

7 strategies to turn ‘lone wolves’ into team players

By implementing these seven strategies, you can effectively foster a more collaborative and cohesive team culture.



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BY [Michael Timms](#)

Do you have employees who act more like “lone wolves” than team players? Individuals or teams who work in isolation from the larger organization can stifle innovation, limit knowledge sharing, and create resentment when others perceive them as playing by different rules. So how can leaders guide these lone wolves toward adopting a team-oriented mindset?

I’ve been asked this question by various leaders including the president of a financial institution, a branch director of a high-tech consulting firm, and the superintendent of a school district. While specifics may vary by context, several core principles apply to any leader looking to foster a shift from “me” to “we.”

The presence of lone wolves often stems from a lack of the necessary structures and conditions for establishing accountable relationships, such as agreed-upon behavioral standards, normal reporting relationships, incentives for cooperation, and consequences for noncooperation. For example, salespeople paid entirely on commission have little incentive to act like part of a team.

Here are seven key strategies any leader can implement to encourage lone wolves to become active members of the pack.

Define desired results

Step one is to clarify what you hope improved teamwork will achieve. Instead of vague goals like “better collaboration,” dig deeper by asking “Why?” multiple times to identify specific, measurable outcomes, such as:

- More innovative solutions
- Higher employee engagement and commitment
- Greater profit for the company

For these results to be useful, they must be measurable.

Define desired behaviors

Next, identify the behaviors that will lead to these outcomes. Ask yourself, “What actions will produce these results?”

A helpful exercise is to create a word picture to contrast the behaviors you want with those you want to avoid. Draw a line down the middle of a page. In the left column, write, “What a lone wolf does,” listing the behaviors that frustrate you. In the right column, write, “What a team player does” and note what you’d like them to do instead.

For example, desired behaviors could include:

- Referring clients to other parts of the business
- Participating in committees
- Responding to requests for information or advice
- Attending company meetings and events

Behaviors should be observable and measurable.

Negotiate a new deal

Executives want better teamwork but often avoid addressing the issue directly, preferring to express their dissatisfaction through sarcastic comments rather than real conversations. Meanwhile, lone wolves are usually already getting what they want but would prefer less “corporate” interference and bureaucracy. The key question is whether you dare to confront the problem directly or continue using passive-aggressive tactics, hoping they’ll change.

If having your lone wolves act as team players is valuable to you, make it valuable to them. Address the issue directly by explaining why the current arrangement isn’t optimal and how adopting the desired behaviors can lead to better results for the organization and them. Then, ask what it would take for them to demonstrate those behaviors and work together to strike a deal. Try to find nonmonetary things you can offer them to make their jobs easier such as more corporate support or less red tape.

Measure and report KPIs

You get what you measure. Tracking key behaviors provides valuable feedback, helping you adjust your approach to improve results.

While I usually emphasize focusing on outcomes instead of tasks to improve your odds of success, it’s more effective to focus on behaviors when individuals have limited control over results such as increasing innovation and profitability.

This may require tracking new metrics, like internal referrals, meeting attendance, or timely paperwork submission. Teamwork, for example, can be surprisingly easy to measure. [Google](#) improved teamwork on an uncooperative team by using a simple two-question survey:

- In the last quarter, this person helped me when I reached out to them.
- In the last quarter, this person involved me when I could have been helpful to or was impacted by their team’s work.

Each member received a report showing their ranking compared to their peers, with all other rankings remaining anonymous. Within two years, the team’s favorable responses increased from 70% to 90%

Meet 1:1 regularly

A reporting relationship with regularly scheduled [one-on-one check-ins](#) is essential for maintaining accountability. Reporting progress face-to-face makes employees feel part of something larger, and [research shows](#) it increases their odds of achieving goals by 95%.

Accountability thrives on mutual feedback, which is hard to achieve without regular meetings and often [harms relationships when done via email](#). Trust is the foundation of teamwork, and you can't build it by meeting infrequently or only when there's a problem. One successful executive told me, "If you're not holding regular one-on-ones with your direct reports, you're eroding trust, not building it."

While effective one-on-ones can cover various topics, one question managers should regularly ask is, "How can I support you better?"

Recognize success

Behavior that gets praised gets repeated. When your former lone wolves demonstrate desired behaviors, acknowledge it. This can be done through an email, a handwritten note, an in-person comment, or even in team meetings—if it won't embarrass them.

Effective recognition includes three key elements:

- a) "I noticed what you did."
- b) "I appreciate it."
- c) "This is why it matters."

The most important part is connecting the behavior with the results it achieved.

As the keepers of team culture, leaders must see themselves as chief storytellers. Great leaders always look for examples to share of team members demonstrating company values or other key behaviors. Stories connect theory to reality in a memorable way and provide a model to follow. Some organizations formalize this recognition through events or awards ceremonies, highlighting employees who consistently embody these values.

Enforce consequences

You get the behavior you tolerate. If lone wolves have agreed to demonstrate certain team-centric behaviors and you're upholding your end of the deal, it's essential to address any shortfalls. Ideally, this will happen during a regular one-on-one meeting or immediately after an instance of unacceptable behavior. A simple approach is to say, "I noticed you did [blank]. What happened there?" Hear them out but make it clear that it can't happen again. Ask what you can do to help them meet expectations going forward.

This must be a face-to-face conversation. Email or text is not appropriate for addressing such issues.

Leaders must have the courage to let go of those who repeatedly violate standards of teamwork and cooperation, even if they are top performers. While difficult, making these

tough decisions in line with your values earns you the respect of others and reinforces the importance of maintaining behavioral standards.

Fostering a cohesive team culture

As a leader, you set the tone for your organization's culture. By implementing these seven strategies, you can effectively coax lone wolves into the pack, fostering a more collaborative and cohesive team culture.

As you encourage your lone wolves to contribute more as part of an integrated unit, you'll not only enhance overall organizational performance, but you'll also reinforce that basic expectations of teamwork and cooperation apply to everyone.

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