

Reprinted from July 24 - August 6, 2009

Strength in numbers

How to develop an effective team

Question:

In your column in the June 26 issue of *BizTimes Milwaukee* you shared 12 keys to an effective team. Could you write about how to act on these?

Answer:

At the outset, let me be clear on one thing: Teams do not just happen. The organizations that are the best at deploying teams pursue the endeavor with intention and effort. Time and resources are devoted to cultivating trust, collaboration, and interdependency. Leaders learn how to lead teams, not just the individuals that comprise them. A measurement framework that incorporates both individual and collective metrics is utilized.

To pursue a team-based approach is, therefore, a complex undertaking. This is not to say that it is impossible. After all, when you look closely you often find that simplicity underlies complexity. In that regard, it is important to observe that the elements that are used to guide individual performance all work for teams, too. The major difference is that the performance of the team is the unit of analysis in guiding teams, not simply the performance of individuals within the team.

This last comment is illustrated by John Wooden's coaching philosophy when he was building a men's college basketball dynasty at UCLA during the 1960s and '70s. His Bruin teams won seven national titles in a row and a total of 10 championships in 12 years. His teams were, of course, populated with very talented players. Coach Wooden was once asked, "How do you decide who will play?" Wooden is reported to have answered, "I don't select the best players and play them. I select the

players who play best together."

An interesting perspective, don't you think?

Clearly, teams of any kind are unique and complex. It doesn't matter if we're talking about sports teams, volunteer teams, or business teams. In each case, teams must work out personal differences, find strengths on which to build, and balance commitments associated with operating within a unit versus solely as individuals.

Dealing with internal team needs that surface from the pressures of juggling multiple roles is as important as the task of solving problems, improving processes, or completing daily work. Teams frequently underestimate the need for ongoing, purposeful development. When a team of any type is working well, individual members are able to concentrate on their primary task of solving problems or improving processes. In contrast, a team that does not attempt to build relationships among its members will waste time on power struggles and endless discussions that lead nowhere.

Just as is true of choppy waters, there are undercurrents in teams. If they are not addressed, undercurrents (e.g., hidden feelings, assumptions, biases, perceptions, etc.) can inhibit a team's chances of succeeding. Any team that aspires to peak performance must, there-

fore, give time to activities related to the tasks (i.e., the "what") that must be accomplished and the process (i.e., the "how") that will be used for doing so. To not do so is to run the risk of falling into the "interpersonal underworld" where mistrust, skepticism, competition, and disenchantment pervade.

So, to navigate effectively through the stages of team development, (i.e., forming, storming, norming, and performing) team members must be mindful of developing their skills at the personal, interpersonal and team levels. Team members must, in essence, understand themselves, their colleagues, and what is necessary to "come together" as a cohesive, interdependent unit. Key questions that need to be answered along the way include the following:

1. Personal level

Will I be accepted? Will I be respected? How can I help the team? How can we do better?

2. Interpersonal level

Are we being too polite? Are we struggling over control and power? Are we doing our best to cooperate and assist each other? Are we accurately assessing our efforts?

3. Team level

Are we sure of our mission and purpose? Are we well organized? Are we sharing data, information, and ideas? Are we sharing responsibility for our processes and products?

Further, as J. Richard Hackman, the Edgar Pierce Professor of social and Organizational Psychology at Harvard University pointed out in his excellent book,

Leading Teams, for teams to truly take root and flourish a number of elements must be present, as follows:

1. Teams must be real.

To be a team, a team must operate as a team, not a group of individuals. To become a team, there must be trust, authenticity and commitment. As George Kohlrieser, a professor at the International Institute for Management Development in Switzerland has observed, "Put the fish on the table." Tell it like it is and deal with it.

2. Teams need a compelling direction.

Teams must have a clear sense of purpose. They must see how what they are doing relates to the outcomes other teams are pursuing and that the organization targets. Crafting a team charter can be very helpful in this regard.

3. Teams need enabling structures.

The best teams are prescriptive regarding the methods and procedures they use. They enforce norms re-

garding the behavior that is expected. They communicate effectively and offer feedback to the team and the individuals that comprise it.

4. Teams need a supportive organization.

Teams work best in organizations that are open and participative. Such organizations have taken the time to build human and information systems that enable collaboration. For example, performance management and reward systems in such organizations address both individual and collective performance.

5. Teams need expert coaching.

As Geoff Colvin highlights in his outstanding book, *Talent is Overrated*, the building blocks of peak performance for individuals (i.e., deliberate practice, coaching, repetition, feedback, self-regulation, building knowledge, and mental models) also apply to teams. For teams to fulfill their potential, therefore, they need the guidance and assistance of leaders and coach-

es who know how to build teams.

In the final analysis, as the organizational system becomes more and more complex in our fast-paced business world, the problems to be confronted require more than one set of skills. Alignment of sub-systems and sub-processes becomes imperative. This is where teams enter the equation.

If the goal is to become a high performance organization, then a sub-goal must be to develop high performance teams. When leaders make this pursuit an important priority, the organization becomes more adaptive and nimble. Such organizations find it easier to develop and improve systems and processes because they have unleashed the power of collaboration. Ultimately, when effective teams are deployed there truly is "strength in numbers." ■

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