



TEAM INTERNATIONAL®

11107 Wurzbach Road, Suite 102

San Antonio, TX 78230

U.S. tel: (210) 641-7733 fax: (210) 641-9654

www.teaminternational.net

IMPROVING TEAMWORK – WORKING AGAINST THE ODDS

What's wrong with my team? Why can't we work together well? These are questions we hear from team leaders – and from team members – on a regular basis. Of course, they're not easy to answer, and teams are made up of all kinds, shapes, and styles of people. We seem to be working against the odds to improve teamwork; but without effective teamwork in place, we are doomed to be left behind by those organizations where teamwork is working.

We believe the answers to effective teamwork are to be found by looking – and working – in three different areas: **culturally, functionally**, and in the use of **behavioral tools**. This article will cover these three areas sequentially.

I. A teamwork culture

In the U.S., and a number of other countries which share our individualistic heritage, the emphasis is on the value and the performance of the individual, not the group or team. It has been said that in the U.S. an academic graduation ceremony is where a whole lot of people gather, all dressed exactly alike, to hear someone talk about the value of the individual.

Economist Lester Thurow (quoted by John Maxwell) puts it like this:

“There is nothing antithetical in American history, culture, or traditions to teamwork. Teams were important in America's history – wagon trains conquered the West, men working together on the assembly line in American industry conquered the world, a successful national strategy and a lot of teamwork put an American on the moon first (and thus far, last). But American mythology extols only the individual...In America, halls of fame exist for almost every conceivable activity, but nowhere do Americans raise monuments in praise of teamwork.”

Exceptions to Thurow's statement come to mind, for sure, such as the statue to the Marines at Iwojima, and the shared prizes presented for joint medical, scientific, and artistic work. But, if your organization has parking spots or a picture wall for the “Team of the Month,” I would sure like to know about it!

Although certainly not a cure-all, John C. Maxwell's book, *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork* can give us a leg-up on building a culture of teamwork in our organizations. Maxwell, quoting C.Gene Wilkes, says that the power of teams is powerful indeed:

- Teams involve more people, ideas, resources, and energy than almost any individual possesses;
- Teams maximize a leader's potential and minimize his/her shortcomings. Weaknesses are more exposed in individuals;

- Teams provide multiple perspectives on needs and goals; individual insight is seldom as broad and deep as a group's;
- Teams share the credit for victory and the blame for losses, fostering genuine humility and authentic community;
- Teams keep leaders accountable for the goal. Individuals connected to no one are accountable to no one;
- Teams can simply do more than an individual.

Now, fostering a teamwork culture is more easily said than done. Individuality and competition are nearly universal among group members, and seem to come out of the very fabric of our cultures where competition is fostered from childhood – in our school system, among siblings in a family, and in the workplace.

In our leadership development programs, for example, we sometimes do an “outdoor” exercise where groups stand on opposite sides of a grid and seek to discover the route from one side to another. In almost every case, the groups assume that they are on different teams, in competition to find the unique route, sometimes even willing to give false signals to the “other team” so that they will be the first to find the route! Only once in a while will the groups combine to help each other through the maze.

So how to re-record the tapes of individualism? First of all, the message must be clear from leadership: we are here to work together. As Maxwell writes, “One is too small a number to achieve greatness,” which is Maxwell’s Law of Significance. None of us is as good as all of us together. The message must go out, and it must be reinforced with systems to reward and recognize team effort. But there are other directions that can and should be taken:

II. *Functional development of teamwork*

By this I mean that team “dysfunctionality” should be teased out and eliminated. If John Maxwell’s focus is on the culture of teams, Patrick Lencioni’s is on their functionality; his book on *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* is a practical treatise on establishing conditions and behavior to build teamwork. Starting at the basic level of *Trust*, he builds a model leading through productive *Conflict*, *Commitment*, *Accountability*, and *Results*. This takes the attitudinal approach above, around Culture to a behavioral level.

Functional and cohesive teams:

1. *Trust one another*. They are open with one another about mistakes and weaknesses, and they are vulnerable with each other in recognizing their failings;
2. *Engage in unfiltered conflict* around ideas, recognize that ideas are more important than rank, and minimize politics and posturing;
3. After open debate, *commit to decisions* and plans of action, and to implementing them. (No fair leaving a meeting and grumbling about what *they* decided....);

4. *Hold each other accountable* for their part of the implementation, and call each other to account for failed-upon commitments;
5. *Achieve Results*. Team-members put the collective results of the team above their own needs (such as ego, career development, or recognition). While not easy to do, these behaviors are visible and measurable. And they can be encouraged and rewarded by team leaders and the organization.

III. Behavioral tools

Finally, there are behavioral tools that will support the two attitudes/behaviors above, and reinforce adhesion to them. These tools are principally meetings skills and have to do with facilitation of an environment of mutual trust, respect, and commitment. They are divided into *task* behaviors and *relationship* behaviors. The first six are *task* oriented:

- *Initiate* – propose outcomes, suggest procedures, establish priorities
- *Give information* – offer relevant facts, share pertinent experiences and perceptions
- *Seek information* – request relevant facts, feelings, ideas, concerns
- *Elaborate* – build on other's comments ("Piggy-backing on John's idea....")
- *Innovate* – offer novel associations, take a fresh look at what the team is doing and why
- *Problem-solve* – identify problems, suggest alternatives, evaluate solutions.

The second six are *relationship* building:

- *Involve others* – include people appropriately, draw others into the discussion, make it easy for others to contribute ("What do you think, Mary...?")
- *Encourage* – acknowledge others' contributions, show appreciation ("Good idea, George...!" and "We're really doing well here, gang!")
- *Listen, listen, listen* – give thoughtful attention to what others say, don't interrupt
- *Process* – summarize the team's progress periodically, keep time, etc.
- *Reconcile* – when someone has a better idea, modify your position
- *Harmonize* – help others explore differences and resolve disagreements, use positive humor to reduce tension.

In our videotape team exercises, we ask participants to observe themselves doing (or not) the above 12 behaviors. What's amazing is to watch the observance of these behaviors as they begin to produce an environment very much in tune with Maxwell's attitudinal and Lencioni's behavioral elements of awareness and exercise of positive team function. In other words, doing positive things in a meeting raises the level of functionality of a team, which, in turn imbues the team with a higher sense and value of self. Try it out in your organization! But don't expect teamwork not to take a lot of work, soul-searching, humility, and yes, failed attempts.

After all, it just goes against our culture....

References:

Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco, CA, ©2002.

John C. Maxwell, *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork*, Thomas Nelson, Inc. Nashville, TN, ©2001.

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~T. Noel Osborn, Ph.D.