



Motivating the Team

Finding New Ways to Solve Old Problems

By Anita R. Goehring, MS, CIE

If your ergonomics team suffers from a lack of energy and enthusiasm when it comes to finding real solutions to your ergonomics challenges, it's time to take a hard look at your team and make some course adjustments.

I'm sure you started your team months or even years ago with a group of employees motivated and "hungry" to tackle ergonomics issues. Now, team members find excuses not to come to the meetings, projects are stalled with few completing action items on time, participants are unwilling to contribute new ideas, and it seems the "zing" has gone out of the meetings—when you have them.

Take Action!

Just like a machine, teams need a good maintenance program to function optimally. Sometimes this means replacing worn or broken parts, providing fuel or energy, tweaking the rpm's, or just cleaning out the old "gunk" that's clogging the system. Rarely do you need to scrap the whole machine and buy a new one. Before you begin to make repairs, make sure you've first diagnosed the situation.

The Overworked, Un-Focused Team Solution

When ergonomics teams get started, part of their responsibility is to assess ergonomic risk throughout the facility. Once assessed, many companies try to take on all these challenges with a single 12 or more member team. This was the case for a 500+ employee hospital supply producer. Quickly overcome by the number of concerns per department, the team set out to prioritize issues, but could not seem to focus on one project without another taking precedence. Since team members had other jobs to do, it was difficult to get everyone together at the same time. Team members weren't always familiar with the operation in question, keeping up with documentation was a struggle, and every meeting offered new challenges.

The intervention: The plant divided the initial team into different jurisdictions each carrying their skills and knowledge to newly developed departmental teams. Some became team members and others support functions—participating in team meetings only when needed. Each team had its own projects and responsibilities and reported to the oversight team—the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee kept tabs on overall plant risk, assigned priority as issues were uncovered, and tracked the timing and success of projects. One savvy plant engineer even developed a streamlined, computer-based outline for team minutes that transferred information directly into the facility's projects database.

Moving from a "struggling-to-keep-up" team to a multi-departmental ergonomics initiative was the most effective way for this plant to gain focus on projects and involve all employees in the effort without overtaxing a few.

Snuffing a Negative Meeting Environment

A manufacturer of auto parts had solid leadership on their ergonomics team and a good methodology in place for identifying risk and concern, but their team meetings quickly turned into complaint sessions. Members lost focus quickly, an hour had passed, and nothing was accomplished. Members were complaining outside the team meetings and soon all the project successes they initially experienced were a distant memory. Discussions were held with plant leadership and instead of disbanding the team members who earlier had great ideas, the ergonomics team leader focused the meeting structure. Some ground rules were established to promote mutual accountability. No group will ever become a team unless members accept their obligation to the group and its rules. Rules, such as, “everyone should arrive on time at meetings,” “everyone is responsible for completing a task outside of the meetings,” “everyone should show respect for others’ ideas,” “everyone must have at least one solution for every complaint they offer,” and “everyone should complete assignments on time,” were outlined to allow the team to meet objectives. With new focus the team and meetings became much more productive and energetic.

When a team holds itself accountable to operating rules, it not only builds fertile ground for performance, but also undergirds the team with trust.

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Is your team struggling to find solutions when they don’t know what the problem is? This is not only frustrating (and de-motivating) for the team, but can be costly to the company. When the “root cause” of a problem is not identified, ergonomics solutions can be implemented that never actually solve the problem. (This is where ergonomics gets a nasty reputation of being too costly with not-so-beneficial results.) Provide the team with training to identify key stressors in the job, work hands-on examples, and gain experience and confidence with identifying workable solutions to these issues. Remember, if you’re asking the team for continuous ergonomic improvement, the team will need opportuni-

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As a team leader, or manager, determine the primary concerns with the team’s function.

Does the team have the right skill mix? Team skills might include technical or functional expertise, communicative competence, and problem-solving abilities. The skill mix of the team members is often more important than their personality traits.

Is the team structure inadequate to serve the whole facility? In other words, are you asking a few to do the job of many? This seems to be a common trend in today’s business community, but an overwhelmed team can easily lose focus and be quickly defeated. Think about dividing responsibility and engaging new teams to take on specific challenges.

Has the team’s hunger for performance been snuffed by some tough, long-standing projects with no end in sight? Peak team performance is attained when a team agrees on the area it wants to improve, generates

ideas for improvement, sees the ideas through to completion, and measures the results. Experiencing “wins” is crucial because this reinforces the team’s confidence and desire to tackle the next challenge.

Are team members picking up vibes that leadership is not committed to the ergonomics initiative? Nothing has more negative impact on a team’s momentum, than for leadership’s enthusiasm to wane. With many responsibilities facing the plant’s leadership, it is important for mechanisms to be developed in the early stages of ergonomics planning (or later stages, as the case may be) to allow leadership outlets to emphasize the importance and value ergonomics and the team’s work are to the organization. Establishing clear goals and objectives for the ergonomics team and process, assigning responsibilities and accountability at all levels, encouraging participation, rewarding achievement, and integrating health and safety as a core operational

ties for continuous learning.

Do your team meetings turn into complaint sessions? Few people want to spend an hour listening to complaints with no resolution discussed. Team members get discouraged and tend to focus only on the negative aspects of the problem or solution. Build a positive environment for your team to work. Strengthen your team meetings, and project focus, by laying down some ground rules.

Take a look at your ergonomics team. Is it functioning to its full potential? Find ways to breathe life back into your team, increase involvement and enthusiasm by recognizing and rewarding their voluntary efforts, set them up to win, and move your successful ergonomics initiative forward. ■

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