

Reducing Conflict 51 Better Teamwork

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



We all would like to see better teamwork where we live and work. 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. The problems are exacerbated in these uncertain times of hybrid work.

Sadly, many teams don't 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. Unfortunately, most teams do not go through the rigor required to get to that level. This article blends well-known processes with horse sense born of experience that will allow any team to perform well.

Tuckman Model

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. Personal bonding is a key element to the eventual success of the team.

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.

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.

Three routes to successful teamwork

There are three basic things required for any team to become a high-performing unit:

- 1) a common goal,
- 2) trust, and
- 3) outstanding leadership.

If these building blocks are in place, all of the rest of the team dynamics will sort themselves out. When any of these are 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 into most teams where members subtly undermine each other.

Common team problem

People often make jokes in team meetings. Keep your antenna up. Often you will discover that 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 it does some damage.

The antidote

Smart groups have a rule that they will enjoy humor but never make a joke at someone else's expense. It seems like a small thing, but over time this practice can improve the function of any team. You will see it's easy to accomplish. The leader just needs to set the expectation and remind people when they slip up.

Social loafing

I have coached hundreds of teams. I find that there are patterns that lead to success and other patterns that lead to extreme frustration. One condition rises above all the others when it comes to dysfunctional teams. It is called social loafing.

When team members believe other members are not pulling their fair share, there will be problems. Unfortunately, this situation is common. Fortunately, there is a simple cure that is about 95% successful at preventing this condition or stopping it. The cure is to have an agreed-upon Charter for the team upfront, before behavior problems surface.

Draw up a Team Charter

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. the talents and skills each member of the team can contribute,
2. a set of solid, measurable performance goals for the team,
3. behaviors that the members agree to follow,
4. 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 improve. The most powerful item is #4. It is the one that is most often omitted from a charter. If people are tempted to goof off, then the penalty they have already agreed to is quickly applied. The bad behavior is extinguished.

Conclusion

Most teams without a good charter end up in frustration. One or more people will believe they are doing more than their fair share of the work. A good charter spells out the expected behaviors and the penalty for non-compliance. With this work in place ***before the group experiences a problem***, it reduces the most common team malady.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change*, *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.