The Habits of an Effective Team

Adapted from a presentation given by Gary Paul Miller at REACH 2017

An effective team operates like the pumping of our hearts: quietly and behind the scenes. But when the pulse of teamwork is weak, issues come to light. Serving on a board or committee requires teamwork, but effective teamwork doesn't just happen. It has to be a priority.

Some teams want to take shortcuts. One elder team decided to meet after church one Sunday. When a team member said he wouldn't have time to meet, the leader responded, "Well, we don't need to have a long meeting. Ten minutes ought to do it. A stand-up meeting is fine."

They all happily agreed. There, as the rest of the congregation visited or filed out of church, the elders had their ten-minute meeting. Unfortunately, they missed some important things. They had no time for prayer, asking the Lord's guidance in their decision-making, and they neglected the pastoral work they should have been doing with the congregation after church.

Effective teamwork requires effort. It requires us to take the time to sharpen our axes through some foundational habits. Following are some habits that boards, committees, and other teams can practice to work together effectively.

Foundational Habits

Unite in purpose. In John 17:20–21 Jesus prayed for unity: "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me."

In my observation, the number one cause for church and organizational splits is division on the leadership team. I've also observed divisions between the leadership team and the congregation, but that's a secondary cause. For the good of the church of Jesus Christ, the leadership team must unite in purpose and commit to staying united. If there's war in the boardroom or on the ministers' bench, no amount of revival in the sanctuary will take care of the long-term issues. The leadership team must unite in purpose, doctrine, and thinking.

Maintaining unity takes effort. A committee or board can do specific things to join together as a team. For example, regular meetings can foster friendship, respect, and understanding for each other. Out of that understanding, we can represent each other when visiting with others or when asked about the team. Sharpening our axes might also mean arranging for a retreat with our wives along, or meeting for an evening of food and fellowship in the living room. Changing the setting can help board members get

to know and appreciate each other in a new way.

On the other hand, ignoring relationships and failing to meet regularly hinders unity. The ministry team who had stand-up meetings after church wanted to keep things condensed and businesslike, but this does not build effective teamwork.

Outside the boardroom, no team member should speak for the team except to state or clarify past decisions. Talking about who said what on a topic only leads to gossip in the church or community and causes division. Even the chairman should only speak for himself. Otherwise, trust in his leadership could be affected. He must not speak for the board unless the board has specifically asked him to.

When the questions come or fingers are pointed at our church or ministry, team members should go to bat for each other. Instead of complaining about the board, the preachers, or others, consider Paul's words: "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

Establish a clear vision. An effective team needs a common vision. Joshua, through instruction from the Lord, envisioned how Israel could take the city of Jericho. Nehemiah envisioned how he could take a team of people and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Jesus strategically chose the twelve disciples who would one day spread His cause and establish His kingdom. Paul strategically chose cities that were centers of trade and commerce, so he and his team could win many people to the Lord. Each had a vision for what God was going to do.

Take the time to sharpen your ax by establishing a clear vision for your team. Determine your team's mission and core values. Involve pertinent people outside the team throughout the process of developing the team's purpose. This might include anyone who will work closely with the team or be affected by its decisions.

Follow Christ's example. Those appointed to leadership positions should develop Christlike habits. A hindrance to teamwork is that we aren't always Christlike. To imitate Christ means to do nothing "through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves" (Philippians 2:3). A Christlike attitude means not boasting or envying one another. It means not challenging each another just to prove our point. A Christlike love requires being devoted to one another and demonstrating brotherly love. Christlike servanthood is working together joyfully, not lording over others. Following Christ isn't something we do once but develop as an ongoing habit in our daily lives and attitudes.

Practical Habits

Meetings can refine team members' character, build morale, provide accountability, and generate vision. Meetings can also ignite the power of prayer, as we begin meeting times with prayer. Following are three meeting habits that can result in an effective team.

Meet regularly. Whether it's a church leadership team, a business, or a ministry, boards and committees need to meet regularly. This practical point will help team members stay current, understand each other, and maintain the spirit of teamwork.

Regular meetings facilitate communication and trust. They provide a place to train younger team members and to build character in leaders as they learn how to handle differences. All this, in turn, improves the spiritual health of the organization.

Larry Osborne, in his book *Sticky Teams: Keeping Your Leadership Team and Staff on the Same Page*, says, "Whenever a group of people increase the amount of time they spend together, there is a corresponding increase in their regard and appreciation for one another."[1] I've experienced that. I've served on a leadership team for forty years and one of the things we've done consistently all of those years was to meet regularly as a team. Despite the imperfections of our team, spending that time together has raised our respect and appreciation for each other.

The frequency of meetings may vary: quarterly, monthly, biweekly, or weekly. The main point is that we prioritize meetings and have them regularly.

Trust one another. A board's success in problem-solving and issue-oriented teamwork hinges on trust. Trust is learned when a team has developed the four habits of uniting in purpose, establishing a clear vision, following Christ, and meeting regularly. That type of trust is more than knowing a colleague is going to do what he says he will do. It believes his motives are sincere.

In *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni says

[1] Larry Osborne, *Sticky Teams: Keeping Your Leadership Team and Staff on the Same Page* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), p. 40.

it well: "In the context of building a team, trust is the confidence among team members that their peers' intentions are good, and that there is no reason to be protective or careful around the group. In essence, teammates must get comfortable being vulnerable with one another."[2]

Lencioni further states that a dysfunction of a team is when we don't "dare." We don't trust, so we hide. We have only superficial evidence of teamwork. We're not really able to let our guard down for the good of the body of Christ, the board, or the ministry that we're serving.

Trust enables members to contribute without fear. One of the best ways to reinforce trust is by not disclosing what's been said in confidence. Team members learn to trust when they know others will be careful what they take outside the meeting and share with others.

Trust helps us admit our mistakes, accept apologies, and request help from one another. Trust gives team members the benefit of the doubt. Trust allows a team to concentrate on vital issues. We can even look forward to getting together the next time.

Debate ideas freely. Once trust is established, team members can debate ideas freely. Everyone dares to speak, and no one feels shut down. Team members can interact with the ideas presented by other team members, asking questions and pointing out possible repercussions. We seek to improve each other's ideas even if it means disagreeing.

A key component of healthy discussion of conflicting ideas is the absence of tension. This frees us up to really confront the issues at hand and work on proposals on the table, as we attempt to put the puzzle pieces together: *What's the problem? What's the best way forward? What's the best solution?* An environment of trust results in lively, engaging meetings where problems are addressed and solutions identified.

The ability to engage in healthy, unfiltered conflict around ideas is a rich blessing. Younger or newer team members can observe this process and learn how to do it themselves. They need to see older team members unafraid to express their ideas freely even when the ideas are different from what others have expressed. Furthermore, if we don't make room for these young eagles on our teams, they'll fly somewhere else and find something else to do.

Pursuing healthy debate can sound overly simple. Some might get the picture that team members shout out whatever they're thinking. That's not the case. Team members must carefully guard against being overly critical of someone's idea and never allow the conflict to be about someone's personality. That kind of conflict will wreck any team's effort. Healthy conflict centers around *ideas*, not people. We must have the mind of Christ as we disagree or challenge each other.

Another minefield to avoid is becoming too demanding. The difference between having a voice and demanding to be heard is the difference between constructive debate versus destructive debate. Destructive debate is overpowering and aggressive, saying "I've got to have my way." Constructive debate, on the other hand, uses a calm demeanor. It is iron sharpening iron and the ability to conflict around ideas healthily. A healthy conflict of ideas is like people working together on a puzzle. Each person has some of the puzzle pieces, and together, we can complete the puzzle.

Also avoid having board members act as "representatives" of a specific subgroup. For example, if I take the position that I'm always representing the youth, or if I'm always representing the Burkholders, or if I'm always representing some special interest group—then I'm not representing the whole. Representing only a certain small

[2] Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), p. 195.

constituency weakens my contribution as a board member because I am only voicing the opinion that supports that group. That said, we do need to remember "the little guy," because it's true that people in positions of responsibility can be so plugged in, so influential, that we forget how our decisions impact the person in the pew.

It's wonderful to have unfiltered conflict, knowing we can express ideas without fear of others going nuclear on us. A board that is able to overcome the crippling dysfunctions of distrust and fear is well on the way to healthy debate and effective teamwork. That's a true hallmark of a great team.

Commit to decisions. So far we've discussed six habits of an effective team: uniting in purpose, establishing a clear vision, following Christ, meeting regularly, trusting one another, and debating ideas freely. The seventh habit flows out of these other habits, and that is the habit of committing to decisions.

The importance of commitment can be illustrated by eight men holding up the letters *t-e-a-m-w-o-r-k*, but one man is laying down his letter to walk away, saying, "I didn't agree to that. That's not my position. I can't support that."

If you're part of a team, commit to unity. Once a decision has been made, that decision becomes yours. Embrace it as your own. Present and defend it because you're committed to the work of the team.

The time for individual dissent is in the boardroom and not outside of it. After the meeting, all members must loyally and unitedly represent the team's decision. As mentioned in the introduction, remember the grief that can result when churches divide. Often, it comes from differences on the ministers' bench. It is for that reason we must unite for the good of the church. Sometimes there may be a place where we need to be transparent about our differences and we need to express our hearts, but only do so in a humble spirit towards the rest of the team. As Patrick Lencioni in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* says, "Great teams ensure that everyone's ideas are genuinely considered, which then creates a willingness to rally around whatever decision is ultimately made by the group."[3]

Committing to decisions takes humility. It takes following after Christ. It can be hard to support the team's decision for the sake of the brotherhood or team. But remember, effective teamwork doesn't just happen. It has to be a priority.

[3] Lencioni, p. 207.

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