

Teams and Kindergarten

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We have all heard the phrase, "All I need to know I learned in Kindergarten." It came from an article written by Robert Fulgham in 1993 that later became a series of books and tapes. His five key points bear repeating when we think about teamwork. They are:

- Share everything,
- Play Fair,
- Don't hit people,
- Say you're sorry when you hurt someone, and
- Take a break in the afternoon for cookies.

Doing what is simple and right is a prerequisite for getting along in this world. Let's examine this primitive, but profound wisdom as it relates to teams.

Share Everything

Teams exist to accomplish some kind of a goal. Whether it is winning a football game, writing a budget, or gaining a new client, there is always an objective. If you are on a team that has no reason to exist, resign. You are wasting your precious time.

Once everyone on the team understands the vision, the path is clear to figure out how to do it. For that, you need the participation of everyone, not just the leader or a few aggressive members. The magic of a team is the diverse ideas in the heads of all members. People who keep their ideas to themselves out of embarrassment or other issues, rob the team of the creative juices necessary for outstanding results.

Share your ideas and thoughts on how the team can work well. Be an active member of the team. Don't assume that, because you are in the same room (or virtual environment) with the rest of the team you are doing your share. As an wise old English teacher of mine used to say, "Put on a suit, and get in the game."

Play Fair

Duh ?- - this seems so obvious as to be trivial, but it actually is often a huge roadblock in effective team dynamics. How can this be? It is because what seems fair to me, may not seem fair to you. I had a student tell me once, "I am the kind of person who does

what he thinks is right." Well....duh..again. Can you imagine someone going around doing what he/she thinks is wrong? I can't. It is practically impossible to do what you think is wrong unless you are trying to break a bad habit and can't. Even then, you rationalize, with, "I just needed that piece of chocolate cake today for my sanity. I'll make up for it tomorrow." You would need to be a psychopath to do something you honestly believe is the wrong thing to do.

So, all of us, most of the time "play fair" according to our own set of beliefs, values, and circumstances. We may not turn in a team assignment when we agreed to, but that is because we had a terrible day at work. When we got home, the basement was flooded and we had to call the fire department to pump it out. Or, the power was out for two hours which was the time we set aside for this. Or, something happened to our computer, etc. etc. Don't get me wrong, these kind of emergencies do come up and cause people to miss responsibilities. That's life. Other team members will excuse an occasional lapse due to problems beyond control. However, I have witnessed employees who have some kind of "natural disaster" happen to them every week. After a while, you get the feeling they either are under a "black cloud," or they are finding reasons to not perform. The interesting point is that they truly believe it is physically impossible to meet commitments. In other words, they are completely justified in their own mind and "playing fair." Others may not share that opinion, so this leads to conflict.

This exact dynamic is going on to varying degrees all the time between team members. In most cases people put up with the vagaries of the other team members because they don't want to cause trouble. However, many times the "disconnects" between people become large enough that the small issues become huge issues in the mind of one person. Then you have open conflict that must be resolved.

Don't Hit People

When we get frustrated enough, we tend to lose perspective. I don't know why this happens, but it is part of the human condition. When a team member is far enough out of line, other members begin to take it personally and "attack" the problem person. Naturally, since this person was "playing fair" according to his/her perspective, he/she becomes angry and defensive. A battle emerges because each party honestly believes the other person is acting irrationally.

This is easy to recognize. One person will throw an "e-grenade" at the other person who says, "Ouch ! not only did that hurt, but it was unfair. He needs to realize he can't treat people that way, and I am just the one to do it." Back comes a bigger "e-grenade" into the computer of the first person, who says, "Well that proves it, he is a real jerk who needs to be put in his place once and for all. Not only is he impolite, he isn't even quoting me right." Back comes a huge "e-bomb" that really blasts the other party. The whole thing has degenerated into the kind of food fight you see in kindergarten. After a while the issue at hand becomes irrelevant and it is more of a personal vendetta between individuals.

There is a 100% cure for this problem. Remember the old adage, "It takes two to tango." If the recipient of the first "e-grenade" doesn't take the bait, the issue does not escalate. That is tough to do when you are the recipient of a hurtful comment. Good teamwork requires the ability to take a shot and not hit back. One easy way to accomplish this is to change the venue. If an attack comes in an e-mail, don't respond in kind. Pick up the phone or go visit the other person to resolve the issue.

Say You're Sorry when you Hurt Someone

Sincere humility is the balm that heals up team wounds. Recognize that, in the heat of battle, things may become overheated. You will know this when it happens to you. An echo will bounce back from a note you sent that has a bad taste. You immediately know that you have angered a team member or, at least confused him/her. This is the time to send a humble apology. You can restate the goal and reiterate your commitment to the team as well. This must be followed by a change in action, or it will not work. Imagine a Greg on the playground who shoves a Mike over something unimportant. Mike says, "Hey whata'ya want to go and do that for?" Greg replies, "Yeah, you're right, I'm sorry," but the minute Mike turns his back Greg spits at him. Well, the teacher better get out his whistle, because there is going to be a fight.

Take a break in the afternoon for cookies

Working in teams is actually hard work. Not only must you do the assigned task, you need to keep people from getting on each other's nerves. That means the stress level is sometimes high for two reasons. It is important to take a break and have some "cookies" from time to time. Realize most of the "problems" that are driving you crazy today will be unimportant to you in a week or so. When you take the time to celebrate the small wins along the way, it rejuvenates the team for the next round. Be lavish (but sincere) with your praise and thanks to other team members and they will appreciate it. Every "thank you" is a chocolate chip in the cookie of life.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

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