

Winning Together

by Ellen Bryson

You work hard at getting the right people into your organization. Are you working just as hard to get the right people working together *within* your organization?

“Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is a process; working together is success.” Henry Ford

Have you ever been part of a truly functional team? If so, you have tasted sweet success! You probably remember the pride you felt toward your work together. Despite long hours, your energy level was high, and you were excited about your work. Putting personal needs aside, you focused on the team’s shared goal. When you achieved that goal, you had others with which to share it which only multiplied the elation of success.

If you cannot relate to what I’m describing, picture a football team onstage at center field after winning the Super Bowl. Whether we are sports fans or not, part of us longs to be up there with them. Even an Olympian in an individual sport does not celebrate alone; after leaving the podium, you’ll see him embracing his coach, his parents, his training partner...his team.

Henry Ford was right: working together is success. Coming together and keeping together must come first, however, and those are easier said than done.



Two Sandhill Cranes (Paul Clark) Paul R. Clark, Copyright 2010

Coming together is a beginning...

In recent years, companies have found it harder and harder to differentiate themselves from their competition and create a true competitive advantage. Those that have pulled ahead have learned that putting the right people in the right jobs doing the right things creates an opportunity that would otherwise not exist. Perhaps we would find an even greater advantage if we applied this same philosophy to creating teams *within* the organization. Following are some tips for selecting the right people to work together on a particular issue:

1. Identify a capable team leader whose ability to manage people is at least as strong as his technical knowledge.
2. Grant full responsibility and authority to the team leader for making decisions and removing obstacles in order to achieve the goal within the specified timeframe. Hold him accountable to this.
3. Ensure a good balance of communication and conflict styles among the team members.
4. Select team members with the appropriate knowledge and expertise to address the problem.
5. Choose individuals who are mature enough to lay aside personal desires in favor of what is best for the team.
6. If the team requires multiple levels of authority, demand that titles get checked at the door when addressing the issue at hand. Everyone must be an equal participant in solving the problem.

I had a client whose growth had rendered a key sales process ineffective. The president had personally developed the process in the company's early years, and he wanted to lead the effort to revise it. He included mid-level managers on the revision team as a reward for good performance and a developmental opportunity.

After a few meetings, the team identified numerous changes that needed to be made, but a difference of opinion arose about the depth of those changes and the speed of its implementation. When the president pushed back, the managers quickly conceded for fear of challenging upper management.

This team was unsuccessful because its composition was inappropriate for the issue it was formed to address. The president should never have been involved with such a deeply tactical issue. His attachment to the original process prevented him from effectively delegating responsibility. Since titles were not checked at the door, the mid-level managers felt compelled to submit to upper management's opinions. The results were an unresolved issue, a lot of frustration, and damaged morale.

Getting team composition right – the right people in the right roles – is paramount to team success. If you stumble in coming together, you have little chance of keeping together – much less winning together.

...keeping together is a process...

Entire books continue to be written about how to function as a team. Anytime you bring more than one person to the table, there will be challenges. The very things that make teams effective – multiple perspectives, skill sets, and strengths – can create crippling obstacles if not proactively managed. Here is a summary of common pitfalls with which I'm sure you are already familiar:

1. Silos develop when team members look out for the best interests of themselves or their departments rather than the best interest of the team. You simply must win together, or you will not win at all. Let go of your own objectives, feelings, and history long enough to reasonably discern what will help the team the most – even if that means your department giving something up.
2. Accountability. I love these words of wisdom from Bob Prosen: “Be hard on performance, but easy on people.” Specify clear goals and agree to clear measurements of those goals, then monitor progress. If you don't hold people accountable, you will not get the results you desire. Period.
3. Rationalization is the art of justifying inferior performance. Excuses are easy (you were too busy doing your “real job,” you ran out of time, etc.). A leader's job is to ensure that

team members have the tools they need to be successful. Remove barriers and obstacles, provide assistance when needed, and holds people accountable for delivering results. One good way to discourage rationalization is to tie rewards to team results.

4. Controlling behavior must not be tolerated. Teamwork is not about kowtowing to one person's desires; it is a collective effort. Allowing one person to control the outcome defeats the purpose of the team and wastes valuable time and resources.
5. Glossing over issues is all too easy to do when conflict emerges. Vigorously avoid this temptation. Differences of opinion are exactly why you have a team. Surface the issues, consider the options, debate them, and then commit to a solution. If some team members refuse to get on board even after healthy debate, you have another issue to address.
6. Passive participation cannot be tolerated. Everyone on the team is there for a reason and must be totally invested in the process. Anything less negates the value of the team. Even if the issue falls under one team member's area of responsibility, everyone must have equal input in its resolution. That's why you check titles at the door.

...working together is success.

Trust is the most critical component to healthy conflict and effective teamwork. When fully engaged employees are willing to be vulnerable with each other, debate issues, and take the time necessary to determine the root cause of a problem, great things begin to happen. Teams who operate according to these guidelines will soon find themselves watching a Super Bowl celebration and saying, “I've been there.”



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