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Achieving Excellence

6 Steps to getting the best from your development teams

There is no secret or magic involved in achieving excellent results from your product development teams. However, many companies are not getting close to excellence. Since management can be defined as getting the right things accomplished using multiple resources, lack of results is normally a management issue.

In this article, I will lay out six steps to getting the best from your product development teams. These six basic steps, if implemented, will improve your team's performance and accelerate your business toward achieving excellence.

Set High and Firm Goals

The first thing to remember is that the goals are golden. These requirements establish the framework and boundaries of the project. These required functions or features are what will make the project or product unique and profitable. If the feature will not make the product unique or generate additional revenue, then there should be some serious consideration about whether it should be a requirement.

Along with the requirements are the dangerous “nice-to-have” features. These are the functions and features that usually come into a project by way of “feature creep”. These were not in the original specification but are added along the way because they are “easy” to implement. These are often the part of the project that creates delays and cost overruns. If there is a request for a new feature or function, then they must be formalized in an amended requirements document.

While setting the goals for your team, do your own research and make sure the goals are achievable within the given budget and schedule. Setting high goals are important for growth, but they must be achievable or both the team and the firm loses.

CASE STUDY

A former colleague of mine worked on a program that may be the best example of scope creep I have seen. The worst part of the scope change was not the features that were added because none were. It was the continual increase in quality requirements. Just as the product achieved the goal, the bar was raised. This delayed

the project for over 1 year, costing the company millions of dollars in lost revenue.

In this case, my colleague had no recourse. The legal and quality departments forbade shipment. There was no intervention possible but to continue to force the supplier to alter the product.

The product was finally released, but the competition had a 1 year advantage and the increased product requirements had no effect on performance, safety, or profit.

Don't Settle for Close Enough

The schedule of the project is not negotiable once it and the requirements are frozen. The discipline of freezing the requirements is critical for success. Missing a schedule is usually the worst thing that can happen to a firm: customer promises are broken, cost overruns occur, and revenues that are forever lost.

Cost is key as well. Schedule overruns will increase costs, as will feature creep and inadequately researched goals. Do your homework and determine whether increased project cost or increase piece-part cost is preferred IF cost is going to increase.

Sometime reality sets in and requires you to settle for less than you desire. Only when the team agrees that it cannot be done in the time/cost needed and outside experts agree with them.

Offer and provide needed support

Your team needs to know that you will provide them with the support they need to be successful. The level of support may have a limit but you will do what you can to back your people as they work to achieve their objectives.

A component of this support is working harder than your team. You may not be directly performing or creating but you should be providing value to them and to the company. Some of the ways you should be helping them is:

- Planning
- Reviewing
- Mentoring
- Coaching
- Funding
- Supplying Tools
- Consulting
- Trend Analysis

CASE STUDY

I was once assigned the strategy development and implementation planning for a \$25M product line. The goal was to grow the product line by consistently by dougle-digits over the next 3-5 years

I spent 2 months interviewing customers and salesmen, studying competitors, and looking at our marketing options. I presented a comprehensive plan for growth that addressed all facets of the business: sales, training, advertising, new products, and the distribution model. It was disregarded with only a cursory review and without comment or discussion.

Details matter – the devil lives here

It is very easy to miss or ignore those gory little details that seem so insignificant when compared to the “big picture”. Most do not realize that a “big picture” or painting like the Mona Lisa is composed of thousands of little details called brushstrokes. Working out, and then through, these details is what makes the difference between mediocre and outstanding results. Be aware that you must know which details to “sweat” and which to ignore, but that is what makes for a great contributor.

Moments like these when one decides between attention to detail and moving at 80% ready are where great managers earn their “keep”. These are the skills that get passed to the team through mentoring and coaching.

CASE STUDY

I was in high school when the space shuttle Challenger exploded 73 seconds into the mission. The launch leader chose to continue the mission despite warnings from his engineering team.

The night before the launch, the temperature at Cape Canaveral dropped to about 37° Fahrenheit which was below the safe limit for the O-rings that sealed the sections of the solid rocket boosters. Engineers warned the leadership of the dangers, but the flight took off anyway. The O-rings failed a few seconds into the flight and ignited the hydrogen fuel tank, destroying the shuttle and all seven astronauts aboard.

The details matter – sometimes with drastic consequences. Pay attention to them. Pay attention to your experts.

Reward excellence

The first mistake many managers make is to reward “meets objectives.” This simple act destroys the morale of the true high-achiever. Simultaneously, this behavior informs the poor performer that he is doing “OK”. This kills productivity of the former and the desire to improve by the latter. At best, this results in less than optimal team performance. At worst, the top talent leave the firm.

There is a cure for this. I touched on this in [Effective Documentation and Communication of Goals](#). Set proper goals and judge team members by them. Reward them according to their performance.

Leverage the results into other successes

The easiest and fastest way to grow your organization and achieve more is to apply what you have learned in earlier projects to new products and services. “NIH” or “Not Invented Here” can exist within a firm as easily as between firms. This type of thinking may create new ways to solve old problems, but these usually do not move the business forward as fast as desired.

It is good to try new ideas and techniques when required. If you need a series of quick-hit products, then leveraging what you already know is critical.

Summary

As the leader of many technical and marketing teams over the past 15 years, these six steps helped us achieve success. I urge you to implement some or all of them. As a recap, they are:

1. Set high and firm goals
2. Don't settle for “close enough”
3. Offer and provide needed support
4. Details matter
5. Reward excellence
6. Leverage the results into other successes

I would like to hear about your challenges and successes. Please contact me if you have questions or comments.

[Doug Ringer](http://www.dougringer.com) is currently the Director of Product Development for a leading firm in the healthcare emergency response industry. Doug has held global roles in marketing, manufacturing and R&D at General Electric, Ericsson, Honeywell, Meritor, and now in a small private firm. He also served on the board of directors and president of the board of a civil rights organization based in Kentucky. Doug lives with his family near Louisville, Kentucky. Follow him at <http://www.dougringer.com>.