Coping when your team is short-staffed

Even in the best of economic times, you may find yourself the captain of a team without a big enough crew. Maybe one of your best performers got promoted and it's taking time to find a suitable candidate to fill his or her shoes. Or maybe your team doesn't have the budget to hire another worker even though the workload would justify the expense.

Here are some ideas you and your team can use to get through a tough time:

- **Ask for candid feedback from your team.** In order to get a feel for how your team is functioning, it helps to check in often. And be sure to encourage and reward open and honest communication.

- **Prioritize, prioritize, prioritize.** Is your team spending time on low-priority projects? If everything is marked at the same priority level, maybe it's time to look a little closer. Are there any that don't need to be delivered as early as your team normally would? Are there any that aren't even really needed? You might need to make some tough decisions, but it can help stave off burnout and the risk of losing experienced team members.

- **Review your processes.** Is there anything you can do faster? Is it possible to reuse work from past projects on existing ones? Would cutting back the frequency of status reports, emails or meetings provide more time to actually get the work done?

- **Overtime, anyone?** Some team members might love overtime opportunities. Others might not be able to add more hours to their work day without straining their stress level. It's important to weigh the costs of overtime with the benefits. In addition to stretching your team's budget, in the long term, overtime can increase burnout and employee turnover.

- **Reach out.** Are there others in your organization with the expertise to help? See if you can borrow from any areas that might have employees to spare for part of the work week.

- **Morale matters.** Your team's culture plays a large part in running uphill together. Supportive teams often fare better than teams that fall into negative patterns of interaction. It can help to take a little extra time to listen to each other and provide ideas and encouragement.

- **Don't give up.** Keep trying to find solutions that will work not just today but next month and next year, too. You might need to present your business case for hiring more people several times before it's approved. Or it can help to document all the projects your team's been working on and ask leadership where you can cut back your workload. Be sure to keep your managers aware of the situation. If you stop talking about it, they may not remember to follow through on it, or worse: they may assume a problem has been resolved even while it's causing your team great stress.

If you suspect your team might be short-staffed, it can help long-term performance to return to a more balanced state as quickly as possible. Think of it this way: You wouldn't tell a marathon runner at the finish line, "Great job! Now give me another 26 miles!"