

Building, Nourishing, and Sustaining a Team

Written by Steve Jones

“Individually we are one drop; together we are an ocean.”¹ This beautiful metaphor describes the simple and practical idea that by working together, people can accomplish far more than they could alone. This sentiment—the concept of teamwork—is increasingly valued by the business world.

Teamwork is a method of operation in which a group of individuals submit their opinions and interests to the unity and efficiency of the group. This does not discredit the individual, but it does mean that effective and efficient teamwork goes beyond individual accomplishment. Another way of illustrating team work is through the cooperation of musicians. If each singer in a quartet has a perfect solo voice, each can sing beautifully by themselves. But by combining harmonies of bass and tenor, alto and soprano, their voices can send chills up your spine. No one is getting credit individually any more, but as a team they bring something complete and unparalleled by solos.

Eight characteristics of an effective team

A clear goal

I attended a meeting last week that went poorly. The team was divided and no conclusion was reached. The problem was a lack of clear vision of what needed to be accomplished. There was not a clear goal. Teamwork calls for a specific performance objective expressed so

¹ Ryunosuke Soetoro, Japanese writer

concisely and clearly that everyone knows when the objective has been met.

A results driven structure

In a results driven structure, a team puts in place a structured system that produces results. This is not a system the boss assigns, but a plan they design and agree upon themselves. It is called “results driven” because every part of the plan moves the process forward toward a clear goal. If the plan does not result in moving the process forward, it is eliminated and a new plan is formed.

Competent team members

Being nice and being competent are not the same. You can choose to be kind, but you cannot choose to be competent. The problem given to the team needs to be one the team can tackle effectively given their level of knowledge and skill. In our company, we like to take two members from the same field and put them together on a team. The more experienced person mentors the one with less experience, which builds competence in both.

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Unified commitment

I did not say *united*, I said, *unified*. If you tie two tomcats together by their tails, they are united, but they are not

unified. Being unified means working with a collaborative effort toward a common goal. The team members do not need to agree on everything, but all of them must direct their efforts toward the goal. Getting each individual to lay down their selfish ambitions and work for the common good of the team is one of the most difficult challenges when working on a team.

Collaborative environment

Building a climate where teams perform well is essential. This is accomplished by developing trust through honest, open, consistent, and respectful behavior. Honesty is one of the keys to building trust, but it must be honesty motivated by respect. Some people defend their brutal statements by claiming they were “just being honest.” Honesty requires saying things that aren’t pleasant to hear, but it needs to be done in an atmosphere of trust. This atmosphere of trust fosters the team’s willingness to collaborate with one another.

High standards understood by all

I stress to our frontline management that each person working for us has a heart and a soul that needs to feel loved and needed. The goal is to build respect for fellow team members so they can be held to a high standard without injury. In order for a team to be effective, they need to be able to tackle very specific and very high goals. This requires explicit and consistent expectations.

External support and encouragement

Support, encouragement, and praise work just as well in motivating teams as they do with individuals. Your teams need to hear your support. It does not bode well when all they hear you say is, “Go get it done.” Follow up their projects with praise and encouragement. Remember that you can attract more flies with a teaspoon of honey than a gallon of vinegar.

Principled leadership

Teams need someone to lead their efforts. Team members must know that the team leader was put in the position because he has good leadership skills and is working for

EIGHT CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE TEAM

- 1 | A clear goal
- 2 | A results driven structure
- 3 | Competent team members
- 4 | Unified commitment
- 5 | Collaborative environment
- 6 | High standards understood by all
- 7 | External support and encouragement
- 8 | Principled leadership

the good of the team. Team members will be less supportive if they feel the team leaders are putting themselves above the team or seeking personal recognition or other benefits.

Four phases of teams

A time of forming

The four stages of a team are forming, storming, norming, and performing. In the first stage, successful teams are comprised of a medley of personalities that harmonizes their contributions for a common goal. To form effective medleys, it helps to have a basic understanding of personalities. Let me define four of them according to speaker and author Jeff Compton.

The driver. This person is a doer. He has a lot of ambition, energy, and passion, and he tries to instill it in others. The driver can tend to dominate other personalities. Many great, charismatic, military and political figures were drivers. They liked to be leaders in charge of everything. Of course, like everything else, these personalities have their strengths and weaknesses. This personality’s strengths include being active and independent, ambitious and self-confident. Drivers respond well to challenges, need personal success, are task oriented, and set high, personal standards for themselves.

But then there are the weaknesses. They lack patience. They tend to be inconsiderate of the feelings of others. They dislike long-term projects and get bored if things

slow down. Setbacks can make them depressed, and they have difficulty following others.

The cruiser. This personality is fairly outgoing and extroverted. They tend to enjoy social gatherings and making new friends. This personality is also creative and tends to daydream. Alone time is crucial for them. They can be very sensitive, compassionate, and thoughtful. They are “people-persons,” talkative and friendly. They are high-energy and exciting. They are spontaneous and make quick decisions.

The weaknesses include being disorganized and erratic. They are natural procrastinators. They can be loud and abrasive. They seek approval from others, tending to be a “yes person.”

The navigator. This is a personality that is thoughtful and pensive. They are often very considerate. Navigators can be very creative in activities such as poetry and art and can become occupied with the tragedy and cruelty of the world. They are often perfectionists, introverted, self-reliant, and independent. They are good problem solvers, steady and deliberate, intelligent and knowledgeable, undistracted by emotion, orderly and systematic, good listeners, and good advisors.

Their weaknesses include their need to accumulate too many facts. For example, if we were trying to solve the problem of the family dog scratching himself too much, the team might discover that the dog has fleas. For the navigator, it isn’t enough to know that there are fleas. They need to know how many fleas are on the head, and how many are on the back, and they need to know whether they are male fleas or female! Because of this, they are hesitant to make decisions. They are intolerant of ambiguity. They prefer to stay in the background and are reluctant to approach others.

The Rider. This personality tends to be more self-confident and kind. They can be very accepting and affectionate people. They prefer stability and are very consistent. They are relaxed and rational. They are curious and observant, making them good administrators, taking care of paperwork, and collecting data. They are diplomats, taking care of injured feelings here and soothing things over there. They are warm and likeable,

good listeners, cooperative, able to see all sides by associating themselves with each team member. They tend to keep the team together.

Their weaknesses, however, are that they are easily misled by others. They can be “push-overs,” letting others take the initiative, reluctant to ruffle any feathers. They avoid conflict and confrontation at all cost. They value feelings above facts, and tend to be weak in planning and leading.²

When forming a team, try to assemble a balance of personalities. Ideally you should have one (or even two) of each personality on each team, ensuring that a project is thoroughly and successfully completed in a reasonable time frame with all relationships still intact.

It’s not only a matter of assembling personalities, however. Forming also involves developing a mindset that solidifies over time into an experienced team that understands its foundation, which includes the reasons for its existence and the vision for the team. It includes time for the team members to learn to know each other and define their roles. During this time the team is generally on their best behavior, cooperating, and pulling together. That will change as you come to the next phase.

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A time of storming

Lightning strikes! There are interpersonal conflicts. Decisions are being made about who gets to do what. Conflicts arise, generating anger, frustration, and disagreement. This is all a part of a necessary phase, and teams need to iron out these differences.

A time of norming

The storm passes. Conflicts are resolved. Team members find ways to work together and concentrate on their

² Jeff Compton, The Driving Force, <http://www.thebasic4.com>

assigned projects. Reaching the norming stage does not mean conflicts have been swept under the carpet, or that team members are simply avoiding confrontation. Norming means issues have been resolved, resulting in peace, collaboration and productivity.

A time of performing

With peace and collaboration, performance is maximized. Conflicts can be dealt with as they arise without getting personal, and the team members operate at their peak. The team has a job to complete, and that goal is broken down into individual tasks that are assigned to individual members. These smaller tasks are matched with team members' gifts and talents. The researcher gathers data. The creative members bring ideas. Those good with their hands do the physical work. In this way the team feels the accomplishment of reaching individual goals in order to achieve a larger, team goal. Enthusiasm rises, momentum builds, performance increases.

A critical contribution to the performance of a team is supplying it with the proper tools to accomplish its tasks. Putting a team together without a commitment to providing tools is like sending the boys out to fix fence without staples, hammer, or pliers. The team should be able to invest all of its energy and talent into completing the task. If team members have to spend time and resources coming up with tools and space or inventive means to fulfill their tasks, they will become frustrated. Enthusiasm wanes, momentum decreases, and interpersonal conflicts will spring up.

Nourishing the team

Like a car gradually uses up its fuel and needs to be refueled, so do your teams. This "fuel" comes from rewards such as recognition. Believing that discipline is more motivating than a reward is a mistake. You would be surprised what a pat on the back will do to help refuel and motivate. "Wow, good job!" are powerful words. Use them.

Beware of burnout. It does terrible things to a team and to individuals. Signs of burnout can be spotted by those outside the team, but it's important to have people within the team who are sensitive to the team's level of

exhaustion. Perhaps your team leader can take measures to correct it or bring it to your attention.

Have a way to measure progress. There should always be a mid-course progress check—a meeting where the team evaluates their progress towards their goals, identifies problem areas, and works on solutions. This is a good time for you to touch base with them, see if they're on track, encourage them, and find ways to overcome their obstacles. Perhaps they need some coaching, some training, or simply a clarification of the task boundaries. Take time to celebrate their successes so far – even the small ones. Give feedback. Revise schedules. Generate action items for things that still need to happen. Identify tools, resources, and information that the team needs in order to progress.

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Initiate team self-evaluation. This is a meeting with the sole purpose of the determining how the team is working together and forming a plan for improvement if needed. This evaluation requires candid honesty. Typically each team member fills out an anonymous form that tallies the items that need to get done, ranking them with "strongly disagree" all the way up to "strongly agree." These results can be tabulated and shared with the entire team. These self-evaluations can be real eye-openers, and provide material over which to brainstorm, identify weaknesses and strengths, and generate a new action list that can help the team get back on track.

Follow the PDCA cycle (*plan-do-check-act* or *plan-do-check-adjust*). Failing to plan is planning to fail—guaranteed. But planning is not the end goal. Acting on the plan, assessing the progress, and improving the method is just as essential to success. American products have tended to be inferior to Japanese products. One reason for this

is that Americans are great at coming up with new inventions, but not great at improving them and making them superior. The Japanese have excelled at this through the PDCA cycle. Studies show that teamwork improves innovation, problem solving and ultimately productivity.

Conclusion

Yes, putting together teams takes a lot of thought and work, and can be intimidating in the beginning. My

recommendation is that you start with a very basic problem or project and put your best people on it. Begin with something you know you can succeed at, and use that success as momentum to move confidently into larger projects.

Using teams in your organization will be a significant asset as you move forward in your business. Just like the ocean is made up of many individual drops, by working together we can accomplish far more than we can alone.

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