

# Managing and Motivating Teams Amidst COVID-19

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## **Managing and Motivating Teams Amidst COVID-19**

*Written by Janet Gregory*

Managing and motivating teams is rewarding and challenging in the best of times. In unprecedented times like this there are even more questions. Do I manage top-down or bottom-up? How do I help my team function better? What's the best way to promote idea sharing? There are no easy answers.

As the team leader, you must decide what is best, given the unique dynamics of your team, your business, and what you are trying to accomplish. Team dynamics change based on communication options, goals, and over time, as a team works together.

**Here are seven questions to help you assess and improve team management and motivation.**

### ***Do I manage top-down or bottom-up? What's the best approach?***

Top-down is best for informing and guiding your team. Top-down leadership informs a group of people as to why they are assembled as a team. It directs a team to their mission or goals. It aligns a team around the key sub-systems (or sub-groups) necessary to achieve the team mission/goals. Top-down approach always starts with the big picture. In uncertain and highly dynamic times, some top-down management is required for guidance, grounding, and assurance (or reassurance). Some team members may be feeling a bit lost, so don't be shy about providing direction, advice, and supervision.

Bottom-up approach is critical for information processing. Bottom-up leadership empowers a team and enables them to decide among several similar options. It inspires a team with clear goals to select the best way to accomplish those goals. It sanctions team sub-groups or individuals to act independently. Bottom-up is a form of empowerment for the team and enables information processing by the collective team. In difficult times like this, it promotes intra-team collaboration and allows each team member to bring their unique perspective to the table. As a leader, this can be a bit uncomfortable because you will not have full control of the outcome, but displaying trust in your team will strengthen it's individual members, it's teamwork, and the outcome.

***Do I have a team or a collection of individuals?***

This is a tough self-assessment question. Business will organize employees in teams to achieve a common goal. Individuals will volunteer or be directed to a team. Work groups are expected to share information and make decisions so that each member can achieve their own individual work goals. Motivating the team is motivating the individuals that make up the team.

***Is there a clear common goal for the team?***

The team goal needs to be clearly understood by all the team members. In today's environment of Covid-19 the team goal of the past may have changed subtly or even dramatically. Conduct team discussions focused on the common goal of the team. Ensure that each team member articulates how they see the team goal. Document and agree as a team on the common goal or goals.

***Which team members self-selected to join the team?***

Individuals that self-selected to join a team or volunteered to be on the team are typically motivated by “this sounds like fun” or “I can help with that”. As a team leader you can strengthen their “fun” motivation by recognizing their efforts. You can strengthen their “help” motivation by being clear about their role and how it helps the team succeed.

***Which team members were told to be on the team?***

People that are told to be on a team are typically motivated by a sense of duty or fear. They didn’t choose this team so they may not be deeply invested. Make it clear to them that they possess skills important to the team and that they have a respected role on the team. It is easiest to motivate individuals with a sense of duty; they are most comfortable with a strong sense of responsibility. Those motivated by fear are more difficult to motivate, unless you understand their fears. Are the fears rooted in organizational hierarchy, losing their job, or something else? Understand the root cause of the fear and you can help that team member address it.

***Which team members don’t want to be the team?***

This is the toughest issue to address because it is often based on irrational reasoning. Yes, some team members just don’t want to be on the team. It doesn’t matter if they volunteered or were *volun-told*. In each of these situations, the best approach is to make their role on the team very clear, make the individual feel valued, and make their contributions respected by all.

***How do I get team members to contribute unique ideas?***

There are many techniques to open up ideas, if team members are not contributing. It depends on what you are trying to accomplish, and team dynamics. One approach is to “round table” ideas; ask each person participating to provide one or

more idea, record them all, discuss for clarification but don't select an approach in the initial idea session. Capture all ideas as having equal value; it encourages participation. Another approach is to ask small sub-groups (of 2-5 people) to work on the issues and report back with 2-3 ideas, each team reports their ideas. Similar to "round table", record, clarify but don't select. Selection can be done off-line or in a subsequent meeting or by a select sub-group. It is important that all ideas are heard and equally considered.

If your business culture has a more hierarchical structure, it may be an issue of authority. This is true in many countries, like Japan. With a strong respect for authority, either organizationally or personally, the team may view you (the team lead) as the "authority" figure, surrendering to perceived influence and power. If this is the issue, one technique is to ask the team to develop ideas independently, without your participation, and bring their ideas back to the team for discussion. Give them time alone to work on it.

Decision making is a critical element in promoting idea sharing. Some team members may be concerned that their ideas will not be valued or that their ideas will be viewed as trivial, thus they do not want to share ideas. Decision making works best when it is clear that decisions are based on what's best to accomplish the team mission/goal.

Team dynamics are unique, interesting and challenging, in the best of times. Today's reality is much more difficult. If you are having difficulty managing a team discuss it with someone that is not on the team that can provide you with an objective perspective and options to consider for improving the team dynamics.

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