

Two Rules for Improved Teams

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The culture of a team governs its effectiveness. Most teams have a culture that allows adequate performance despite many unfortunate outbreaks of tension and sometimes childish behavior. It is unfortunate that more teams do not experience the exhilaration of working in a supportive culture that produces excellent results. The methods of building teams into high performing units are well documented, but most teams do not go through the rigor required to get to that level. This paper blends well known processes with horse sense born of experience that will allow any team to perform better.

In 1965, Bruce Tuckman described four stages that every team goes through. They are Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing. A critical time for any team is when it is forming. This is when the team is trying to figure out its role and goals. Members are not sure of their status or contribution at this point, and personal bonding is a key element to the eventual success of the team. It is advisable for the group to go offsite for some initial teambuilding activities. Many leaders avoid this step because often team building activities involve a kind of game atmosphere that does not feel like “work.” In fact, team building is real work that may be fun at the moment, but it is deadly serious business that can result in millions of dollars of profit if done well or millions of dollars in damage control if not done at all.

During the storming phase, there is some kind of power struggle where members vie for position and influence. It is up to the team leader to help the team move quickly through this awkward time. Usually the storming stage is short simply because it is painful. People want to get out of the rut of consternation and move on to getting the work done.

It is in the norming phase that the team decides the degree of effectiveness it will ultimately enjoy. If individual and team behaviors are agreed upon with conviction, the team will immediately begin to perform with excellence. Included in this phase is identifying the individual skills brought to the team by the diversity of talent in the group, the goals of the team, the ground rules of expected behavior, and the consequences of failing to comply with team expectations.

The two most basic things required for any team to become a high performing unit are (1 a common goal, and 2) trust. If these building blocks are in place, all of the rest of the team dynamics (like excellent communication) will sort themselves out. If either of these is missing, the team will sputter and struggle to meet expectations. A key rule fostered by most teams that is most often compromised is to treat each member with respect. There is a kind of disease that sets in most teams where members subtly undermine each other.

People often make jokes in team meetings. Keep your antenna up and you will discover that, for most groups, the majority of jokes are sarcastic digs about other people in the room. Everyone knows they are only jokes, and they laugh, but deep down some damage is done.

Smart groups have a conscious norm that they will enjoy humor in meetings but never make a joke at someone else's expense. It may seem like a small thing, but over time this practice can really help improve the function of any team. It is easy to accomplish. The leader just needs to set the expectation and remind people when they slip up. In coaching some groups with a particularly bad habit on this, I have suggested that any time a person makes a joke that is a dig, he or she has to put \$5 in a kitty. The money is used later by the group for a party. This small change can actually change the entire culture of a team.

Now that you are sensitized to this, just keep track in a few meetings with some hash marks on a piece of paper. You will be astonished how pervasive this problem is and also how certain people are addicted to the practice. Then, solve the problem and begin enjoying the benefits of better teamwork.

I have coached hundreds of teams, and find that there are patterns that lead to success and other patterns that lead to extreme frustration and failure. There is one condition that rises above all the others when it comes to dysfunctional teams. When some members of the team believe other members are not pulling their fair share, the team is going to have major problems. Unfortunately, this situation is so common, it is almost universal, yet there is a simple cure that is about 95% successful at preventing this condition or stopping it if it happens. The cure is to have an agreed upon Charter for the team upfront before behavior problems surface.

During the forming stage of a team, there is an opportunity to document several critical parameters of how the team will operate. These include:

1. A list of the talents and skills each member of the team can contribute
2. A set of solid, measurable performance goals for the team
3. A set of agreed upon behaviors that the members agree to follow
4. A statement of the consequences that will occur if a member fails to live up to the behaviors.

When teams take the time at the start to document these four items, the chances of success are much higher than if this step is omitted. The most powerful item is #4, and it is the one that is most often omitted from a charter. The reason it has power is that when the team is forming usually all members have good intentions to pull their weight for the good of the team. If they agree that letting the team down by slacking off and having others pick up the slack will result in some unhappy consequence (like being voted off the team, or having no points on an assignment, or having to do extra clean up work, or some other penalty) they are far less likely to practice "social loafing." If they are

tempted to goof off, then the penalty they have already agreed to is quickly applied, and the bad behavior is quickly extinguished.

Most teams without a good charter end up in the frustration of having one or more people believing they are unfairly doing more than their fair share of the work. When a good charter spells out the expected behaviors and the penalty for non-compliance before the team experiences a problem, it greatly reduces this most common of all team maladies.

*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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