Leadership: I'm Tired of Teams
Tips for Work Teams that Work

Written by:
Randy Boek
Professional Outsider, President

I'm tired of teams and the pithy quotes of team motivational posters. "There is no I in team."
I don't buy it – the concept or the poster. Sure people on winning teams have to act for team above self. As a leader in business, however, you are unlikely to have a team of Mother Theresa's or Nelson Mandela's. Good people on teams are not selfless. More than ever, people on good teams are also different. They come from different cultures, different disciplines, different age groups, and live in different parts of the world. You may even lead a team made up of talented people from different companies.

HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAM AT ITS BEST

I'm tired of teams. But, I am a big Formula One Grand Prix fan. I'm excited watching the way 8 people in flame retardant suits change 4 Bridgestone tires, add 3 gallons/sec of fuel to a 1200 pound carbon fiber land missile that seconds before was going over 200mph… and have it back on the track in under 10 seconds. That's high performance at its best and that is when there is no "I." People with a profound commitment to a clearly understood mission; highly trained, practiced and acting in the full interest of the mission with the best of resources and finely tuned processes.

No, I don't hate teams.   I do take issue with the fashionable nature of the term "team". Many books are written. Business people, we men, in particular like sports and war metaphors to describe business realities. Some such analogies and metaphors are useful. Some are confusing and grossly inaccurate.

My issue is that pretty much every group of people working together in any organization are referred to as a team. The senior executive team, the operations team, the sales team, the front office team, the customer service team – enough already! It is as if we leaders have an expectation that the simple use of the term will make the team effective. Too many of these groups of people are not high performing and in fact many are the antithesis of an effective team.

If you are building, rebuilding, growing or tuning up a team for new challenges, here are some considerations:

1. Clarity and alignment are essential.   The vision/mission of the team must be clear, compelling, and something good people are inspired to be part of and passionate to achieve.

2. The right people must be in the right roles.   Team member knowledge, skills and attributes must fit with the needs of the mission and requirements of the team.

3. Rewards must fit with blood, sweat and tears.   Money is important but watch-out if it is all about money. Achieving big things requires significant work and usually includes sacrifice. Make it exciting and compelling to be a part of the team. Achievers want to be a part of something bigger than self.

4. Some decisions are collaborative, some not.   When mission, goal and operating parameters are agreed and committed at the outset, better, faster decisions can be made by individuals. Some decisions need collaborative, some don't. Knowing the difference is important.

5. Team member is not allowed to fail – but.   Clear direction, values and operating processes can guide effectiveness, efficiency. Commitment to each other, the full team and the mission provide a level of support and intervention that helps those who need it. That said, the HP team quickly spits out a member who is toxic, harmful or not-contributing. That is a different person than the divergent thinker.

6. Values guide behavior.   Collaboratively created, committed and the critical few that are essential to success, they provide powerful parameters for individual and team action.

7. Measure what matters.   Get clear on the data that matters. Measure and report both results and key actions that lead to results.

8. Anticipate barriers.   There are realities, perceptions and other factors that get in the way. Going around, through or over these is easier when they are identified early on.

9. Celebrate.   Being a member of a high performing team doing significant things is both an honor and highly satisfying. Look for reasons to celebrate, recognize and reward. Leverage small successes to bigger ones. Be creative in how and what is done here.

We expect leaders today to build and lead high performing teams of smart diverse people. Teams that get results. A good team chartering process sets the team up for success and ensures actions that persistently focus on the good of the team's mission. Being a professional business leader is too often harder than need be and much less satisfying. It gets easier and much more satisfying when the challenges of building an effective team give way to a self-managing team that gets persistent results.

Randy Boek
Professional Outsider I President

www.routetworesults.com
RandyB@routetworesults.com
425 242-5039

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