11 Ways

to Successfully Manage Your AP Team

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Finance & Management

11 Ways to Make Your AP Team the Envy of Every Other Department

Finding great staffers is one challenge; keeping them is another. However, that's the kind of problem you want to have—a team that is so exceptional that you must keep other managers in the company from trying to poach them.

How to accomplish this? Consider these suggestions:

1   Look beyond the clerical work.

We all know that for most accounts payable departments, there's a strong clerical element involved, especially for organizations that haven't yet automated their routine processes. If that's your situation, you already know that your team members are often "in the weeds" all day, every day, managing the manual process of getting the bills paid.

As an outstanding manager, it's your job to keep your eyes on the ultimate goals of your process—happy suppliers, bills paid on time, few duplicate payments, early pay discounts captured. All that has a strong impact on the company's bottom line. It's equally important that you communicate this to your team so they understand the impact they can make on your employer's success.

This will enable them to think about what they're doing in a larger perspective, whether that task is big or small, which in turns leads to better decisions and a greater sense of accomplishment.

Consider taking inter-department field trips to find out how others in the company do what they do. Encourage other departments to do the same for AP—pay you a visit. Have one of your team conduct a tour and explain your process. This will build their confidence and encourage them to talk to employees who work in other areas of the organization.

> Help your employees understand the impact they make on the organization's success.

2 Ally with procurement.

This is one relationship you'll definitely want to build up. As the front end of your procure-to-pay process, what procurement does is critical to your doing what you do later in the workflow. Delays and miscommunication between procurement and AP can make the entire process inefficient, which in turn looks bad for both of you. Yet, this is incredibly common.

The problem is compounded when the departments are under separate management, as they often are, or physically distant—also a common thing. They're marching to different orders and aren't aware of the other's needs and priorities.

Your team and the procurement team must get to know one another and learn about the other's pain points. What's the thing you do that drives them nuts? What's the big thing you would like them to do differently? How can both teams' processes be refined to create optimal success every step of the way?

It starts with a discussion. A savvy leader will initiate that conversation, going through appropriate channels to get things moving. If supported by management—and it should be, especially if you can provide some potential benefits to get their attention—you may want to hold joint planning meetings, team up members from both groups to solve a problem, or conduct an internal field trip.

Once the barriers are down, healthy conversations can organically spring up between the two groups. While you should remain involved, let your team suggest ways the P2P process can be improved. After all, who doesn't want their job to be easier?

3 Support your team members.

This can hardly be stressed enough. However, let's discuss what "support" means.

It doesn't mean standing over your staff and nagging them. It doesn't mean letting them have free rein to do whatever they want either. Everybody needs to be doing the same things the same way for optimal performance. However, there's an element of trust that needs to be present, and if it's missing, your team will definitely know it.

You'll see it manifested in a lack of confidence or an unwillingness to step outside their normal day-to-day responsibilities. You'll hear the awkward silence in a meeting when you ask a question or solicit feedback. Everybody's afraid of getting in trouble for saying the wrong thing or making a mistake.
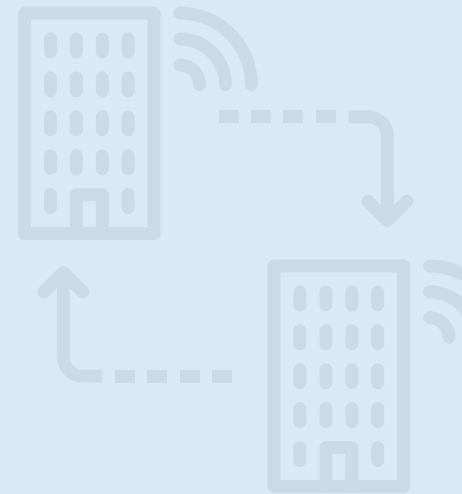
Supporting your team requires a balance between keeping an eye on them and trusting them.

It's a balance. Guide them, train them and keep an eye on them, but also trust them enough to let them try new things on their own—and that includes learning by failing at non-essential tasks. Let them know that you won't let them crash and burn, but growth is a process that comes from experience.

For many, the day-to-day routine becomes reassuring, if lacking challenge. In order to build a team that supports AP, you and the organization overall, find opportunities for them to step out of their comfort zones.

4   Advocate for your team.

Let's talk about how you represent your team up the chain and with your peers in other departments.

As the face of AP, you are in a good position to present them favorably to the organization. That means standing up for them and making their accomplishments known, even grooming top performers to take on other suitable roles within the organization. Word will get around, and your staff will know and appreciate the fact that you're willing to go to bat for them.

Loyalty is something you earn by being your team's advocate. Not only won't you deflect blame onto them if AP is criticized—you'll do everything in your power to elevate their profile within the organization and help them shine.

5   Train your staff.

If you're looking for top performance and the maximum contribution from your team members, they must be knowledgeable. Consider getting them IOFM-certified as an important first step. They'll become familiar with the best practices and standardized methods adopted by world-class AP departments.

Beyond AP, what kinds of training does your company offer? Even if the topics don't seem immediately applicable to your staff's roles, training broadens their understanding of your business as a whole and shows that you value them enough to help them improve their skills. You never know when that knowledge might come in particularly handy—to you, to AP, or to them personally.

Giving them time to train also breaks up the routine of their day-to-day work, which can become monotonous in some roles. Knowledge is power—encouraging them to build up that knowledge gives them a way to discover their own strengths.

Earn your team's loyalty by advocating for them.

6   Provide ongoing feedback.

Nowadays, the annual performance review is increasingly coming under fire. Organizations are beginning to realize that only discussing performance, accomplishments and areas for improvement once or twice a year does not yield the desired results.

Instead, formal performance reviews are incredibly time-consuming, not terribly productive in many cases, and can even discourage employees from trying to improve. It's too easy to focus on the mistakes they made because those things stick in your mind, rather than encouraging your team members to repeat actions that were positive.

A better approach is to offer feedback on the spot. If you see something great, compliment them within earshot of the team. If you need to correct a problem, find a discreet way to talk to them privately as soon as you possibly can. Immediate feedback is the best. Managers who call staff out in front of their peers will likely experience a high level of turnover.

Remember that people generally want to do their best. It's your job to give them the guidance, encouragement and opportunity to do that.

7   Hold team meetings that matter.

The first question you should ask yourself when calling a team meeting is, "Is this really necessary?" Employees who are compelled to attend too many meetings that aren't relevant to them burn out on them quickly and learn to tune out. They're just warm bodies in seats.

Phones should be set to silent during a meeting and put away. If someone is expecting an emergency call, the person should probably be excused from that particular session. They'll hardly be focused on the topic being discussed.

Meetings should have a definite purpose, a specific length and an agenda. Be respectful of people's time and attention. Some organizations prefer "standing meetings" in which participants are required to stand up the entire time. It's thought that this prevents people from getting so comfortable that the meeting turns into a time-wasting ramble. Whether or not you sit, stay on topic and be mindful of the time limit. Don't feel the need to go the entire scheduled time. If your meeting is set for 30 minutes but you're able to communicate your message in 10, adjourn early.

Finally, don't invite those who aren't absolutely necessary. If the information being communicated is highly relevant to them or you require their input or participation, then by all means bring them in. But you don't need the whole team present to address something that doesn't really affect them.

> **Feedback should be given on an ongoing basis, not just at an annual performance review.**

8   Ask for ideas—and listen.

Listening to your team is important. Even if you've been in AP for 20 years and they're brand-new at it, it doesn't necessarily mean they won't have good ideas. In fact, precisely because they don't know "the way it's always been done," they may have a fresh perspective.

Even if their ideas aren't viable, don't just say, "That won't work"—remember, this is a teaching moment. Instead, have a discussion to explain the nature of the problems you foresee. They may not yet understand the full implications and the complexity of the situation. Once they do, however, their next suggestions will be better-informed and potentially more viable.

This can be a win-win. Their informed brainstorming can help you tune up your processes, especially since they're the ones who are doing the hands-on work all day, every day.

9   Introduce some fun.

AP doesn't have to be all work and no play. Think of some activities to break up the routine of the day.

As your schedule permits, play games, have contests, do a potluck lunch, or plan an outing. You may want to appoint a social committee, then provide them with a schedule and a small budget to plan events. You probably have some folks on your team who enjoy doing that kind of thing and would gladly volunteer. And consider inviting procurement or other members of the finance team. Doing a fun activity together can go a long way toward building up relationships and improving communication.

One caveat, however. Particularly if your team is interested in going out together after work or meeting up to do things on the weekend, remember that not everyone enjoys spending their free time with their coworkers. Some people are turned off by forced socialization, so make participation in after-hours events voluntary.

> Listen to your team's ideas, even those suggested by members with less experience.

10 Provide a safe work environment.

Safety encompasses a broad spectrum of considerations. Now, while we're still in the midst of a pandemic, many people are concerned about going back to the office and working in close proximity with others. If your organization is requiring that, make sure you find out what sanitation and social distancing concerns are being addressed and communicate that. If your team is able to continue working from home and you're comfortable they're productive doing that, confer with upper management to find out if that's an option and establish the rules surrounding it.

On an intrapersonal level, you'll want to make sure members of your team are free from harassment and bullying, no matter what the cause. Work with the human resources department to understand your organization's policy on this topic and communicate it to the team, with clear instructions that you have zero tolerance for it and what to do in the event they are on the receiving end of this type of negative treatment—or observe it happening to a coworker.

Finally, within your day-to-day operations, be sure that everyone has a voice and feels safe enough to express their ideas, concerns and opinions openly and without fear of ridicule. Establish a ban on eye-rolling and snickering. An open door policy is a good idea for those who are less comfortable speaking in front of the entire team. If it proves to be disruptive for you, set specific hours where people know they can just walk in and begin a conversation with you.

11 Imagine the future.

As a leader, you need to walk the line between the daily task of getting the bills paid and staying mindful of the organization's larger goals. Those leaders who have loyal, effective teams do a good job of keeping everybody on task while making sure to communicate that bigger picture.

For many AP departments where there's more automation and less manual work, the successful team will look to you for guidance about how they can make a difference at a more strategic level than they ever have before. You'll need to stay informed and look at AP through a different lens, maintaining and communicating a vision for what it can be when it isn't as focused on clerical processes.

If you empower your team to think creatively, you'll likely find that they're more engaged and productive. Supporting them in their journey will yield positive results for them, for you, for AP—and for the organization as a whole.

Adopt a zero tolerance policy for harassment and bullying.

Maintain and communicate a vision for the future of AP.

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About the Institute of Finance and Management (IOFM)

Financial operations professionals (AP/Procurement/P2P and AR/Credit & Collections/O2C) are facing mounting pressures to improve their performance. To meet operational and strategic goals, cash must be paid and collected faster – and more accurately. Compliance regulations are continually changing – and the fines are increasing. And threats of fraud and abuse are on the rise. But despite these challenges, there are few reliable, independent, and comprehensive places to turn for help.

That's why IOFM exists.

Since 1982, our team has remained committed to helping financial operations professionals do their jobs better, raise their personal and team profile, and advance their careers. Our mission has been, and continues to be, to align the resources, events, education, and networking opportunities we offer with what companies need from the accounting and finance functions.

We strive to empower financial operations professionals to perform with the highest levels of efficiency and confidence.

That's why thousands of your peers are IOFM Members, have become Certified through our world-class training programs or attend our virtual and in-person events. We look forward to helping you, too.