

Building a Nimble / Plastic Organization



How do you build a team that is as adept at solving tomorrow's problems as they are at solving today's?

Even if you build a nimble team, how do you motivate them? Retain them? Get them to consistently deliver results?

The pace of business today is fast and accelerating. Technical developments, changing financial, regulatory, legal, customer, and organizational demands are creating the need for even more flexible organizations.

Simultaneously, hyper-specialization at large companies create narrower job silos that reinforce rigidity rather than flexibility.

Leaders find they have increasingly tentative/rigid teams which require ever more "change management" efforts to address new challenges/opportunities. In this monograph, we'll explore ways to build "plastic" teams capable of dealing with frequent, demanding changes without breaking stride. In fact, building teams that thrive on change.

The Plastic Team

The term "plastic" goes back to at least the year 1630, and its fundamental meaning hasn't changed - "capable of being molded...capable of adapting to changing conditions." Psychologist Jerzy Konorski used it to describe how human behavior (even reflexes) could adapt over time, even in the face of serious brain injury.

Below you'll find the distilled 25+ year experience developing and maintaining teams that adapt, adjust, and even thrive off of novel challenges and surprises.

But first, A little context...

We believe 'plastic' teams are best leveraged for complex, rapidly changing work that requires expertise, judgement, and critical thinking. Team members often contribute to shared common goals/objectives. For example, a 'field organization' where each member has a territory that contributes to the whole. Another example is a Product Development Core team, where each member represents a business function, but they all share a common goal of delivering a product on time and on budget.

Below are key principles and practices to help you build a nimble, high-value organization.

1. Pick the right motivation:

- Align the team charter with your company's mission and vision.
- The team charter should specifically define how your team brings value to the enterprise.

Employees who contribute most and thrive in plastic organizations are often motivated by a sense of contributing to a larger goal. Aligning the team's goals with the company's mission provides clarity to those goals and validates those motivations. By providing perspective on how your organization brings value, you provide a framework for independent decision making by your team members.

2. Pick the right people:

- Hire only those who resonate with the Mission.
- Select independent problem solvers who like taking personal responsibility.
- Hire for talent, drive, critical thinking; train on skills and knowledge.
- Leverage your top performers to find and train new team members.



“A” players are your best asset. In a plastic organization, that means energetic, passionate, courageous and independent; everything else you can train. Create an abundance rather than a scarcity mentality in the team. Your best people know other great people; leverage them to recruit others like themselves. This is where collaboration supersedes competition – your team member should want to recruit the best and then train them to succeed.

3. Pick the right message:

- Emphasize personal responsibility for delivering what the enterprise needs.
- Empower independence of problem solving and importance of creativity.
- Reinforce responsibility to the team and overall outcome.
- Encourage constant sharing of challenges, solutions, and, most of all, mistakes.

For a team to be truly plastic, each member must be free to find ways to uniquely contribute to the team’s objectives. As a leader you’ll need to reinforce the message that success depends on everyone figuring out how to contribute - then trust them to do that. Tougher still, as a leader in a plastic organization, you’ll need to give your people room to experiment and make mistakes.

4. Pick the right work/projects:

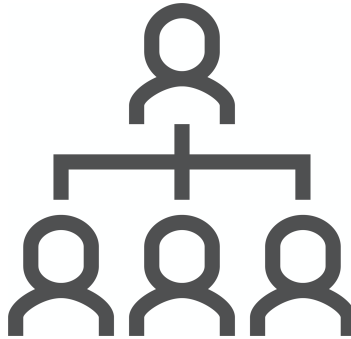
- Select work that demands individual problem solving across a variety of evolving environments.
- Don’t be afraid to throw your team a curve.
- Don’t use the plastic team to do mechanical/predictable work.

Plastic teams thrive on innovation and diversity. Plastic teams need novel challenges. Give them projects that demand individual creativity, commitment and problem solving to reach a shared objective. The plastic team draws energy from “swinging in on a vine” to deal with problems that stymie others. Avoid burdening this team with overly repetitive/mechanical responsibilities. Repetitive work crushes plastic teams.

5. Pick the right structure:

- The flatter the better.
- Make people management personal.
- Offer coaching and guidance without micromanagement.
- Challenge through competition among members, but reward collaboration even more.

- Help team members and managers grow in their roles...and then grow out of their roles.



Concentrate decision-making close to the actual work and empower local problem-solving. A plastic team's most successful members will need to know they're free to be creative and innovate. They'll also want to know that, if they need a management level decision, they'll get one fast. That means decreasing the distance between individual contributors and final decision makers. Flattening your organization also serves to reassure your staff that they have the ear and the trust of their management. Management is not just about the job, it's about personal challenges, personal achievement, and development. Your leaders should manage the whole person.

6. Pick the right rewards:

- Pay them well, but don't rely on money as a primary motivator.
- Reward your people with more challenges and more complexity.
- Go easy on the recognition. Congratulate members on successes privately, while, letting them know you recognize their efforts.

- Bring public attention to their success through asking them to share their methods/learnings with the team.



For your most successful and plastic team members the ability to creatively solve problems and watch their own solutions succeed, is the most powerful motivator. Recognizing successful strategies may be your most powerful motivator. Plastic team members also frequently build close personal working relationships, often with remote peers who share the same challenges. Leverage these relationships to drive team accountability and “best strategies and mistakes” sharing.

Conclusion: A truly plastic organization leverages flexibility to deliver consistent results and exceed expectations. It can adapt to changing demands and balance complex and evolving priorities. But a plastic team is tricky to develop and manage. As a leader, you’ll need to create an environment that allows your staff high levels of independence – an environment that gives them the courage to innovate and flex with changing demands. It also means letting your team members make mistakes, learn from them and share them with the rest of the group.

In a rapidly evolving business environment, a team of gifted problem solvers can make the difference between success and missed opportunities. you need a flexible team who can consistently deliver, evolve, deliver then repeat. A plastic organization can provide enormous return on investment and is well worth the effort to build and maintain.



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