

The Potential of Teams

“All of us are smarter than any of us” is one of my favorite clichés. Of course it’s true; it wouldn’t have become immortalized with the status of cliché if it weren’t. We know anecdotally that it’s true because we’ve all observed situations in which a group of people working together has come up with a creative solution that evolved from their active collaboration. The problem is that this is usually an after-the-fact observation rather than a deliberate action. In other words, we tend to think of “All of us are smarter than any of us” in terms of effect rather than cause. The opportunity lies in systematically exploiting the notion of collective knowledge and experience to achieve specific results.

Enter the Team Leader or Team Coach or whatever title is bestowed upon what is probably the most important position for achieving results through the effective management of front-line resources. It is through this position that the collective power of the team can be realized. There are two critical things that must take place for this to happen. The first is the realization that the position is no longer confined to the traditional role of supervisor and administrator - keeping track of individual performance, handling paperwork, meting out disciplinary action, etc. These remain important elements of the job, but the emphasis is on team, rather than individual, development and performance, which leads to the second consideration. Candidates for these critical positions must be considered for their leadership ability and potential, their focus on group as well as individual development. Once selected, they must be **formally trained in facilitation skills and group dynamics** in addition to basic management concepts.

Now that the right people with the right training are in place, the real effort – and the real payback – begins with the conduct of weekly team meetings. Standing agenda items for each meeting should include:

- discussion of errors in the preceding week and how to keep them from recurring
- discussion of difficult transactions and brainstorming ways of handling them
- identifying support needed from outside the team and identifying information that is of interest outside the team

It is the trained facilitator who will ensure that these meetings are productive, that they consistently meet the objectives stated in the agenda in the time allotted and that all team members contribute.

There’s another cliché, “There’s no I in Team”, that, while often effectively used to motivate and inspire, can actually be a barrier to realizing the potential of the team. The fact is that a team is all “I’s”. Each member brings not only his or her knowledge and experience to the team but also an ego and perhaps an agenda that must be navigated and managed to achieve the collective benefit. This is where the group dynamics training is an essential adjunct to the facilitation skills in balancing the needs of the “I’s” to achieve maximum performance of the team.

The results are not attained overnight. In fact, the nature of group dynamics – which, by the way, change whenever the team composition is altered – will often cause initial friction that must be overcome. It is said that teams go through four stages in their development – forming, storming, norming and performing. The stages are somewhat self-explanatory and will not be elaborated upon in this article. The point is that the process of developing teams to a level of performance at which the contribution of the whole exceeds the sum of its component parts takes time. In addition to trained front-line leadership, it requires patience on the part of the organization. The storming and norming stages are often marked by conflict and low morale and can be painful enough for an organization to abandon the effort and revert to “team” as simply an entry on the org chart. The company that understands the process of true team development “going in” and supports the process through all its stages will ultimately realize a significant return on its investment.