
ACC DOCKET

INFORMED. INDISPENSABLE. IN-HOUSE.

How to Build a Successful — and Borderless — Team

Law Department Management

Skills and Professional Development



When you think about the group that you belong to or lead, do you see it as a well-oiled machine, or a rusty, broken-down clunker? That is, if you think of it at all. Is it a collection of people, or is it a team? Do you all work together as a unit, moving toward the same vision, or are you just reporting for duty and hoping somehow that everyone else does the same?

These visions are very different, and which one you have can profoundly affect how you show up to work and interact with your colleagues.

The benefits of being a part of a team, as opposed to just being in a group, are that you are working toward the same goal. In theory, you would have a leader who has clarified everyone's role and communicated how working together will help you reach the identified objective.

However, the problem is that roles and objectives are left uncommunicated. Group members are left to figure out on their own what they are supposed to be doing for the greater good. While this is a huge problem with co-located teams, it's an even bigger one with virtual or cross-boundary teams.

When building a team, whether you work together from across the room or across the world, there are a few musts that will give you a better chance for success.

As mentioned before, one of the biggest benefits of a team is knowing what you are all working toward and why. When communication breaks down and tensions between people arise, having a solid foundation upon which to rely becomes key to keeping team members focused on the common goal.

Another key component of successful teams is having the right people in the right position. While this is possible for co-located teams, it is an even bigger possibility for virtual teams. Often the search for team members is done in the same way, by the same people: the human resources department. Without understanding the bigger picture, they will tap the same channels for the talent pool and thereby limit the diversity of who applies.

Virtual teams aren't limited to a local talent pool. You can search the world for the best talent. But there are new challenges that arise with virtual teams. Different cultures and different work styles can complicate productivity. A good leader will recognize that reality and proactively work to remove or minimize them.

In a global company, having talent dispersed in areas where a business is conducted is a huge advantage over having talent in one location trying to understand what is happening a world away. Imagine you have a team of lawyers comprised of members from Taiwan, France, Ghana, or any number of other locations. If you are working through a legal issue in one of those locations, think about how important it is having a lawyer understand not only the law there, but the culture of the business. That allows you, as the problem-solver, to see the issues through the local perspective. It is one of the best ways to avoid public relations nightmares and making follow-up decisions and actions, along with apology tours.

The key to building a team, any team, is being clear on your actual needs, not just focusing on the narrow factors of education and technical legal skill. I know that can be anathema to an audience that places such an emphasis on where you went to law school and for what firm you practiced. But examining your real needs can mean the difference in giving someone a life-changing opportunity.

Other factors also contribute to better balance, productivity, and ultimately success. Make sure you

account for problem-solving skills, creativity, and the ability to communicate, work with, and respect people from other cultures.

Recognize and accommodate teams members where they are. That means don't schedule all your team meetings for a time that is convenient only for you. A 3 pm meeting for you is a 3 am meeting for someone else. Every now and again, be the one who is inconvenienced and has to meet at a difficult time.

Differences in work style and culture are other considerations. Where communications can be clear and done offline, use technology to your advantage. But where there is any possibility of misunderstanding or an in-person meeting is helpful and possible, even if impracticable, meet in-person or at least by videoconferencing.

Actually thinking about your team and its cross-border needs will help you give your company the best legal talent while virtually ensuring success across your department and around the world.

[Whitnie Wiley](#)



Former ACC Docket Columnist

Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the *Lead the Way* column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.