Providing support for team members

- **Do members of your team ever have problems with their work?**
- **Do members of your team ever have personal problems which affect their work?**
- **Be aware of work problems and support your team members to overcome them.**

This session helps you think about how you work with people in your team who are experiencing either work or personal difficulties. It will also help you to consider effective ways of supporting your team members and improving working relations in the team. You will think about the people you work with and their strengths and weaknesses as part of a team. You will also look at how you can support them to improve their performance.

Why do you need to support your team?

As a team leader, you are responsible for:
- ❖ agreeing work goals or objectives with your team members (what work needs to be done, and by when);
- ❖ supporting team members to achieve their objectives; and
- ❖ taking action when team members are not performing effectively.

A team that is working effectively is a team that can achieve its objectives. It will be a successful team.

Exercise

Think about the qualities of the members of your current team. For each team member list what you think are their strengths and weaknesses when it comes to:

❖ agreeing goals or objectives;

❖ achieving their objectives; and

❖ recognising when they have problems carrying out tasks to the standard required.

(Draw up a table like the one below for each team member)

Team member (name)		
Ability to:	**Strengths:**	**Weaknesses:**
❖ agree goals/ objectives		
❖ achieve objectives		
❖ identify own difficulties		

Once you have finished this exercise for each of your team members, read through what you have written. Think about the strengths and weaknesses you have listed.

1. Circle the strengths you think are most important in making your team work well.

2. Then circle the weaknesses that you think are most likely to reduce your team's effectiveness.

It is your role as team leader to convert the poor performance into effective practice. This session will help you do this.

Providing support to improve poor performance

If people aren't performing properly it's usually not deliberate. There could be many reasons they don't perform well, which is why they need your support. Look at this case study to see how one person ran into problems.

Case Study

> Maria works in a general office as a data input clerk. Six weeks ago her responsibilities were increased to include maintaining the stationery cupboard. This involves checking the supplies in the cupboard on a weekly basis and also asking team members if they have any particular requirements.
>
> Maria's team leader, Imelda, has had a number of complaints from team members that Maria has not asked them for their requests and also that standard items kept in the cupboard have not been replaced. Imelda is aware from the meetings she has had with Maria that she is happy at work and is not experiencing any difficulties in her personal life at present. Therefore it is clearly a work based problem.

Imelda needs to work with Maria to resolve the above work difficulty. She needs to consider why Maria is not carrying out this task successfully and how she should help to support Maria.

Exercise

Why do you think Maria may not be performing well?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Compare your answer to those over the page.

You may have come up with some of the following:

❖ Although Maria is effective as a data input clerk she may not have the confidence to talk to her fellow team members about their needs.

❖ Maria may not be clear about what she is expected to do and has been waiting for her fellow team members to come to her.

❖ Maria may not be familiar enough with the stationery requirements of the team members.

❖ Maria may not understand fully what is required to place an order.

In order for Imelda to provide appropriate support she needs to find out what is preventing Maria from achieving this task. The main areas are likely to be that Maria is either lacking in confidence or she does not have the skills to carry out the task.

Task analysis is a useful way of working out what knowledge and skills a person needs to do their job. It is very useful when people are experiencing difficulties to help find solutions to their problems. A task analysis is simply an examination of the tasks involved in a job. It is usually done by discussing the job with the people who perform it and asking them to list all the tasks that they perform.

By doing the task analysis you can identify what skills and knowledge someone needs to do that job. This can help you identify the specific support someone needs to do their job effectively. The example on the next page shows part of the task analysis which Imelda and Maria carried out on the job of maintaining the stationery cupboard.

For each task Imelda asked Maria what knowledge and skills she had which helped her to perform the task, and which one's she didn't have. As a result, Imelda was able to identify that one of Maria's problems was lack of confidence. Imelda agreed to support Maria by getting the team to agree when they should be asked about their stationery needs, so that Maria would feel more confident in approaching them.

Task analysis for maintaining the stationery cupboard

Tasks that I need to do to maintain the stationery cupboard:	I have the required knowledge or skills:	I do not have the required knowledge or skills:
"To check each Thursday with all team members what items of stationery they require."	"I get on well with all team members."	"I do not feel confident in approaching busy team members"
Support agreed by Imelda to help perform the task: "I will lead a discussion in the team meeting explaining Maria's role and about the best time to request information from each of them."		

Case Study

Guy is a technician in the media resources unit of a college. All the teaching staff need to request audio/visual equipment and materials from Guy. There is a system for booking equipment and requesting materials which involves completing a standard order form which is posted internally to Guy. However, on occasions equipment and/or materials are needed at very short notice and the system allows this to happen. The request is made directly to Guy who must then respond promptly if the equipment is available.

On numerous occasions tutors have complained to Paul, Guy's team leader, that Guy has been uncooperative and offensive when direct requests are made. Guy has always provided the equipment/materials but it is his manner that causes the complaints and it has upset a lot of people.

Paul has heard recently that Guy's mother is terminally ill but Paul has not spoken to him about this as Guy is not someone who likes talking about his private life. Paul isn't sure how he can talk to Guy about the problems and what kind of support he might be able to offer him.

This situation is very different from the first case study. Maria's problems were mainly about learning how to do her job properly. Guy's seem to be far more personal. Many team leaders find it difficult to talk to people about these kind of personal problems.

Exercise

What do you think Paul should do?
1. Make a list of the key steps which Paul needs to take when he talks to Guy.
2. Then suggest how he could do this so that he doesn't upset Guy or make the problems worse.

Key steps	How Paul could deal with them

Clearly Paul needs to be sensitive about Guy's personal circumstances, but, as team leader, he must concentrate on resolving the work problem. However, Paul should be aware of the help his organisation can offer to support team members in such a situation.

There are several things that Paul needs to do to help Guy become aware of the problem and to try and help him to resolve it. Here are some of the most important:

❖ Make Guy feel relaxed enough to discuss the problem. Paul should organise a one-to-one meeting in an environment where Guy wouldn't feel threatened.

❖ Guy needs to recognise his behaviour is upsetting other staff. Paul should help Guy to see links between current behaviour and personal situation.

❖ Find out what the organisation can offer Guy to help him deal with his personal situation. Paul might need to discuss with Guy taking compassionate leave and/or getting access to counselling through work.

Maintaining effective support for team members

This session has looked at the support that team leaders need to give to team members who are experiencing difficulties at work. Working through the exercises and reflecting on your own work situation you have learnt that:

- ❖ It is important that team leaders **work with the member of their team to identify the source of the problem**. Together they should agree what specific action needs to be taken and what support is available to help overcome the problem.

- ❖ It is important to **be clear about the type of problem and re-alistic about the support** that can be offered.

- ❖ The team leader's role is to support team members to perform their work tasks effectively. But you should also **recognise the limits of your role** in dealing with a team member's personal problems.

- ❖ As a team leader you need to be **informed and up to date about the support your organisation can offer** to help people with problems.

Don't try to do things that are beyond your responsibility or your skills. Once you have identified a problem which you can't handle, pass it on to someone else who can help, like your manager. Don't ignore problems - a problem with a member of your team is always your problem!

Comprehension Check

Complete the following exercises. Refer back to the session if necessary.

A. Why should a team leader be concerned about supporting team members who have personal problems?

_____

_____

_____

_____

B. A task analysis can help you to identify what two things that a person needs to perform the job?

1. _____

2. _____

C. Mark the following statements (T)True or (F)False:

___ 1. A team leader shouldn't discuss personal problems with team members.

___ 2. A team leader should find out about the support that the organisation can offer people with personal problems.

___ 3. A team leader should always try to resolve personal problems before passing them on to other people.

___ 4. A task analysis is a way of identifying the tasks which are involved in performing a job.

Making Connections

Answer the question following each case.

Case 1

Amin has just joined Bill's team. He was supposed to have had a very similar job before he joined, but he doesn't seem to be performing the job as well as he should. Some tasks he does very well, and Bill's manager has noticed this and praised Amin. Others he performs very poorly, but Bill's manager hasn't noticed that.

Bill thinks that it is because Amin is good at making sure that he performs well at the things which the manager notices, and then doesn't care about the others. Amin gets on well with everyone and he doesn't seem to be lazy, but Bill thinks he lacks commitment to the job. Bill has decided that he is going to complain about Amin's attitude to his manager.

❖ What would you advise Bill to do before he complains to his manager.

_____

_____

_____

Case 2

Paula is the team leader. One of her team members, Annie, is going through a very painful divorce. On several occasions recently she has burst into tears when a customer has spoken to her harshly.

Paula is divorced and knows what it is like. She is very sympathetic to Annie and has tried to console her. She has avoided speaking about Annie's problems to her Depot manager because she doesn't want him to think that Annie is not capable of the job. However, the problem seems to be getting worse, and she is spending more and more of her time talking to Annie and their work is starting to suffer.

❖ What advice would you give Paula?

_____

_____

_____

Think and Apply

How well do you use the skills in this session? Think about your team and their performance in their jobs.

- ❖ What action, if any, do you need to take about weaknesses in your team's performance?
- ❖ Are there any jobs which you should carry out task analysis on, to identify the knowledge and skills team members need?
- ❖ Do you need to find out what support your organisation can offer team members with personal problems?

1. Read the list of skills. Tick the boxes to show your strengths and weaknesses.				
Skills	*strengths <- - - -> weaknesses*			
	I'm good at this	I'm quite good at this	I'm not so good at this	I'm quite poor at this
■ recognising team members' strengths and weaknesses in their jobs	☐	☐	☐	☐
■ carrying out task analysis to identify the knowledge and skills needed to perform a job	☐	☐	☐	☐
■ providing support to team members with personal problems	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. Do you want to improve any of these skills?				
3. How do you plan to improve the skills you listed in question 2? (You might want to discuss this with your line manager or your tutor/mentor/coach.)				