

Beyond the Horizons Consulting

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The Power of Teams

Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world. Arthur Schopenhauer, philosopher.

What if your own glass ceiling — the limits to *your* field of vision that you're totally unaware of — could be suddenly and magically replaced with the greater vision of a group of persons all pulling in the same direction? What if this group acted as *one* in their mission and goals **and** linked their fate to the wellbeing and vision of a common consensus?

This is the kind of power toward accomplishing something of positive benefit to our world that only



teams can provide! Groups are a step in the right direction — a propensity toward true community — but they fall short in the area of “bonding” that arises only when trust has made the group into a true team. In *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni

notes that when trust replaces fear, team members “can focus their energy and attention completely on the job at hand.” The emotion of fear — one of the emotions that comprise the *entire range of human emotions* — is sometimes experienced when we reveal our deficiencies, such as past failures or weak skills, or when we allow ourselves to become vulnerable by asking for help.

A simple strategy for disassembling the fear walls of any group and working toward building a team is to take time for a “meaningful ice-breaker.” With refreshments available and comfortable seating in a circle, give group members a brief questionnaire about their earlier experiences in life. For example,

- ◆ What is your hometown, and did you live there most of your childhood?
- ◆ How many brothers and sisters do you have?
- ◆ What were your favorite things to do or to learn as a child?
- ◆ What are your favorite hobbies now?
- ◆ What was your first job?
- ◆ What was your best job or volunteer experience?

Avoid the really “deep” questions that may prove too revealing to a fledgling team, but do give each person a chance to share. Members may ask questions of each other, but no one is required to answer them. Protect the privacy of the group by getting agreement to maintain confidentiality.

The Role of Team Leaders in Building Trust

Team leaders need to show vulnerability during such exercises. After all, their role is to serve as role models for team members. Such vulnerability is best expressed by giving honest answers to questions, sharing not only successes but instances of perceived failure, *and* being able to laugh at oneself!

As Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith point out in their book, *The Wisdom of Teams*, “*team leaders need to do real work themselves.*” This may seem surprising to managers coming from some schools of thought where the manager or leader operates more as a detached delegator. But in fact teams will achieve top performance objectives only if they operate as a seamless whole.

The team leader is thus both a full-fledged member of the team *and* a facilitator of the team process. In the words of the famous country music song, “you’ve got

to know when to hold and when to fold.” The team leader *must* be able to distinguish between when to step in and do something him/herself and when to let others take the ball.

A genuine team leader knows that s/he does not have to have all the answers nor does the leader need to make all the decisions. In other words, a real leader does not have a huge ego waiting to be fed at every turn!

Letting ultimate decisions be in the hands of the team and its group process means a leader does have to take some real risks. What if a team decision goes against the leader’s intuitive grain? What if team members’ feelings and opinions are aligned in an opposite direction from the leader’s? There is no black-and-white answer or decision tree on how to proceed, and that is why leadership and human relations are science at one level but art at a higher level.

The Chinese philosopher Lao-Tsu says it perhaps best, “As for the best leaders, the people do not notice their existence. The next best, the people honor and praise. The next, the people fear; and the next, the people hate. When the best leader’s work is done, the people

say, ‘We did it ourselves.’”

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