

Inspire True and Triumphant Teams



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Few leaders are willing to face the wrath of their friends and peers and speak ill of “teamwork.” Yet too often we use the words “team” and “teamwork” when we really mean work groups or a process involving a group of co-workers, while ignoring some of the difficult challenges that arise in creating and sustaining high performing teams.

What’s the risk of ignoring the truth about teams? The truth is that many tasks assigned to “teams” can be capably (and more quickly) be accomplished by individuals, instead of groups. Assigning these tasks to teams consumes precious resources in your organization. But by tuning up our perceptions about teams and teamwork and focusing on the risks that arise from collaboration, we can take teamwork from its status as a cliché to something that has meaning and value for a nonprofit’s mission.

What’s a team?

An effective team differs from a simple work group in perhaps several key respects. One of the most important differences is the willingness or desire to work collaboratively. Great teams are groups that want to collaborate. A contrived team is a work group consisting of people who work in close physical proximity, or whose members occupy adjacent boxes on an org chart or report to the same boss.

I recently discovered the transformative potential of helping a “work group” become a team. One of our public sector clients had a risk management workgroup that struggled with teamwork. Although their offices and cubicles were in close proximity, the group lacked clear direction and incentives to communicate, collaborate and cross-train. Examples of the fact that a work group isn’t necessarily a team:

- The work group’s “shared” calendar was accessible to four of the nine members
- Two or three staff accidentally discovered they were working on the same project
- More than a dozen key tasks and responsibilities were the responsibility of a single staff member, with no cross-training or back-up capabilities
- When staff members were out of the office for more than a day their voice mail boxes will quickly fill up with calls from customers seeking answers and assistance

It's as Easy as ABC

To begin the process of transforming work groups at your entity into high-performing teams, start with these ABCs.

- **All Aboard, All Accountable** – A common mistake made by many leaders is to control the selection of team members and force the formation of teams. Running an entity isn't like coaching a high school football team! Defy convention by engaging a work group to first identify an important challenge or opportunity, and next, invite the group to form a team to tackle or advance the issue. Instead of "calling the shots" while pretending it's a team effort, sit back and let the team come together. Don't jump to micro-manage the line-up unless you believe the team is simply too small to bring the diversity of opinions and perspectives necessary. Another key to team success is accountability. Accountability means doing something you committed to do. Nothing shows the cracks in a team faster than failing to focus on accountability. Yet holding one another accountable is easier said than done. When was the last time you reminded a peer or direct report-face to face-that she compromised a team effort by allowing an important deliverable to go undelivered?
- **Bold Exploration** – Many teams feel constrained by what they perceive to be the vision of the team leader. High-performing teams need permission to think beyond imaginary boundaries. A simple way to experiment with boundaries is the "Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis" or T-A-S technique. Explain the technique and get your team's willingness to experiment with T-A-S. When a team member proposes a solution or strategy, counter by suggesting the absolute opposite of that solution. Invite members of the team to identify strategies or approaches that capture the best ideas at both ends of the spectrum—"synthesis" solutions that fall somewhere between the end posts of the "thesis" and "antithesis."
- **Connections, Clarity of Purpose and Candor** – In his research on the science of teamwork, MIT professor Alex Sandy Pentland has discovered that connectivity trumps individual intelligence and talent when it comes to the effectiveness of a team. According to Pentland, generous information sharing leads to engagement and connections. Clarity is also a key to true teamwork. What's our purpose? What is our ultimate charge or goal? What is our authority-to recommend action, take action or both? Don't leave your team flailing about in a sea of uncertainty; there's enough uncertainty baked into the challenge they are tackling. Don't make it worse by waffling about what the team needs to accomplish, when it's due, or what resources they can tap into achieve the ultimate goal. The commitment to candor must be real in an effective team. One of the qualities I admired most in one of my former teammates at NRMC was her ability to politely-and with perfect timing-say, "I disagree. Here's why." She often waited until the rest of the team had fallen victim to anchoring bias (the tendency to support or anchor the first solution or idea presented) before uttering the words that helped steer our team back to the mission at hand. She consistently helps us reconnect the dots and avoid opting for the most obvious, but rarely optimal, strategy.

It Takes a Team to Advance Your Mission

Leaders who continue to believe that their unique ability to quickly solve complex challenges is quicker and therefore cheaper and preferable to engaging a team, rob their agency's mission of the value a team brings. Leaders who use the term "team" to describe a group of people working in close proximity commit a corollary sin: robbing their co-workers of the opportunity to learn from one another and develop valuable leadership skills.

Every reader of this *Risk eNews* has been part of at least one team that didn't work. Perhaps the team lacked focus, consisted of members who resented the requirement to participate, or maybe the team was a way for a leader to simply pretend that s/he wasn't really a controlling dictator.

These teamwork failures should inspire you to do and be better at teamwork. Begin by resolving to use the word "team" sparingly at your organization. A work group is simply that: people who work in close physical proximity or report to the same leader. Use "team" to refer to those instances when a willing group comes together to tackle an especially difficult or complex challenge that needs and deserves the best thinking, close connections, and candid dialogue that can't happen in a team of one.

Melanie Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center and welcomes questions about any of the topics in this article at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.