

Building Strong Teams

Start with Your Ability to Relate

Every possibility in life hinges on your ability to relate. But neither profit nor pleasure is the primary motivation for teamwork. Productive teamwork moves you toward challenge, through change, with more confidence. Working well on any team generates energy and enthusiasm for life.

Some are More Skilled than Others

This ability is learned. You do not need complex interaction formulas. You don't have to be easy-going, well-educated, hard-nosed, or even especially intelligent to build a team. You don't have to be anything other than yourself. You can be effective with people using common sense and a few fundamental principles.

Vision

Vision means being able to excite the team with large, desired outcomes.

Large outcomes mean devising goals that attract "missionaries" and true believers. The first step in vision is to project such a goal. This goal must be bigger than a pay check. It must contain challenge, appeal to personal pride, and provide an opportunity to make a difference and know it. Then the goal can become a powerful vision.

Next, team leaders position the goal by picturing success. Initial questions might be, "What will it look like when we get there?", "What will success be like, feel like?" "How will others know?" When a large, missionary-friendly goal has been pictured and clearly communicated, the vision is complete.

Commitment

Commitment can be a dangerous concept because of its attendant assumptions. Some may assume, for example, that commitment means long hours, while to others it may mean productivity. When expectations are defined, success rates soar. When leaders assume that everyone "should" be committed, as a matter of course, we overlook the difficulties many have with certain commitments.

If people cannot initially commit, it doesn't mean they don't care. More often, it means they do care, and they are caught up in a process of doubt. This process precedes every meaningful commitment. Effective leaders catalyze this process, so that the critical mass of people can pass through this stage efficiently on their way to genuine commitment and innovative strategies.

This pre-commitment process is the same for team leaders and members. When we ponder a new commitment, we climb up to a kind of mental diving board. Commitments contain unknowns, and some

warn of possible failure. It is common for people to neither jump nor climb back down the "ladder," but rather to stay stuck at the end of the board, immobilized in pros, cons, obstacles, and worries. In this state of mind, the obstacles begin to rule, obscuring the vision, blunting motivation.

When leaders do not understand the commitment process they tend to seek accountability without providing support. Without a means to process doubts and fears, people often feel pressured to commit, but can't. One option, often unconscious, is to pretend to commit, to say "yes" and mean "maybe" at best. The pretended commitment is a form of wholly unnecessary corporate madness.

The solution to this set of problems is twofold: establish an atmosphere of trust, and within that atmosphere encourage inclusion.

Trust

Trust is the antidote to the fears and risks attendant to meaningful commitment. Trust means confidence in team leadership and vision. When trust prevails, team members are more willing to go through a difficult process, supported through ups, downs, risk and potential loss.

Trust is most efficiently established when leadership commits to vision first, and everyone knows those commitments are genuine. The process for leaders to commit is the same as for everyone else: assess pre-commitment doubts, questions, unknowns and fears. This involves three simple steps:

- List the unknowns
- Assess worst case scenarios and their survivability
- Research the unknowns

The list of unknowns reveals some answers and further questions. Some of these questions lend themselves to research (others' experience, a small pilot plan), and some have no apparent answers from our pre-commitment position. These latter comprise the bottom line or irreducible risk. We learn the outcome only after commitment. Every major commitment contains some irreducible risk, some lingering unknowns. We therefore make every major commitment in at least partial ignorance.

Leadership now understands the potential loss and gain involved in the new vision. At this point, leadership can commit itself, and prepare to include other team members. That preparation must include a plan for leadership to share visibly both risk and reward with the other team members who will be coming on board.

With leadership's commitment to a clear vision, and a genuine plan to share risks and rewards, the atmosphere for trust is in place. We are now ready to include others in our team effort.

Inclusion

Inclusion means getting others to commit to the team effort, helping others through their "diving board doubts" to genuine commitment. Since leaders now understand this process first hand, we need only communicate with the potential team members to complete inclusion.

The best setting to obtain buy-in and build trust is in small groups that facilitate thorough give and take. The basic tasks are to communicate the vision, make sure it is understood, communicate leadership's commitment (including sharing risk and reward, and how), and elicit and address peoples' doubts.

Leaders will need three communication skills to achieve inclusion. These are the non-assumptive question, good listening, and directed response.

1. Non-assumptive questions – “What do you think?”, “Can you tell me what is happening with this report?” invite real answers because they are inclusive, not intrusive. Questions containing assumptions “Why are you skeptical?”, “Why is this report so incomplete?” invite defensiveness. When converting an atmosphere of change and possibly skepticism to trust, added defensiveness is counterproductive.
2. Listening means separating the process of taking in information from the process of judging it. Kept separate, both processes are valuable. Mixed, especially when the receiver is a designated leader, the sender is invited to stop communicating or to change the message midstream.
3. Directed response. Effective team leaders demonstrate responsiveness. Since leaders have already processed their own pre-commitment doubts, many questions can be answered on the spot. Some require research and a timeline for response. And some, which relate to the bottom line, irreducible risk, require a truthful “I don’t know. I’m in the same soup as you.”

Help Exchange

The final step in creating the team is to establish a corroborative, balanced strategy for reaching the committed vision. This plan will consist of all of the tasks and help exchange necessary to realize the overall vision. Your teammates themselves are in the best position to supply this information. Since by this time you have laid the groundwork for trust, and established good buy-in, your teammates are likely to be enthusiastically cooperative.

At this point, the leadership role is to catalyze consensus, not to issue orders. Consensus means that team members agree to, whether they necessarily agree with, a particular approach. Consensus occurs easily when most feel their ideas were heard and considered, whether or not the team ultimately chooses those ideas. Obtaining consensus again requires use of leadership communication skills: non-assumptive questions, good listening, and directed response.

Adapted from: <http://www.learningcenter.net/library/building.shtml>