

Teambuilding Strategies

Five keys to developing healthy workplace teams

IF YOU HAVE BEEN FORTUNATE, you have had opportunities to work with great teams. You probably also know what it's like to work with a difficult team—with those who drain your energy. Difficult situations in the workplace will always exist, but organizations can gain an edge by working on the following foundational areas:

1. Leadership: The leader of any team creates a climate that will determine the team's productivity and how well the team will function. Team leaders are often chosen because they have done their particular jobs well. The effective team leader, however, must also be able to elicit trust and cooperation, maintain objectivity, and direct team members, giving shape to the process as they move toward stated goals. Evidence that a potential leader has these qualities should be thoughtfully evaluated before placing an individual in a leadership role.

2. Systems Approach: Focusing on individual performance is critical to the success of any organization. A regular analysis of how the organization functions as a system is equally as important. A healthy system exists when leaders and team members demonstrate mutual respect, allow freedom to contribute, encourage active listening and give-and-take dialogue when problems occur, seek outside input when appropriate, and operate with an intelligent balance of authority, power, and responsibility.

Unhealthy systems include those whose employees are kept off balance by constant criticism, over-scrutiny, and micromanagement, and those whose team members have much responsibility but little authority or power. (At the root of dysfunctional systems you will often find toxic personalities, both at the leadership and staff level.) Position yourself to treat the core issues by examining things from both an individual and systems perspective when productivity is down, turnover is high, or

the interpersonal climate is negative.

3. Knowledge of Staff: Teams comprise people who come in a seemingly endless variety of flavors. It is ill-advised to take on the role of parent, counselor, or pastor in the workplace, but understanding your staff will pay off. Team members will thrive in environments where individual strengths and weaknesses are known and addressed, various learning styles are incorporated into training, the impact of personality/generational/gender differences is understood, the pace at which staff members work best is identified, and the goals of each team member are explored and supported.

4. Effective Conflict Resolution: Many leaders avoid conflict like the plague. Yet when handled correctly, conflict can be a catalyst for needed change. Responsive rather than reactive communication, as well as a timely and direct approach, is most effective. Self-awareness is critical. Know your hot buttons and be prepared to respond appropriately when they are pushed. It does not benefit anyone when an emotional situation with an employee escalates due to an emotional team leader.

Start by objectively describing the problem: "You have been late to work three days this week." Describe the impact on the team: "Your absence creates more work for your team members." Clearly communicate the consequences: "Failure to be on time will result in disciplinary action and could lead to termination." State the expectations for change and the time frame in which they must be met.

5. Valuing the Person: It can be so easy to focus on administrative processes and productivity to the neglect of the person. Your "people work," your investment in staff, will yield positive results. Regular one-on-one meetings in which you give a few minutes of undivided attention affirm the value of the person and provide opportunities for growth. One manager asked the following non-threatening questions each time she met with a team member: "What areas of your work do you feel most positively about?" "Is there anything you think could be done better?" "How can I be of help?"

A corporate culture with traditions and rituals such as times of community worship, holiday celebrations, honest affirmations of achievement, and acknowledgment of birthdays and work anniversaries also conveys the message, "You are valued."

Christian leader, consultant, and author Bobb Biehl of MasterPlanning Group International sums it up nicely: "A Christian organization views its employees as persons to be developed, not tools to be used." ●

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