

Members Quarterly

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Feature

What Makes a Team Work?

Look at building trust

Vince Lombardi once said “Individual commitment to a group effort – that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.” With that much at stake, why would “teamwork” get such a bad rap?

Back in the mid-80’s, “Teamwork” was in vogue and every training company and consultant scrambled to put together programs that would capture this niche market. When I reflect on a few courses that I attended, they were really just a focus on better communication. Although extremely important, these courses failed to address the real underlying behaviours to develop a truly cohesive team. I see three key problems:

There is no focus on collective results. The individual commitment is to the individual, not the team. Examples: the salesperson who steals accounts and hoards information for himself or the hockey star who is more concerned with how many goals he scores than how many wins the team has.

“Groupthink” drags the team down because there is no healthy conflict. Under experimental conditions, psychologist Solomon Asch showed that 70% of the time, people will cave in to group pressure, even when the group is clearly wrong.

Authoritarian leadership is still prevalent in the workplace today. Milton Rokeach, another notable psychologist, said that people who like hierarchies seem to be comfortable giving orders and are authoritarian personalities. And those same people who like giving orders they also like taking orders. They seem to thrive on hierarchy. They also tend to be closed-minded to new ideas and problem solving. Open-minded personalities like to seek new solutions. Given that many organizations promote authoritarian personalities to leadership positions, there’s a built-in obstacle to effective teamwork.

Patrick Lencioni says in his best-selling book, “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team,” that the single most untapped competitive advantage is simply teamwork. Communication is the underpinning to the five behaviours that are required, but to master each of the behaviours, you need to know what they are and really work on them.

As a partner with Wiley & Sons, I worked with Lencioni to develop a program entitled “The Five Behaviours of a Cohesive Team.” A cohesive team needs to master the five behaviours of building trust, mastering conflict, achieving commitment, embracing accountability and focusing on results. These can be applied to any team, be it at work, in sports or even the family unit. I remember playing football in high school and getting pummeled every week. We were in the wrong division, but I had the time of my life and so did every guy on the team. There was a huge amount of predictable trust everyone knew their role and we had each other’s backs both on and off the field. The camaraderie was outstanding and we had fun. Even though we did not win on the scoreboard, we set other goals and achieved them.



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When it comes to teams in the workplace, this same level of predictable trust is paramount to achieve great things. You have to be able to predict and trust what each other is going to do in so many ways to be able to count on each other. This only comes from observing consistent behaviours over time.

There is more to consider. Vulnerability based trust takes a team or even a family to much higher levels of greatness. It is only when every single team player is willing to own up to his or her mistakes, shortcomings and weaknesses without fear of reprisal that a team becomes truly cohesive. That is when great things happen because the team goes to work to overcome the weaknesses together.

I experienced this recently as a parent. When having a meaningful discussion with my son of 30 years, he said "These are the conversations I love, Dad—when we can open up and truly express our struggles and concerns." If I could turn back the clock, I would start that kind of dialogue with my children when they were toddlers, instead of trying to be the strong and macho dad that had no faults.

Once you have vulnerability based trust, the other behaviours will follow, namely engaging in healthy conflict, being committed to decisions, holding one another accountable and focusing on collective results. When these behaviours are embraced, every member of the team becomes a leader.

Here is a quote from James Kouzes: "You either lead by example, or you don't lead at all. When leaders do what they say they are going to do, it is a better indicator of profitability than any customer satisfaction scores."

Murray Janewski is President, ACT One International Corp. and can be reached at murrayj@aoic.ca