

A League of Your Own



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Last weekend two close friends who are enthusiastic members of a bowling league persuaded me to join them for an outing to our local bowling alley. Prior to Sunday I perceived bowling to be an individual sport. I've watched winning bowlers celebrate their high scores and losing players take the walk of shame to the nearest bench after bowling an embarrassing "gutter" ball.

But during our afternoon at the alley last Sunday I gained a new perspective on bowling: the fact that it is in fact, or can be, a team sport. When it was my turn to bowl each of the experienced bowling league members offered gentle coaching and helpful tips. When my efforts were rewarded with a few scattered pins, the members of my "team" offered positive feedback and words of encouragement. Throughout the afternoon we cheered each other's triumphs, downplayed our bad form, and laughed about our inconsistent performance within and between games.

The concept of "teamwork" is a familiar, recurring thread in the fabric of nonprofit life. We look for prospective employees and volunteers who are "team players," we routinely welcome newcomers to our "team" and we regularly assign key tasks to work groups and volunteer teams. Yet many teams ultimately fail and some are doomed to fail or flounder from the start.

Tips for Great Teamwork

Consider the following tips as you reflect on the effectiveness of existing teams within your organization and also before you form new teams to tackle the risk issues on your nonprofit's horizon.

- **Start with Purpose** — Many nonprofit teams are formed before clarity of purpose has been established. Some leaders are content to "figure out what we're supposed to do once we have the team together." Lack of clarity about purpose not only extends the time required for teamwork, it causes frustration among task-oriented, purpose-driven team members. Avoid forming any team for "the sake of teamwork." Form a team when you need the benefit of diverse points of view or many sets of eyes/hands, etc.
- **Consider Timing** — Always think about timing before forming a team. Do you need a group of creative minds to come together to brainstorm for a short period and then disband? Or a strong management team to lead an organization through a challenging transition and new era of operations? Or an at-the-ready crisis response team that will only be deployed if/when a crisis unfolds? Whether it's a short-term

work group or ongoing leadership team, make your expectations about timing clear from the outset.

- **Change It Up** — A “dream team” made up of truly indispensable members is a rarity. In most cases great teams evolve over time... members join and others leave. Keep in mind that losing a great team member is an opportunity to bring a different perspective into the mix.
- **Put Candor and Accountability on the Table** — Hesitancy to speak the truth is often a hidden weakness in poor-performing teams. When members are fearful about sharing their views, the benefit of teamwork is diminished. And no one wants to serve on a team where some members pull their weight and others go along for the ride. Rather than wait for poor team dynamics to jeopardize the goal and team morale, discuss team “rules” at the outset. For example: “We want and need you to be candid,” and “Let’s discuss how we’ll hold one another accountable.”

Teams in the nonprofit sector are as varied as the assortment of colorful, differently weighted bowling balls emerging from the ball return at your local bowling alley. No single format, structure, or length of service will be effective in every instance. And in some cases assigning a team creates more problems than even an effective team can possibly solve. By giving some thought to whether a team is truly needed, the length of service required, the value of “changing it up,” and the need for candor and accountability you’ll increase the odds that the teams formed in your nonprofit will enjoy working together while advancing your mission.

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