in the crowd can derail your intentions before you have even started. Silent voices may become the deadly assassins.

The best way to build morale and to get people to focus on the future is to let them talk, let them know you are listening and share your plans for the future. Allow people to let off steam if necessary and talk about their concerns. Don't try to deny that

individual members so that everyone has had a chance to speak up and be listened to. It is an occasion for the business owner to make clear that now is the time for everyone to be pulling in the same direction; that the future is bright and positive changes have been made.

Of course, some people may have already quit the company in their minds, even though they have

It is important to be transparent about what went wrong previously and how things will be done differently in the future



decided to stay. It can be useful to say 'as much as we *want* you to be here, we want to know that you want to be here; that you want to be part of the programme'. You've made a change and you want everyone to be on board.

Reinforce the message that, in order to be successful, everyone needs to be pulling in the same direction. Ask yourself and your team: "Have I got the right people in the room to make this work?"

6 Don't 'dump delegate' and make sure the team can cope with any additional tasks they've had to take on Downsizing the team needs to be done consciously. It is not a simple matter of saying 'I'm going to get rid of X, and that will save me money'. It is not effective simply to dissect a job and divide the responsibilities up among the team. That is 'dump delegating'.

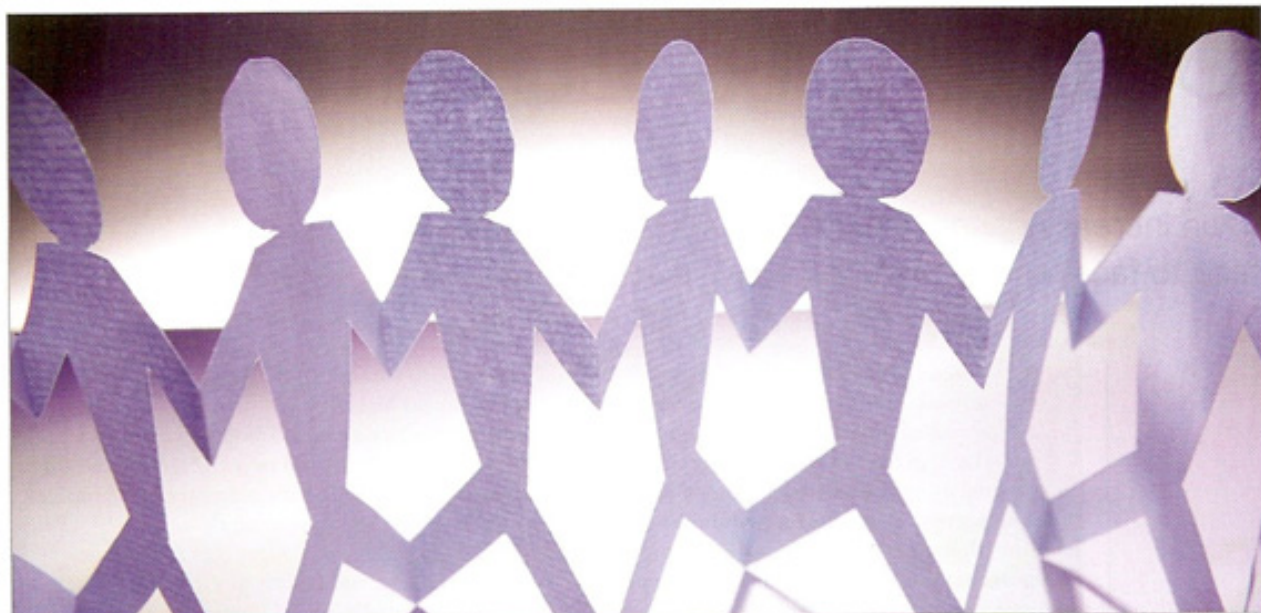
You will need to consider who has the spare capacity to take on the extra workload and who has the right skill set. It is unwise to give detailed work to a big-picture person, or strategic tasks to someone who will get stuck in the detail. If there is any question of your existing staff dropping the ball or making mistakes, consider outsourcing the role for a time.

7 Consider outsourcing duties to help with workloads if they become excessive Outsourcing key tasks during a period of restructuring has several benefits: a new team member can lift morale and bring new energy to the workplace; it is a way of testing someone out before you take them on board; it is an effective use of resources, as an outsourced worker will not cost you the same in terms of overheads; it is easy to cancel the arrangement if their approach to the job is not a good 'fit'; it can allow other members of the team to adjust more comfortably to their new roles and responsibilities.

Building a network of external resources allows a flexible and creative approach to delivering the outcome you need.

8 Add a social element to bond the team and lighten the mood Few people work solely for money. Most enjoy their work because they like their work environment and the company of colleagues. Setting up the occasional social occasion will help your team feel appreciated and ensure that business owners and managers get to know their people on a more informal basis too.

Of course, the choice of venue or entertainment needs to be relevant to everyone. Be sensitive to the age range of your team, or cultural and social differences. Ask people for suggestions but your



choices need to match the character of your staff and meet the needs of your budget.

One of the habits I have found most effective is sending a 'Monday message' to all staff each week by email – to positively frame the week ahead. It is a simple template that takes very little time to complete, but says to people 'this is what we achieved last week; these are the highlights; this week we're aiming for Y and we are focusing on X'.

I try to keep it light and often add an inspiring quote or an uplifting piece of news. It helps people focus on their immediate priorities, reflect on achievements and feel appreciated.

9 Encourage people to take responsibility and support them if they make a mistake The atmosphere following a restructure can take a while to settle down. Team members may be given new responsibilities and, of course, managers are concerned that things are done properly. However, a blame culture may develop when someone makes a mistake.

Mistakes are an important part of the learning process – at every level. Few entrepreneurs make a success of their business without making some errors along the way. If something goes wrong it is important to first ask why. Could procedures be improved? Is someone overloaded? Why did the mistake happen? What mechanisms and safeguards need to be put in place to prevent it happening again?

If you ask the person who made the mistake for a solution, he will probably know exactly what

is needed and take greater ownership of the task in future.

There is a management truism that states 'every time you point a finger, there are probably three fingers pointing back at you'. The first thing I always do when something goes wrong is to consider 'how did I contribute to that?' People who make mistakes, and who care that they made a mistake, will rarely make the same mistake again. The trick is to work together *to make sure* it never happens again.

As Thomas J Watson, the founder of IBM, is credited as saying, after an employee had made an expensive mistake, "I was asked if I was going to fire an employee who made a mistake that cost the company \$600,000. No, I replied, I just spent \$600,000 training him. Why would I want somebody to hire his experience?"

10 Building a corporate culture If you have been through a time of turmoil and you are rebuilding a team, you also want to create a culture of trust. That means briefing people well, giving them the tools they need to succeed – and then leaving them to get on with it. Corporate culture begins at the top and your team will learn from your example, and the examples of those around them.

A football manager is on the sideline. He's not running onto the pitch and taking the shots. If you put people in the right positions, you should be able to get off the pitch and let them do the job. Obviously you still need to monitor and measure – but allow people to do their job.

If they can't, you've probably got the wrong people in the first place. But that's another story... **TJ**

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