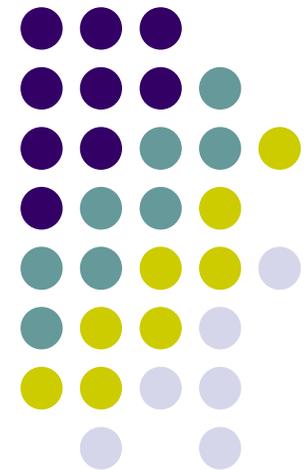# Fixing Troubled Groups

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My experience

- Complier group in maintenance mode
  - In two years: 3 times the deliverables with 2/3 the staff
- Algorithms group waiting for permission to work
  - In one year: Called on to support every new customer win
- Documentation group rated 2 out of 5 by customers
  - In two years: 4 out of 5 and working as part of the development team
- 3D CAD group delivering only minor enhancements
  - In two years: Enabling 50% work-center time, customer TAT from 3 days to 1, and 3D web viewer for customers

How do you recognize that a group is in trouble?

- ## Just listen
  Everyone else knows
  And are talking about it behind your back

- ## You keep trying to fix them
  And keep hearing excuses for why it is the way it is

- ## They are delivering nothing:
  - They focus on one area – fixing some perceived problem
  - They are caught up in maintaining status quo
  - They are trying to fly under the radar
  - They are afraid to make mistakes

- ## Some groups hide

Real evidence of trouble

- "We are only allowed to work on bug fixes. We were told not to work on new development until it has been approved."
- "You don't have to change words that haven't been written."
- "All we have time for is working on building for the next OS release."
- "We can't get marketing to tell us how they want it to work."

What are some root causes of a troubled group?
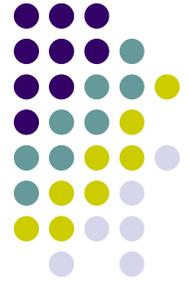
- Lack of direction
- They don't know what to do
- Lack of understanding of business values
- They are afraid to act – mistakes feel dangerous
- The leader can't effectively advocate a direction
- They give up
- Bad eggs (unusual)
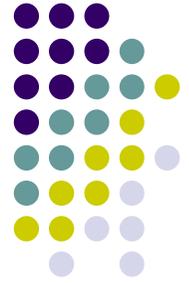- Unreasonable expectations

What is your first action when you find a troubled group?

Mine is:

- Decide if the current leader can fix it
  - Probably not – change them out!
  - They don't know how to fix it
  - They would have done it already

How do you diagnose the root-cause of the problem?

- Get out of the way
  - Give the new leader some room
  - Your preconceptions may have colored the previous leader's actions
  - Don't force the new leader down the same path
- My best tool: One-on-one interviews
- Focus on causes not symptoms
- Learning cycle:
  - Listen to people
  - Form an opinion
  - Test your ideas
  - Repeat

Who should you interview and why?

- Management – ask about problems, look for business values

- Peers/Stakeholders – search for rumors, find who are assets to your team

- Team members – search for motivations, learn root causes, evaluate available skills

Order matters: Who should you interview first, and why?

This is the order I use:

- Manager briefly:
  - Learn problem from their perspective
  - Learn who your strongest peers are
- Team – as a group:
  - To tell them you will be talking to them individually
- Strongest peers:
  - Most likely source of accurate problem description
  - Will know who is likely good and poor on the team
- Best team member:
  - Build an inside ally
  - See if they will describe the problem
    - Tests their engagement in fixing the problem
    - See if they really are good
    - Learn their level of insight and ability to help with a solution
    - Test the assessment you heard from management and peers
  - See if they will point out the bad eggs
- Worst team member
  - They will describe the problem, usually accurately
  - Start to decide if they can be saved
- Rest of the team members and peers
  - Repeatedly run through the learning cycle

How do you fix the problem?
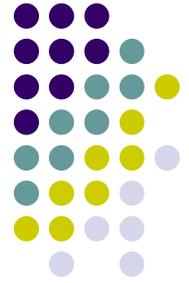
- Create a meaningful vision for the group
- Resolve the root-cause obstacles to success
- Set new performance norms
- Keep refining the solution

The group vision

- It must be:
  - Meaningful to the organization
  - Simple to describe
  - Something the group can be proud of
- Engage the team in setting it
- Get management buy-in that they want it
- Build peer buy-in to support it

Resolve root-cause obstacles

- Set new deliverable expectations with management
- Change short-term expectations to give improvement head-room
- Trade them for meaningful, long-term deliverables
- Set new interaction norms with peer groups
- Renegotiate resources for new deliverable expectations

Set new performance norms
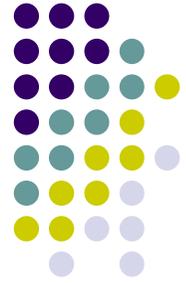
- Create a burning platform
  - Be honest about the previous situation
  - Support and deliver on new vision
  - Deliver on new commitments

- Somebody will quit – help them
- You'll probably need to fire someone Probably only one person
- Somebody will rise as a new star

Stay on track

- Frequent repetition of the vision
- Explain expected steps and measures of progress
- Frequent reminders of improvements
- Highlight every sign of progress and success

- Don't expect instant results:
  - 2 months: New mission in place
  - 4 months: First signs of success
  - 9 months: First meaningful new deliverables
  - 12 months: Peer groups talking about the success
  - 18 months: New behavior is the norm

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