# Managing Team Borders: Critical Success Factor

## By Lynda McDermott, Nolan Brawley, and William W. Waite

No team is an island. Teams operate within the context of a larger organization and industry. In order to provide "product" to others, they must also obtain support and resources from others. These people are their key stakeholders—those individuals or groups, internal or external to the organization, that have a critical impact on the team's success.

Unfortunately, once a team has been formed, team members often focus solely on the team's goals and tasks. They may forget the need to integrate their work with other individuals or groups, including sharing information that may affect the decisions or actions of others. In short, teams often fail to manage their stakeholder relationships.

We refer to the interface between the team and any one stakeholder group as the "border" and to the process of managing those interfaces as "border management." The process implies a proactive approach by the team. It is designed to help build trust, a required ingredient for true collaboration.

Early in a team's formation, it's a good idea to bring the team together with key stakeholders for a formal Stakeholder Team Launch Meeting. In that context or through another mutual alignment process, border management begins with such elements as:

- Agreeing and committing to the team's Charter—its reason for existence, and to the roles, responsibilities, and areas of authority of the team and each stakeholder.
- Determining the needs and expectations of every stakeholder relative to the team.
- Developing Operating Agreements for how the team and each stakeholder will interact (how they will communicate, make decisions, allocate resources, etc.).

### Border Management Strategies

Here are several border management strategies we've developed over the years. How such strategies are carried out depends on the particular relationships to be managed. For example, cross-functional and/or cross-cultural teams generally serve "multiple masters" and must build bridges to a variety of key stakeholders. Given the team structure, borders may exist with the team Sponsor; functional, divisional, regional, and/or senior management; support groups (resource people or technical experts assisting the team); and possibly customers, suppliers, industry experts, or others outside the organization.

**Give them what they want.** Success is always in the eye of the beholder. Find out exactly what stakeholders need/expect from the team and how they will measure results, then deliver accordingly.

**Communicate.** Stakeholders hate surprises. One of the best ways to keep them in the team's corner is to provide frequent status reports/updates and include them in the feedback loop.

**Get them involved.** Actively solicit input and ideas from stakeholders. Invite them to team events and to observe the team at work. Seek their knowledge and viewpoints while planning , not just after the fact.

**Identify value-added benefits.** Make stakeholders aware of how they stand to gain status and power through the team's success. Look for overlapping objectives.

**Share the credit.** Remember that stakeholders have stakeholders, too. Find out who those significant parties are and, when communicating the team's progress and accomplishments, be sure to note contributions made by stakeholders on the team's behalf.

**Never put border-management monkeys on their backs.** Try to resolve problems/issues before turning to stakeholders for assistance, especially if the resolution will entail political maneuvering on their part.

**Practice the fine art of negotiation.** Be willing to make strategic trade-offs when lobbying for stakeholder support on initiatives or resources that are critical to the team's effectiveness.

**Get periodic check-ups.** Plan ways to ask the question: "How are we doing?" Get feedback from stakeholders during or after a team meeting, circulate an e-mail questionnaire, or conduct a more formal survey.

**Take advantage of technology.** Linking teams and stakeholders via shared databases, e-mail, the Internet, or similar means can enhance the exchange and timeliness of information. Such tools can be especially useful for remote teams dealing with different time zones or languages.

**Socialize.** Host a party, plan an outdoor recreational event, or just do lunch—it is easier to work with people whom you've interacted with on a personal basis.

If border relationships are managed effectively, stakeholders can become strong advocates for the team. If not, teams increase the potential for disruptive political skirmishes, and decrease the potential to produce value-added results. *CT*

*Lynda McDermott and Bill Waite are principals with Equi-Pro International, a New York-based consulting firm. Nolan Brawley is Director of Training and Development for Pfizer Pharmaceuticals. Lynda, Bill and Nolan are the authors of* World Class Teams: Working Across Borders. *(John Wiley & Sons 800 225-5945). Contact EquiPro at (212) 573-9046.*