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Creating Teams That Really Work
By Diane Hanson

To many people, team building means getting people to know and like each other more and, therefore, to work together better. Then the problems will go away, right? Actually this approach usually does not work because it assumes that the problem is the people.

While there can be a mismatch between the individual's capabilities and the job requirements, obstacles to teamwork are more likely related to a variety of factors--and often a combination of several factors which may or may not include the people involved and their personalities.

The most effective approach to team building involves a wide variety of methods. It allows you to see the team in the bigger context of its environment and to plan the right type of intervention(s) that will bring about lasting results.

Case Study

A fast growing computer company reorganized into teams because the company president heard what a great success teams were at another company headed by his friend and golfing partner. He immediately decreed that everyone would work together in teams and in a memo assigned everyone to a team.

Within a few months, the teams were in severe conflict. But the organization's leaders did not seek external assistance until one team started a fist fight in the middle of the office one day. Then they called me saying, "We need an emergency team building session."

When I met with the managers I learned that the team that started the scuffle was working on a top priority project. And they were working on a tight deadline. If they didn't learn to work together and complete the project on time, the company would lose a big contract that could potentially threaten the company's existence.

Company personnel told me that they had some very difficult people on the team and that the problems were due to personality conflicts. As a performance consultant, I was not convinced that the real problem was personalities. My approach is always to determine what factors in the work environment are hindering teamwork and what the consequences are if people are not team players.

I asked to meet with the various members of the team individually to determine what the problems were more specifically. From my research with the team members, it was apparent that there were many sources of conflict:

- Although they had a clear-cut goal which was to develop highly customized software for a client and install it by a specific date, they did not have much time left to accomplish their goal and were under extreme pressure. In fact, the team had no input into the development of the goal or the time frame and they all felt that the goal was unrealistic.

- Lack of clearly defined roles, especially of the team leader, had caused several blow ups among team members and was impeding their progress.

- The team didn't have all the resources it needed to achieve its objective.

- Access to leaders to clarify issues was limited, leading to further confusion.

- Several members of the team who were new to the company did not have adequate knowledge of the company's software. This severely impacted their efficiency but there were no plans or resources to provide the needed training.

- The void of standard policies and procedures for making programming changes had led to team members unintentionally violating each other's work, resulting in re-work, lost time, and further conflict.

- Lack of communication was leading to misunderstandings and costly mistakes, putting even more pressure on the team to meet its deadline.

What would you prescribe for this team? Would it be warm and fuzzy activities to help them understand and like each other? Would that likely resolve the issues in this case study? Although it might do some temporary good, it wouldn't resolve the underlying problems and probably wouldn't help the team reach its goal.

The approach taken was to work with the team members to clarify their roles and responsibilities as well as their expectations of each other. Each team member was asked to think about their perceptions of each other's roles and what they expected from each other. This was then discussed with all present and a list of responsibilities and expectations was developed for each individual or distinct role. The list was then distributed to all as a permanent record of the discussion. This prevented duplication of efforts and minimized future conflicts.

Plans were made to provide the training needed for team members to do the job efficiently. Consequences for being a team player were reviewed and a partially team-based

compensation system was put into place. The company's performance appraisal system was also revised to include criteria for teamwork. The importance of celebrating team successes was emphasized.

To tackle the communication problem, with the assistance of a facilitator, team members were encouraged to openly discuss what information they needed and how it could best be provided. A plan for communicating the needed information was recorded and implemented.

Finally ground rules and procedures were established to allow the team to work effectively and efficiently together instead of everyone doing things their own way.

The end result was that the team accomplished its goal on time and the company had established a structure that is supportive of future teams as well.

The above case story may seem basic and in many respects, it is. However, diagnosing the needs of a team and prescribing the right interventions is more complicated than it may seem. Although there are some similarities or patterns that can help with diagnosis, every team has different needs.

A Diagnostic Tool

One tool that I find very helpful in diagnosing a team's needs is, "A Model for Exemplary Team Performance." I have adapted this model from the Behavioral Engineering Model in *Human Competence: Engineering Worthy Performance* by Thomas F. Gilbert (page 88). According to Gilbert, "We can say that all instrumental human behavior-- all behavioral components of performance--have two aspects of equal importance: a person with a repertory of behavior and a supporting environment. The person's repertory and the supporting environment together form a transaction that we call behavior."

Gilbert then divided each of these two major determinants of behavior into three sub-categories. Environmental Support was broken down into information, resources, and incentives/consequences. Knowledge and skills, capacity, and internal motivation comprised the individual behavior. The categories are all interrelated but the sub-components help us narrow our focus in order to determine where we can get the greatest leverage in improving performance.

While Gilbert's model is based on individual performance, it applies equally well to team performance. A team will be successful only if it has an environment that will support it. And while the individual members of the team affect its success, the major impact on overall team performance comes from the environment. In other words, if you take an exemplary team and put it into an environment that is not supportive, the team's effectiveness will be diminished proportionately.

Problems are usually found in Cell 1 (Information)

Certain team diseases are more common than others and most of the problem areas are found in cell number one (Information). First of all a team needs the guidance provided by a mission statement and overall company goals that will help the team to establish priorities. From these priorities, the team must develop shared goals. Many teams get engulfed in conflict--sometimes severe-- because team members are all trying to accomplish something different. You may have many well meaning people all working hard but pulling the team in different directions because the team hasn't clearly defined its objectives and/or hasn't achieved consensus on what it's trying to do.

Once a team has defined its goals, the roles of the individual team members must be determined. Eliminate this step and you'll end up with conflict. Team members may duplicate efforts while other important tasks are left undone. When things start falling through the cracks, everyone starts blaming each other and the team becomes dysfunctional.

A second aspect of role definition is for the team to clearly understand its boundaries of authority and responsibility. Many companies try to empower their workforce by telling them to go ahead and make decisions. What they find is that employees are reluctant to make decisions without a clear distinction between what they are solely responsible for and, thus, have the authority to decide, and which decisions must be cleared through management. It is ironic that boundaries actually increase freedom, but without this clarity of decision-making authority most teams get stuck in indecision and inaction.

Communications issues always pose a challenge. Team members must freely pass information along to each other but in order to do this they must discuss who needs to communicate what to whom and why. The team must maintain lines of communication with other teams, customers, suppliers, and management. Performance criteria must be clearly defined and must provide feedback to the team and its individual members on their performance.

Team members must establish ground rules for how they will interact and operate as a team. How will they handle it if one team member is always late for meetings? What if a team member betrays confidences or is disrespectful of his fellow team members? These issues should be discussed before they happen so that clear expectations of what is acceptable and the consequences of not complying are understood by everyone involved.

In addition, teams need established work procedures to prevent duplication of effort and conflicts over how things should get done. If everyone's doing things his own way, it will inevitably lead to confusion and conflicts.

A Model for Exemplary Team Performance

Environmental Support

Cell 1. **Information**	Cell 2. **Resources**	Cell 3. **Incentives/Consequences**
· Organizational strategy · Mission statement · Shared goals · Clearly defined roles and expectations · Defined boundaries of authority and responsibility · Effective communication · Performance criteria clearly defined and communicated · Performance feedback · Sharing of experiences (Reflective feedback) · Ground rules for team conduct · Job aids · Established work procedures	· Effective leaders and facilitators · Access to leaders · Equipment--computers, tools, supplies needed to do the job efficiently · Training budget · Freedom of decision making · Methods for measuring progress & success · Ergonomics--safety and efficiency · People resources to do the job · Time to do the job · Efficient processes or the authority to make them efficient	· Respect from peers and management · A culture that reinforces team decision making & continuous improvement · Performance measurement based on desired outcomes · Challenge/responsibility · Compensation based on team performance and individual success · Good performance is recognized/rewarded · Team celebrations and recognition · Permission to learn by success and failure · Career development opportunity

Individual Behavior

Cell 4. **Knowledge/Skills**	Cell 5. **Capacity**	Cell 6. **Motivation**
Training in: · Team skills · Communication skills · Management skills · Problem solving skills · Technical skills · Job procedures · Team leader skills · Meeting management · Cross training · Change management	· Team player vs. independent worker · Ability to learn technical skills · Personal initiative · Ability to work with people · Individual and team capacity for self evaluation · Willingness to change behavior to support team	· Desire for challenge and independence · Personal goals compliment company goals · Desire to learn through failure and success

Cells 2 (Resources)

If all the components of cell one (Information) are provided, team members are more likely to have cohesive relationships and to work together effectively. However, a lack of resources (Cell 2) or lack of effective incentives and consequences (Cell 3) can greatly impact the team's success. If a team doesn't have the resources it needs to accomplish a goal--whether it's time, equipment, people, or money--it will have difficulty succeeding.

Cells 3 (Incentives/Consequences)

Many organizations establish teams without even considering the impact of their antiquated compensation and reward system. These systems are most often based on individual performance, not teamwork. If a team member's salary increase or bonus is based solely on individual performance, what incentive is there to help other team members? It may even be detrimental to an individual's personal compensation to help others. Such a system encourages competition instead of teamwork.

The impact of taking risks and sometimes failing can have a significant effect on team performance. Are teams and individuals penalized for trying something new? If this happens, don't expect a lot of creativity and innovation from teams in the future. The reactions of managers and supervisors to creative ideas and novel approaches can create either a positive or negative consequence for the desired behavior of creative problem solving.

Cell 4 (Training)

Training can provide a tremendous boost to the effectiveness of teams, but it must be used in combination with interventions related to the systemic support and structure of the organization in which the teams must perform. For the best results, training should be just in time". Giving the team a week-long training program on teamwork, usually doesn't work best. It is much more effective if it is given in smaller increments as the team needs the specific training. For example, if the team is interviewing for a new member, provide training on interviewing skills and the legal issues in hiring just before they do their first interviews. Provide training in conflict management just as the team members are experiencing conflict.

Cells 5 and 6 (Capacity and Motivation)

Based on my experience with teams, a large majority of problems are related to the environment or the top half of the Model for Exemplary Team Performance. While there are individuals who are independent workers or who may not have the capacity or motivation for teamwork, (Cells 5-6) these problems are more easily remedied through proper

selection. It is much more effective and efficient to start with team players rather than trying to coerce an independent personality to become a team player. An incentive and reward system that fosters collaboration goes a long way toward overcoming these potential problems which are usually blamed on the individual, but are most often deficiencies in the system.

Conclusion

To analyze the effectiveness of teams and determine the causes of team inefficiency or conflict, use the Model for Exemplary Team Performance to isolate the areas of greatest leverage. In almost all cases, the problem areas will show up in the environmental support system--cells one through three--as the case study demonstrates. In the case study example, training on the company software was the only factor impeding team progress that was directly related to the individuals' capabilities. The areas of greatest leverage were in the top three cells.

Many techniques and interventions can help create productive teams but it's often a combination of several strategies that will bring about the desired results. Approach the situation from all angles to assure that team members have the information and resources they need and that potential sources of conflict are minimized. And most important of all, they work to make sure the team has an environment and structure in which it can succeed.

Biography

Diane Hanson, President of *Creative Resource Development*, has over 25 years of experience in management, consulting, and training. She is a recognized authority on teams, teamwork, and organizational change.

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