So Happy Together
Team-building skills for your group

By Stephanie Reck, editor

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Welcome to Oxendine Publishing! If we're going to work well together, there are some things you need to know about me:

1. Don't tell me to do something in the hall on the way to a meeting and expect me to remember it.
2. I edit with green ink.
3. Gotta have Mountain Dew.

Am I just the office diva, making sure my every whim is catered to? Nope—I'm just lucky enough to work somewhere that emphasizes teambuilding within the staff, so I know the preferences of my co-workers as well. Here at Oxendine, when we were building ourselves into a team, we took the time to purposefully communicate our pet peeves and work preferences to one another, rather than learn that stuff the hard way, or worse yet, not learn it and suffer the consequences.

Every group or organization goes through transitions at times, and on college campuses, you can set your watch by those times. Even if a campus group has had the same president for two years running, the officers and members likely have undergone a lot of change. So, how do you build a cohesive team, a group of people who work well, relate well, and (gasp!) even get along together?

We went through a massive transition time at Oxendine in the fall of 2001. Three out of three editors were new, and there was turnover in the business staff as well. It was a perfect time to escape from the clutches of "we've always done it this way" and revamp our processes in everything from where a story goes first to be edited to who puts the aforementioned Dew in the office fridge when we're out. But first, we needed to learn who each other was and how best to work together.

We set aside time to communicate by having a brown-bag retreat. There, we hashed out the big things like editorial process and how the money's handled. In many cases, we didn't need to change anything, but not everyone knew the process. Because so many of us were new, our retreat morphed into a transition meeting—a time to share all the word-of-mouth office information, to ask questions, and to establish new methods. Again and again, things came back to individual preference—how not to step on (stomp on, squash, or grind to a messy pulp) the toes of the person doing the job. But learning all those small preferences can take a lot of time—time we didn't have because we're a small staff and magazines come with concrete deadlines.

Our solution? A tag-team e-mail through the office, the "read-add-and-reply-all" variety that listed each person's "gotta-haves" to make a workday smooth. So now, the newest guy on board knew to always give the business manager a request in an e-mail, to edit in a different color than the editor in chief, not to bug the IT guru for at least 30 minutes after he'd walked in, and to keep the bathroom doors in the reception area shut after using the restroom.

Something as simple as an e-mail like this can help ease transitions and build a team dynamic in a campus group where turnover is annual, if not semester-to-semester. Your new officers don't come on board with the psychic abilities necessary to divine the preferences and methods of the existing group members and other newbies. Creating the means for them to learn about one another and work well together speeds up your ability to begin the real work underway. In our case, e-mail was effective, but communicating on a personal level during transition time will pay off in the long run.

More suggestions to get a group to become a team:

Get off-site. Shake things up with some intensive retreat time to get to know one another and talk in depth. Retreats don't have to be an expensive trip to a resort—have make-your-own sandwiches around a picnic table in the park or camp out at the vice-prez's apartment. Our company's "Spring Planning Retreat" cost less than 50 dollars.

Set up consistent communications. If members know they're expected to check e-mail, a snail-mail box, or phone mail daily, they're less likely to gripe about being out of the loop.

Go play. Relationships aren't built with parliamentary procedure. Hike, swim, play Uno, and see what you learn about each other's character in the process.

Avoid gossip. Even a small group can get poisoned by gossip. If all the members of your group see one another often enough to communicate easily, it helps avoid the "Did you hear…?" problem. We frequently lunch together in the office to stay caught up with one another as people, not just as job titles.

Be considerate. If you know your fellow group members well, follow through and accommodate their preferences whenever possible.

Reach out to introverted students. Not everyone is bold about communicating things about themselves. Provide more than one outlet of communication so the shy guy isn't forced to show up at the karaoke event to get an answer about something.

Keep those doors open. It's nice to shut the door and really concentrate on your work as long as you're not alienating the people on the other side of it. Be sure everyone knows who to go to with questions and concerns, and provide ample time to tend to their issues. You know how you hate the professor who has 10 minutes of office time and is too busy to answer your questions even during those few minutes? Well, then, don't be like him.

Have a transition manual. If most of how your group operates is communicated through word-of-mouth, you're going to miss somebody or forget something. Write your procedures down, update them annually, and watch for how effective it makes the next transition in your group.

Meet regularly. Even if you don't have a set agenda, weekly meetings can provide valuable brainstorming time, and your members get to know each other well enough to feel free to let the ideas fly.

Compromise. If you always want to have it your way, go get a burger. Otherwise, concede to other people's good ideas. **SL**