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COLLABORATION HEALTH CARE

ALIGNING IDEAS WITH COLLABORATION TO IMPROVE HEALTH CARE TODAY



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Setting a Standard For Teamwork

Putting together, implementing, and managing a successful team is an art. Each group of individuals is unique and each project or initiative brings with it its own unique set of issues. With the macro-economic challenges we will all be facing in our current environment, successful team-management will be a requirement for all organizations; large and small.

This month we provide a brief overview of what it takes to manage teams and how teamwork will become a more important business strategy in the time ahead. We look at one of the most successful organizations actually "living" the team concept- and use some of their principles to provide some ideas for implementing successful team approaches in our organizations and in our lives.

We may have been able to get by with marginal team execution in the past. But in the climate we have today, your team results may make the difference between your survival or your elimination in the market.

Teamwork- More Important Today Than Ever

In almost everything we do, and whether we acknowledge it or not, we rely on others to help us get things done. Whether it is a Board of Directors, a project initiative, a committee, or a family, whenever we work with others to accomplish something, we're working with a team. There is already quite a bit of research that exists on how to build and manage successful teams so the topic is not a new one. But, with the challenging times we are facing today, teamwork will become an even more important component of successfully achieving the goals we set for our organizations, and for ourselves.

Oxford defines teamwork simply as "organized cooperation". While this is a simple definition, we all have found over the years that establishing, directing, and motivating a team is as much an art as a science. How you address, or don't address conflicting priorities, unclear goals, diverse personalities, or limited resources can impact the results and the success or failure of the team as a whole.

We've watched organizations attempt to put massive team initiatives in place to achieve some particular strategic objective. We've watched as some of them have been successful- and others haven't. We've personally managed and participated with large and small teams on a local and national basis so we appreciate the diversity and unique personalities that come with each team you put together or work with.

Over the past few years, we have also had the opportunity to directly observe one of the most successful team-building organizations in the world as they develop and train individuals to put their lives on the line to serve the broader good of the team- as opposed to themselves. We've started to use them as a benchmark as the ultimate in team-building expertise.

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Some Principles of Success Teamwork Management

Through his research, J. Richard Hackman has set out five basic conditions that must be fulfilled in order to create and maintain effective teams. While Hackman's conditions focus on the "transactional" requirements of successful team interaction- we would also stress the importance of the "relationship" components as well including; trust, open communication, and commitment.

1. Teams must be real. People have to know who is on the team and who is not.
2. Teams need a compelling direction. Members need to know, and agree on, what they're supposed to be doing together.
3. Teams need enabling structures. Teams that have poorly designed tasks, the wrong number or mix of members, or fuzzy and unenforced norms of conduct invariably get into trouble.
4. Teams need a supportive organization. The organizational context- including the reward system, the human resource system, and the information system- must facilitate teamwork.
5. Teams need expert coaching. Teams need coaching as a group in team processes- especially at the beginning, midpoint, and end of a team project.

Sources: Semper Fi; Business Leadership the Marine Corp Way; Carrison, Walsh; AMACOM, 2005

Why Teams Don't Work; J. Richard Hackman; Harvard Business Review; May, 2009

We'd love to hear from you. Let us know your thoughts, your feedback, and other ideas.

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Teamwork (con't)

No organization teaches teamwork with greater emphasis than the United States Marines. At the same time, no organization stresses the importance of self-reliance. While seemingly contradictory, Marines are first trained to be as independently resourceful as possible as an important component of contributing to the needs of their team. Marines learn very early that he/she must succeed individually first, to be of use to the team as a whole.

Teamwork, clarity of mission, defined roles, and specific responsibility are a part of the Marine culture. Team members (whether a fire squad, platoon, squad, or battalion) all know their roles and understand that individual egos are out the window when moving forward to achieve their mission. And, Marines trust each other with their lives. They trust their buddy will do their part- and their buddy trusts them. No questions.

In daily military life, in maneuvers, and in combat, the assigned mission is accomplished because Marines are working together. Through their constant training and reinforcement, Marines see for themselves how much more the team can achieve as opposed to the individual.¹ And, they trust their fellow Marines to follow-through.

We can learn a lot from the Marine mind-set to make teamwork an important part of our own culture.

But, in our experiences, we have all seen that teams don't always work. Especially in the global and virtual world we live in, putting effective team strategies in place has many challenges that need to be overcome on a regular and ongoing basis in order to be successful.

In the May, 2009 Harvard Business Review, an interview with Organizational Psychologist J. Richard Hackman (Edgar Pierce Professor of Social and Organizational Psychology at Harvard University) discusses critical conditions that make the difference between the success and failure of teams. While he argues that teams can be "places where individuals can be highly creative and productive", the research consistently shows that most teams under perform their great potential.

Dr. Hackman has found that teams need to be set up carefully to ensure they have a compelling direction and, not surprisingly, leadership of the team provides the critical path to accomplishing its goals. Team participants should be included based upon contribution, capability, and subject-matter expertise; not on job title or politics. Further, his research has shown that small teams whose members stay together for long periods of time perform best.

He states, "As a team gets bigger, the number of links that need to be managed among members goes up at an accelerating, almost exponential rate. It's managing the links between members that gets teams in trouble." (Note: We have found a maximum team size of 8 individuals is best for most projects we've been involved in- whether it's a project team, Board of Directors, or committee function).

As we have worked with various team structures over the years we've simplified our approach to some very common principles. Each team structure has its own unique personality and characteristics (whether you are working in-person or virtually) so it may be necessary to adjust the "style", but the basic fundamentals remain the same.

First, make certain you have a clear and concise objective identified. Team members need to understand why they are involved, what the expectations are, and how this fits with all of the other priorities they are juggling. Hearing directly from the "Executive Sponsor" (if you aren't it) goes a long way in establishing the importance and priority for team participants.

Second, establish the relationships with the team members. This is much more difficult in a global/virtual world but we believe establishing personal connections between team members are critical (especially if this is a new team). We are firm believers that periodic face-to-face events between members goes a long way in establishing the trust and rapport that is going to be required to successfully work together as a team over time. Even in a virtual world, Dr. Hackman states, "virtual teams need the basic conditions for effectiveness to be in place just as much as face-to-face teams, if not more so". We try (at a minimum) for face-to-face gatherings for the launch of a project or initiative, and try for periodic "reality checks" when appropriate to make certain members are still on the same page. A face-to-face debriefing at the end helps the team to reflect on what was accomplished, what worked, and what didn't work as they approach their next initiative or challenge.

Third, make certain the communication channels are always open and flowing. A break-down of communication is one of the major reasons team activities fail. In the book, *Senior Leadership Teams*, the authors collected data and analyzed more than 120 top teams around the world. They found that while every senior team studied thought that it had set unambiguous boundaries, fewer than 10% agreed who was even on their team. Open, clear, unambiguous communication strategies are critical to team success.

Organizations are now being forced to do much more with fewer resources than they had before. While a lot of p.r. and cheerleading may have surrounded the idea of "teamwork" in the past, the more effective use of the concept can be a viable personal living and business strategy for our use in the future. Remember, we can do more together, than we ever could on our own- and we need to trust each other to follow-through on our commitments to the team to make it happen.

We can learn from the Marines.

Something To Think About

"The true measure of success is the number of people who love you, of those that you really want to love you."

Warren Buffett- From Snowball; Warren Buffett and the Business of Life