

Beyond the Horizons Consulting

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Teams versus Groups

In our May issue we talked about the power of teams and how to realize that power by (1) helping team members overcome fear and (2) engaging in a group process by valuing the contributions of each member and making decisions by group consensus.

This month we are following up with two aspects of a team that clearly differentiate it from a group:

- 1 the size of a team, and
- 2 the fact that team members have complementary skills

Both these characteristics are part of a larger definition



— an excellent and well-thought-out statement — which we quote from the book, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization* by Jon Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith:

A team is a small number of people with

complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and a common approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.

Thoughts on the Size of Performance Teams

Small groups are generally defined as consisting of up to 16 members. In a therapeutic context, eight persons would comprise an ideal group — one in which every member would have sufficient time to share and work through issues. In a group where performance goals are emphasized, however, larger numbers of members are permissible. However, there must still be time for each member to give input at meetings, and logistics of meetings must be arranged, not only in terms of comfortable space for the team to meet, but also in terms of members' conflicting schedules.

Groups that are too large never coalesce into a working team. It may be impossible to solicit and take into account the opinions of over 25 persons. What happens in a case like this is that a hierarchy develops, and decisions are made from the top. Other members may feel discounted and lose interest in the process. Ultimately esprit de corps, which is a hallmark of true teams, is lost and — with it — the drive to achieve goals.

In business, teams can be effective with just three members whose skills are complementary.

The Requirement of Complementary Skills

Katzenbach and Smith outline three different types of skills, all of which are necessary for the formation of a true performance-oriented team:

- 1 technical or functional expertise
- 2 problem-solving and decision-making skills
- 3 interpersonal skills

Technical or functional expertise has to do with the *content* of the team's goals, and ultimately with the goals of the organization. Thus a team whose purpose is to get to market a brand new product (or an update to an already existing product) by a specific deadline has to have the technical know-how to produce the item.

Problem-solving and decision-making skills refer to the *executive* decisions that have to be made to reach the overall goals. These decisions have a broader

range than just technical expertise, although they do include that as well. When the team runs into a snag in design or production, the thrust of the decision makers will be to brainstorm with the technological folks, come up with several creative options, and decide on how to implement the best solution as quickly as possible.

However, the team members who display problem-solving skills also need to be able to apply their talent to issues of production and marketing, in which areas they would pull together those team members whose expertise lies there.

Finally, we come to the "oil" which, although invisible, actually makes possible the movement of the "joints" and accomplishment of the team goals. For without **excellent communication and interpersonal skills** — without constructive conflict and its resolution in the light of common purpose — the other function would ultimately become "stuck."

Some of the skills involved in communications among team members are:

- ◆ taking appropriate risks
- ◆ benefiting from constructive criticism

- ◆ practicing "active listening"
- ◆ learning to be objective rather than "taking things personally"
- ◆ giving others the benefit of the doubt
- ◆ being supportive rather than controlling
- ◆ appreciating the interests and achievements of others

All of the above skills can be learned. Sometimes, however, poor interpersonal relationships and communications are habits that have become part of a person's ego. In these instances it is difficult to change such learned behaviors. The ideal solution to remedy this weakness in a team is to engage a professional business coach.

Professional business coaches are able to analyze the "heartbeat" of a team and work with members to help them become stronger, more self-confident persons. Step by step they will learn to take appropriate risks and to practice "active listening." A deep experience of self-confidence, based on knowing one's true worth, allows us to avoid taking things personally, to be truly appreciative of others' efforts and achievements, and to accept constructive criticism gracefully!

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