

Harnessing the Power of Teams

Turning Potential into Performance

To remain competitive in a global economy, companies have been charged with achieving world-class performance in all measurable areas. Anything less will threaten their viability. The marketplace has taught us that, to remain competitive, we must work smart and do more with less. Teams have emerged as an important organizational structure for managing change, productivity, problem solving, service and quality.

Teams at Work: Results in Action

Team success stories abound. The following examples, cited from the book, "The Wisdom of Teams", demonstrate the formidable energy generated by fully developed teams:

- The Motorola GEG leadership team was formed to turn around a major business unit. The result: within two years, profits moved from \$25 million to \$60 million, and ROA jumped from 6.5% to 16.5%.
- General Electric's Fort Edwards Salisbury team was charged with multiple initiatives and achieved significant operating improvements in quality, flexibility, and speed, with a 30% decrease in backlogs within the first year.
- Sealed Air formed a team to pursue manufacturing excellence. They did: waste was cut in half for one product; downtime cut from 20% to 5% on another line; and employee absenteeism went down to 1.6%.

These results affect not only bottom lines, but also morale, creating invested employees who share in corporate vision and goals. If properly developed teams can deliver shortened product delivery cycles and troubleshoot for customer-service issues, they can also resolve internal conflicts ranging from meeting tardiness to interdepartmental cooperation. A trained team allowed to share information and given clear and measurable standards for accountability will be a force that can drive business in the 21st century.

But first, companies must accept one irrefutable fact: creating teams from groups of individuals is a process, not an event.

Where a Team is Most Effective

What is a team? Research indicates a team is formed when two or more people work together using innovative methods to maximize performance toward a common goal. A team demonstrates unity, and utilizes the talents of each member to produce results.

Teams are highly effective for making complex decisions, as the input and expertise of many will usually enhance the decision quality. With decisions resulting in organizational change, a team approach ensures interdepartment support and will help facilitate implementation and employee acceptance.

As business competition continues to heighten, creativity is valued as a way to move beyond standard solutions. Teams are great incubators for innovation and creative problem solving. Diverse teams, especially, have a dynamic potential because of the variety of views, backgrounds and experiences represented.

It's important to note that teams are not appropriate for all tasks. If there is a lack of time or organizational structure necessary for team development, there's no opportunity to benefit from the team. In still other cases, work is best accomplished individually.

Maximizing Team Performance: Three Critical Measurements

Studies on exceptional team performance repeatedly reveal three critical components by which team performance can be measured and, to some extent, predicted:

- **Leadership** refers to the process of focusing the team in a common direction, aligning capabilities to that direction and managing and directing change.
- **Relationships** refer to the level of care, respect, concern and active help extended within the team. Conflict is managed and achievements are recognized.
- **Methods** are the procedures used to organize, structure, and improve the team's work. Consistent methodology facilitates rapid integration of new members and evaluation of results.

When modeled by all members, these components promote interdependence and trust, creating an environment conducive to creativity and high productivity.

Orchestrating Performance: Team Leader as Conductor

Sir Georg Solti and the Chicago Symphony were made for each other. Together they are producing some of the world's most exciting music.

Time Magazine

Sir Georg Solti won a spot in the Guinness Book of World Records as the winner of 31 Grammy Awards, more than any other classical or popular recording artist. Described by Time Magazine as an "orchestral architect," Solti built his team of musicians into a single, integrated organism. At the heart of Solti's prowess was the ability to lead, while also being a part of, the orchestra he conducted. This is at the very foundation of team leadership for empowered work teams.

In the start-up phases of team development, strong leaders are the needed end result. Leadership requires both introspection and forward-looking vision. The leader needs to promote member satisfaction in all three critical components (leadership, relationships and methodology). He or she also needs to build bridges between the team and the rest of the organization.

Tearing Down the Walls: Team Barriers

Barriers to team performance can come from anywhere in the organization, including the team itself. This includes unreasonable expectations, lack of support, restrictive policies and procedures, and poor communication. These barriers prevent accountability, compromise commitment and lead to lower productivity.

Two of the most inhibitive barriers are an unclear organizational vision and insufficient resources (time, money and/or personnel). Organizations unwilling to provide these will most certainly doom a team to failure. Team leaders must have direction and resources to feel comfortable taking risks and sharing information.

Team members must remain uncompetitive, accept each other's ideas and honor their commitments. They must learn to provide and solicit feedback and work with minimal supervision.

Results Greater than the Cost

Remember, developing a team is a process, not an event. But though development takes time, commitment and continuous evaluation, results like those experienced by Motorola, GE and Sealed Air prove that the rewards far outweigh the cost.

"Effective team builders utilize distinctive techniques aimed at harnessing the power of the collective energies, talents and diverse styles of the teams they supervises. We call this team building. The amount of performance improvement that is possible from these turned on teams is...enormous."

- Tom Peters, In Search of Excellence



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