

Leadership Barometer 154 Teams and Kindergarten Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD



We have all heard the phrase, "All I need to know I learned in Kindergarten." It came from a book 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:

Five Rules for Teams

1. Share everything,
2. Play fair,
3. Don't hit people,
4. Say you're sorry when you hurt someone, and
5. 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. There is always an objective, whether it is winning a football game or gaining a new client. 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 rob the team of the creative juices necessary for outstanding results.

Play Fair

This rule seems so obvious as to be trivial. 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." Can you imagine someone going around doing what he/she thinks is wrong? I can't.

Most of the time people "play fair" according to their own set of beliefs, values, and circumstances. There are times when an avalanche of unexpected disasters happen, whether at work, at home, or a combination of both. In these days of chaos in our lives, it is easy to get buried in competing commitments. It is important that the person affected be upfront with the team and arrange for cover.

For most people, an occasional let down can be forgiven, especially in these difficult times. Some people have a steady stream of "emergency" situations. They may have serious acute or chronic health issues. They may be dealing with a dying family member. It may take time for the situation to be resolved.

In these situations it is up to the team to be supportive. Work out solutions to keep the flow going. On good teams, the members support each other. Follow the Golden Rule.

Don't Hit People

When we get frustrated enough, we tend to lose perspective. It is part of the human condition. When a team member is far enough out of line, other members "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.

We need to show empathy for other team members and not be so quick to judge their situation. A hallmark of good teamwork is that the members show that they care for each other.

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.

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. 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.

Conclusion

These five team rules form a good core of actions that can take away a lot of typical team struggles. Make sure that your team adopts the rules and practices them regularly.

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