

# The good goodbye

*Employee teams need to come to terms with a member's departure*

**A**n often-neglected issue in team development is the changing of membership characterized by players leaving. Membership stability is a fundamental principle of maintaining a high-performing team. Yet many teams lose their high productivity because they fail to terminate properly with a departing team member.

Take what I'll call Team Terrific, for instance. This team, which had a long history of great productivity, had recently been stagnating. Production was down, attendance was sporadic at team meetings, and members often were late or left meetings early. Moreover, infighting had increased; old turf wars were resurfacing. The team was perplexed about what had caused this dramatic change in team functioning.

Upon consultation, Team Terrific's leader discovered the event that had contributed to decreased productivity. Sam Sage, one of the original founding team members, had recently been promoted to another department in the company. Because the company was in its busy season, its executives had not bothered to formally announce Sage's promotion or deal with its consequences within the team.

The issue of players leaving a team is rarely dealt with in a constructive way. Terminations can remind members of painful losses in their own personal lives—many of which were beyond their control. Consequently, the team will have a natural tendency not to deal with a member's leaving. They believe

that approach is easier—and it is, in the short run. But in the long run, it can prove disastrous to the ongoing functioning of a team.

The sense of rejection which team members feel—unconsciously, at least—stymies future risk taking. If other team members see that a member's leaving is not acknowledged, they fear the same will happen to them. So they think, why involve themselves in a team which shows so little appreciation?

Change in membership automatically shifts all teams back into an earlier developmental mode known as the "storm stage" of team development (*SBN*, April 1998 issue). The ability and speed at which the team faces the change in membership will determine how quickly it can resume its high level of work output.

The team needs to establish a new norm that recognizes the loss of the departed member. If it doesn't, the team will never again regain its previous high-performance output. Rather, the team will stay in the storm stage, where infighting, competition and blame are the order—not productive work.

The choice is simple, yet difficult to execute. Teams must come to terms with a member's departure. A good goodbye ensures a robust future team. **SBN**

## PERSONNEL



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