



Collective Competence

How do you capitalize on your team's knowledge?

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We know that one individual is not as smart as all of us collectively. However, even with that knowledge, leaders still have difficulty capitalizing on the collective intelligence of teams. It is not because they do not want to, but because they often do not know how. This article presents six strategies for capitalizing on what your teams know.

■ **Purposeful Team Processes** — The processes the team utilizes should allow time for reflection, feedback and information sharing. If all of the processes are inclined toward tasks, there will not be enough time or room for the team to attend to itself. Team processes ought to allow time for discussion of customer perspectives and feedback. The team should make it a point to hear from customers and integrate their sentiments into the work. Processes should also examine emerging relationships that impact the team — relationships with other departments, vendors and stakeholders. These relationships can impact the team in subtle ways. If a sales department is putting increased pressure on a marketing department, one or both of the teams is sure to have a lot to say about the new expectations.

■ **Reward Effort** — Managers often get in the habit of only rewarding results. When team members know that they will be acknowledged for putting forth their best effort, they will be more apt to continue trying. When managers build dialogue about those efforts and what team members learned from trying, they begin to create a culture where experimentation is acceptable. This also creates a climate where failure is a learning experience. It is through discussion of this learning that team members realize that their experiences, whether they result in success or not, are valuable.

Rewarding effort also creates an environment where people are more likely to be creative. When team members realize they will not be penalized for failing, they are willing to test potential innovations. They will invest more of themselves when they feel free to be innovative.

■ **Rotate Roles & Responsibilities** — The team leader role should revolve so every team member gets to experience leadership, learn new competencies and develop more confidence in his (or her) abilities. This rotation is another tool for getting people to speak up. It is impossible to hide behind the most vocal team members when thrust into a formal leadership role.

The rotation should not happen without proper preparation. Be sure to provide adequate education and training before putting a team member into a leadership role. This will



enable him to be more effective in the new role. It will prevent the team members from having dependence on a single individual, as they can rely on each other to lead as the need arises.

Rotating roles and responsibilities also prevent the team from yielding to the will or ways of a dominant leader. This allows different voices to be heard. It also allows varying forms of expression and prevents communication biases emerging from an entrenched team leader.

■ **Host Regular Q&A Sessions** — Every organization, regardless of the size or industry, has a grapevine. Sometimes information from the grapevine is accurate, but more often, it is not. Hosting regular question-and-answer sessions with the entire team allows team members to ask questions about everything, ranging from policy and procedure changes to rumors about mergers and acquisitions. It positions you as a listening leader. This not only enhances your personal credibility, but cements the idea that dialogue is an essential norm in the enterprise.

One caution for question and answer sessions: You must have at least some of the answers. If your only answer is, "I don't know. I have to check on that," you diminish your credibility. Certainly, you should admit when you do not know, but go into the session with a strong idea of what people want to discuss. Then have enough knowledge of those topics to have meaningful discussion. Whatever you do, do not give incorrect or misleading information. The team members will not trust or respect you if they cannot count on you for honesty.

■ **Give Credit to Individuals and the Team** — Team members will invest more deeply and share more freely when they

know that they will get credit for their contributions. If you are a glory hound and take credit for their successes, they will be less inclined to share best practices freely. The reverse is true. When team members see that you will acknowledge their input and let it be known that the idea originated from them, they will know you genuinely value them and will see you as a humble leader.

Giving credit freely creates an open environment where sharing is the norm. People are not only more willing to collaborate, they are more willing to openly praise one another. This is the example that you, the leader, have modeled, so it becomes normative behavior for the team. Sharing credit also reduces unhealthy competition. People know they will get their due, so they have little interest in becoming cut-throat for the purpose of garnering recognition.

■ **Elicit Expertise** — Every team member has expertise in some area of your operation. Encourage them to share their expertise with one another. Peer-led learning is a valuable tool for raising the confidence and competence of the team. This can be done through informal brown-bag lunches facilitated by the topic expert. Or, the objective can be accomplished by formal instruction where team members get to try their hands at teaching. In both cases, team members are

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actively sharing what they know for the good of the team and the organization.

Eliciting expertise is a vote of confidence in the team and its individual members. It says that the leader not only trusts the team to be focused on its development, but to also stay on the cusp of learning. Encouraging a focus on learning and sharing information enables the leader to capitalize on the collective intelligence of the team.

Collaborative effort can yield big rewards for your dealership. Use the strategies detailed here to maximize the collective intelligence of your teams. Build an organization where free-flowing communication happens naturally. Create an environment where teams are recognized and rewarded for their efforts. Publicly celebrate the successes of individual contributors and the team so everyone will fully invest in the enterprise. These strategies will enable you to get and keep your team engaged in sharing information. ■

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