

Are We a Team?

Hi. My name is Jenny McConnell. I am the newly appointed CIO of a medium-sized technology company. Our company recruits top graduates from schools of business and engineering. Talent, intellect, creativity—it's all there. If you lined up this crowd for a group photo, credentials in hand, the "wow" factor would be there.

Our company is spread over a dozen states, mostly in the Northwest. The talent pool is amazing across the board, both in IT and in the rest of the company. But when the CEO hired me, he said that we are performing nowhere near our potential. On the surface, the company is doing fine. But we should be a *Fortune* 500 organization. With this much talent, we should be growing at a much faster rate. The CEO also said that I was inheriting "a super team with disappointing performance." His task for me was to pull the IT stars into a cohesive team that would meet company needs for new IT systems and services much faster and more effectively.

Without making our superstars feel that they were being critiqued and second-guessed, or indicating "there's a real problem here," I wanted to gather as much information and feedback as possible from the 14 team members (regional CIOs and department heads) who report to me. I held one-on-one meetings in order to give a voice to each person, allowing each individual to provide an honest assessment of the team as well as areas for improvement and a vision for the future of team efforts.

I was surprised by the consistency of remarks and opinions. For example, a picture emerged of the previous CIO, who was obviously awed by the talent level of team members. Comments such as "Bob pretty much let us do what we wanted" and "Bob would start the meeting and then just fade into the background, as if he found us

intimidating" were typical. The most disturbing comment, "Bob always agreed with *me*," was expressed by most of the team members at some point in our conversation. It was as if the regional heads believed that the CIO wanted them to succeed by doing as they thought best for themselves.

I queried members about the level of cooperation during meetings and uncovered areas of concern, including the complaint that others at the table were constantly checking their iPads and smartphones during meetings. One department head told me, "You could turn off the sound while watching one of our meetings, and just by the body language and level of attention, tell who is aligned with whom and who wishes the speaker would just shut up. It would be comical if it weren't so distressing."

Such remarks were indicative of a lack of trust and respect and a breakdown of genuine communication. One team member told me, "I recently encountered a problem that a department head from another region had successfully solved, but the information was never shared, so here I am reinventing the wheel and wasting valuable time." It was apparent that these so-called high performers were territorial, and that the "each division for itself" attitude was becoming a cultural norm that, unchecked, was slowing our response to line departments and customers.

I was also struck by the similarity of the regional IT leaders in their backgrounds, comments, and attitudes, which presented a whole new dilemma: How do we create diversity, jump-start ideas, and reignite passion? This looks like a group of individualists who don't know how to play as a team. I don't want to diminish the individual talent, but I am concerned by the lack of cohesion. I need to find a way to help people think less about themselves and more about sharing work and information and achieving collective results for the good of the company.

Team building is an art, anchored by trust and communication, and committed to mutual success. What I'm seeing looks like team dysfunction to me. Now I have to determine the steps necessary to build a cohesive, visionary team.

Questions

1. What type of team does the new CIO have? What do you see as the key problem with the team?
2. How do you think that the team evolved to this low level of cooperation and cohesiveness?
3. What suggestions do you have for the CIO to help her turn this collection of individual regional and department heads into a top-performing team? Explain.