

One of the Team is Tearing Us Apart



Teams are a wonderful tapestry of different people with different personalities, different personal goals, different beliefs, and different methods of approaching issues in their professional and personal lives.

When a team is working together they are more than a collection of individuals; they are a functioning entity that can accomplish more than each individual thought possible.

Unfortunately, a single person can destroy that team synergy, changing a smoothly functioning team back into a group of individuals, all trying to protect their own interests. Dealing with this problem team member can be your most difficult challenge as the team's leader.

The typical scenario goes like this.

You've worked hard to make your section a place people want to work. You've made some changes which seem to have been well received by everyone. Everyone except Jill. Jill is a problem. Nothing seems to make her happy and she even seems to be actively working against the team. It seems like Jill has been with the company for a hundred years. She doesn't like change and you're pretty sure she doesn't like you. Everyone knows Jill and many supervisors are afraid of her because she knows where all the skeletons are.

This is not an unusual situation and it isn't an easy problem to solve;

but, there are a series of steps to take in order keep your team together.

- 1.** The first step is about you. It's important to make sure the team knows who you are and what you believe. As a leader, you should develop a leadership philosophy that articulates your vision for the team and the team's mission. It should clearly state your values and explain your priorities. The philosophy should also make it clear what you expect from your team, but just as importantly, what they can expect from you. Finally, your leadership philosophy is a way to let your team know how open you are to feedback and the best way to approach you.

Everyone on your team should have a copy of your leadership philosophy and you should discuss it with them, answering any questions they may have. After you've made sure everyone has a copy and understands it, the hard part starts – you must live by that philosophy. If you act differently in your day-to-day interactions with the team, you will lose credibility, making it even harder to work with Jill and keep your team together.

- 2.** Each member of your team is a different person, with different

needs, different expectations, and a different way of approaching challenges and dealing with stress. One of the most important tasks you have as a leader is getting to know these differences in your team. Sometimes a team member becomes a problem simply because others approach him in a way that he finds offensive or at least contrary to his expectations of others.

This seems like a daunting task, especially with a large team, but it doesn't have to be. There are several approaches available to learn more about your people. Of course, simply observing others and learning from their behaviors and how they interact is one way but there are several assessments available that can help shorten the process. At the Daedalus Group we use an assessment called the MyHardWired™ Leadership Styles Profile. The profile provides a very accurate tool that not only helps team members understand each

other, but also develop a team profile that graphically shows how each member's own style fits into the team.

3. Now back to Jill. Unfortunately, she was unimpressed by your leadership philosophy and her profile does not indicate a vast difference between her and the rest of the team. She is just being contrary. As hard as you try, you will occasionally have someone like Jill on your team, someone who will poison the atmosphere, making it difficult to keep the team focused and moving forward.

Just because Jill doesn't respond to your efforts doesn't mean these first two steps aren't important. In fact, your leadership philosophy provides the foundation for everything else you'll do. It doesn't just provide a guide for your team. It also helps remind you of what's important. When you live by your stated philosophy, the consistency will help as you work through this difficulty.

How did Jill get this way?

This scenario is based on real cases we've seen in our own experience and with coaching clients. Problem employees have usually been in the company for some time and have probably also been a problem for a long time. How do they get that way?

Some are just contrary by nature and some have suffered a real or perceived injustice at some point. Whatever the cause, it's easy for leaders to take the easy way and just ignore problems like this, hoping they will go away or waiting until they or the problem employee move on. That approach only makes the problem bigger. When the problem employee is allowed to continue their bad behavior, it becomes accepted and even expected and becomes very difficult to fix.

4. You've established who you are and what you expect and, having studied Jill's profile, you have a pretty good idea of her needs and expectations. You've spoken to Jill before, and discussed your leadership philosophy. She didn't respond to that and her negative attitude is beginning to create a toxic environment for the team. Maybe if you just ignore her she'll go away. Unfortunately, that's a tactic used by too many leaders and it's the wrong thing to do. Your job as a leader is to take on the difficult challenges, not avoid them. She won't go away. In fact, she will become stronger, both in her own eyes and in the eyes of the rest of the team. Ignoring Jill and her effect on the team will diminish your own leadership effectiveness. So, it's time to talk to Jill. The conversation should be professional and courteous, but direct. Let her know you are interested in her thoughts and why she is not happy with what the team is doing. This is not the time to make threats. Instead explain that you understand Jill does not support the changes you're making and you would like to understand why. Explain that you recognize her experience with the company, and you'd like to know if she sees a problem that you aren't aware of.

After you have this discussion with Jill, take a little time to observe. She may not give you the satisfaction of agreeing with you, but she might start to slowly come around. If you see that is happening, don't rush her.

Managing the difficult meeting.

When people begin airing their disagreements, meetings can become adversarial and even hostile. There are several steps to manage these situations.

- ✓ Conflict is not all bad. Shutting down discussion to avoid conflict only ensures more conflict. Instead, welcome professional conflict but don't let it become personal. Managed conflict results in a better final decision.
- ✓ It may be necessary to stray from the agenda to address Jill's comments. Bringing Jill into the team warrants this.
- ✓ 2. Be prepared. Anticipate problems and disagreements. Be prepared for hostility and the effect it may have on the rest of the team.
- ✓ 3. Use a whiteboard or flip chart or to write comments. Committing them to writing shows you take them seriously.
- ✓ Don't allow arguments. Keep firm control and allow only one person to speak at a time. That's difficult, but essential. A free-flowing discussion may be normal, but in this case can quickly become name-calling.
- ✓ You probably can't resolve all the issues that come to light. Make it clear that you will carefully consider these valid points that have been raised.

5. If your conversation doesn't produce the results you're looking for, it's time to talk to your boss. He or she probably knows Jill and the results of Jill's behavior in terms of productivity and team efficiency. You're more likely to gain the boss's support if you are very precise. Make sure you listen to your boss's reaction. Remember that Jill has been around for a long time and your boss may well have had problems with her before.

6. If Jill is still not coming around, use the next regular meeting to ask her to give the team her opinion of the changes. Do this in an interested, non-threatening way. This will result in one of three responses: short answer or silence, tirade, or expression of her concerns. If she expresses her concerns, listen carefully, she may have good points and there's a chance others on the team have the same concerns. Be prepared for the passive aggressive, or just aggressive approach as her reaction can bring out aggression and hostility in other team members. Your goal is not to start a conference room free-for-all. However, don't avoid a helpful discussion just because it becomes a little heated.

7. You have now given Jill the chance to be heard by both you and the team. This step is important so

might have ideas for you to try. This issue is not going to be easy to resolve and the boss needs to know it exists. Clearly explain that the rest of the team understands you are open to dissent and discussion. They will see that Jill is uncooperative and will be more likely to stay positive themselves.

You may begin to experience another result of Jill's actions. The rest of the team may begin to divide themselves, some siding with Jill and some siding with you. That's why you need to tackle this early and in a positive manner.

8. If you've given Jill the chance to air her grievances, but she is still creating a toxic environment for the rest of the team, it's time to review your options with HR. Be clear about the problem and the actions you've taken to this point. Show them the documentation you've been keeping and get their advice. Then, sit down with Jill. Now is the time to explain the consequences of her actions. State the facts and explain how you intend to handle the situation (based on your conversation with HR). This is not a discussion and should be mostly a one-way conversation. Ask her to consider what you've said and come back the next day to tell you how she wants to proceed.

About the Authors

Steve Alltop and Bob Mason are dedicated to leadership development and concentrate on developing leadership skills in supervisors and managers. Their approach stems from their firm belief, backed by extensive experience, that leadership doesn't have to be complicated. Leadership is simply getting things done through people and when supervisors and managers understand themselves, their purpose, and their team they become effective leaders.

To learn how The Daedalus Group can help your supervisors and managers accelerate your business performance, contact us at team@dleadershipgroup.com or call Bob at 505-453-5266.



Steve Alltop is a former U.S. Air Force fighter pilot. His military career took him from pilot training to high-performance jet aircraft in combat to an assortment of command and leadership positions. Retiring from the Air Force after 24 years of service, Steve joined the corporate world as a project manager supporting diverse projects which provided high-tech solutions to the modern warfighter.

Steve is a free-lance project manager serving in the high-tech space industry. But he thoroughly enjoys spending time with his leadership students when he can and believes he is enriching lives by helping folks find the great leader within themselves and by having a lasting effect on those that they lead.

Steve is a graduate of the United States Air Force Academy with a B.S. in Astronautical Engineering. He holds a Masters of Aeronautical Sciences, a Masters of Business Administration and is a certified Project Management Professional. He currently resides in Colorado Springs, Colorado where he enjoys his family and powered paragliding.



During a 30-year career in the U.S. Air Force, Bob Mason worked in aircraft and munitions maintenance and was a crew member in combat rescue. Early in his career he was given the opportunity to lead ever larger and more complex teams, eventually commanding four different squadrons, including a deployed aircraft maintenance squadron and the Air Force's largest munitions squadron.

When Bob retired from the Air Force he started a company dedicated to helping others learn the skills that he has found make leaders successful. He has studied leadership extensively, but more importantly has been there, working with real people, making hard decisions, and experiencing the results.

Bob is a professional speaker and author and a Past President of the New Mexico chapter of the National Speakers Association. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Human Resource Management, a Master of Science in Aeronautics, and a Master of Business Administration in Aviation. He is the author of four books on leadership. Bob lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico where he and his wife enjoy hiking and exploring the history of the Southwest.