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COACH AND EQUIP: BUILDING EFFECTIVE TEAMS

BY ERIC SWANSON

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been a part of a team—an athletic team, a staff team, a summer project, etc. where everyone’s attitude and performance was absolutely necessary to the success of the team? You knew that what you were accomplishing was significant and could have never been accomplished unless everyone gave their best. Your team performance was far beyond what any individuals working alone could do. It would be complete arrogance to think that one person could accomplish what needed to be done. Fellow-teammates worked sacrificially and unselfishly toward the common goal. It may have been hard, but, boy, was it fun. It was a “once in a lifetime” team. You bonded together and you seemed to bring forth the best in each other. The goal and the work transcended your petty differences. When you look back at that team you feel a sense of deep satisfaction. If so, you have experienced the power and fulfillment of being a part of a team.

What is a team?

Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith, in their book *The Wisdom of Teams* (Harvard Business School Press, 1993) define a team as “a small number of people with complimentary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.” Think of how critical each word is to this definition.

The advantage of teams

Teams bring together skills and experience that exceed those of any individual on the team. As the saying goes, “No one of us is as smart as all of us.” Parenthetically, this is why God has given each of us different spiritual gifts.

Teams provide a sense of community and belonging. They share in the victories and defeats. Its enjoyable to work together.

People learn to respect one another and one another’s abilities in the context

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of working as a team.

The greatest sense of accomplishment is not what you do by yourself but what you accomplish with other people. Michael Jordan, though arguably the finest basketball player for years, was not willing to retire from basketball (at least temporarily) until the Bulls won the World Championship.

People do not mind hard work if it is meaningful and they are doing it with others they love and respect.

Are you really a team?

Not every staff team that works together is really a team, no matter what they call themselves. In *The Wisdom of Teams*, the authors studied fifty different teams in a variety of settings. They discovered the following types of “teams”:

Working Group

A group that can achieve its purpose entirely through the collective effort of the individual members. A working group is similar to a track team in that the outcome is determined by the individual bests of each competitor. A working group staff team comes together to share information, pray, study the Word, training, etc. However, working group members don't take responsibility for results other than their own.

Pseudo Teams

Pseudo teams are those groups that call themselves teams but they are actually less effective than working groups because of time and effort taken up in meetings. The sum of the whole does not equal the contribution of the individual parts.

Real Teams

“Teams differ fundamentally from working groups because they require both individual and mutual accountability....The essence of a team is common commitment. Without it, groups perform as individuals; with it, they become a powerful unit of collective performance.” Real teams have adopted a purpose and specific performance goals for which they hold themselves accountable as a team. A team is synergistic. A team measures its success not only by how each member is doing but what they are accomplishing as a team.

High Performance Teams

Are those teams that are not only committed to the objectives but also committed to one another.

Characteristics of high performance teams

1. Everyone knows what they are trying to accomplish and why--the goals are clear and shared



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by team members. They share a dogged committed to a common purpose, goals and approach. (Being committed to a common approach is as important as being committed to a common purpose.) They have made a commitment to be a team. The single most important ingredient of a high performance team is that each person wants to be part of the team. They have anted up and declared themselves to be “in.” They want to be part of the team because they realize the task is worth doing and there is no way they can do it alone. Their personal agenda is subordinate to the agenda of the team.

2. Everyone takes some responsibilities for leadership. They do this not just because it seems like a good idea but because no one person could possibly do the job by him/herself. “Staff Jobs” provide an excellent format for all to lead.

3. Everyone feels appreciated and supported by others.

4. Team members genuinely value one another’s contribution, abilities, skills and track record.

5. Team members develop their skills to become better contributors.

6. Everyone does roughly equivalent amounts of “real work” (apart from gibbering, squawking, analyzing, commenting and pontificating). No team will ever be successful without hard work. Everybody must have real responsibilities and results for which they are accountable.

7. The team holds itself mutually accountable as a team. Katzenbach and Smith write, “By promising to hold ourselves accountable to the team’s goals, we each earn the right to express our own views about all aspects of the team’s effort and to have our views receive a fair and constructive hearing.” This is what it means to be “in.”

8. The team spends lots of time together, scheduled and unscheduled.

Stages in the life of a team

Every team or group will pass through four different stages of development on the way to becoming a productive team. In Kenneth Blanchard’s book, *The One Minute Manager Builds High Performance Teams* (William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1990), he defines the four stages in the life of a team.

1. Orientation. Team members come to your team asking “Where do I fit in?” and “What is expected of me?” At this stage the morale is high, people are generally excited (and maybe a little anxious) because of the potential accomplishment. However the production is low because there is little knowledge of what needs to be done or how to do it. During the Orientation Stage the following is decided upon:



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- Participation--Who talks and when.
- Decision Making--How the team will make decisions--majority rule, consensus, or unanimity?
- Conflict Resolution--How is it perceived and handled?
- Leadership--Who influences whom?
- Goals and Roles--Who does what and what it is that you are trying to accomplish? What are the expectations?
- Norms--Set some clear rules of behavior regarding attendance, confidentiality, contribution, etc. Problem solving--identifying the problem, generating and evaluating solutions.

2. Dissatisfaction. In this stage, things hit the fan. This is where the team realizes that what they are trying to accomplish is much more difficult than they imagined. (If they don't reach this stage it may be because the team really isn't attempting anything difficult.) There is tension, conflict and tears in the group as false assumptions and expectations surface. There may be feelings of frustration, incompetence, anger and confusion. Group members may be vying for power or attention. Knowing that every team has to pass through this stage will help you work through this phase.

3. Resolution. At this stage the team turns the corner. They have been through the storm and seen that they can weather it. They feel more confident of what they can accomplish as a team. The discrepancies between expectations and reality have been resolved. They are moving toward harmony, trust, support and respect. Some of the best ideas are developed in the throws of the Resolution Stage.

4. Production. The team is performing at a high level. There is camaraderie between team members. Moral and production are both high. Leadership is shared.

How to become a team

Teams just don't happen. There are four basic things that you need to do if you are going to construct a team:

1) Clarify your mission and purpose. The very activity of talking about your purpose will help align your team members towards a common purpose. It's preferable to give strong leadership at this juncture. Katzenbach and Smith write, "The often asserted assumption that a team cannot 'own' its purpose unless management leaves it alone actually confuses more potential teams than it helps." The mission we have been given in the Campus Ministry is "To turn lost students into Christ-centered laborers."

2) Establish your specific goals in view of the mission. Goals help a team keep track of the progress. Such specific goals might be: "To reach every student in the Freshman class," "To bring 100 students to the Christmas Conference," "To have 25 students leading small groups



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by the end of February,” etc. You probably should not have more than two to four team goals.

3) Establish your strategies that will help you reach your goals. Strategies are the “What,” “By Whom,” and “By When” part of your plan.

4) Feedback, recognition and celebration. Did we do what we set out to do? Everybody wants to know how they are doing. Telling people the truth helps people move forward or move out. Often as Christians our highest value is “no conflict” which ultimately leads to peaceable self-destruction. Unless there is accountability and consequences you will sink to the level of mediocrity with everyone. The high-performers will think, “What difference does it make?” For the low performer, lack of accountability reinforces two things...someone else will do it for them and they will never get asked again. What a deal! Don’t forget to celebrate your accomplishments and victories.

The importance of goals

More than any single element, a strong performance challenge, along with specific and measurable goals serves as the catalyst to molding a team.

Teamwork, team-building seminars and other efforts fail to galvanize a group of people like a strong performance challenge. Without specific team goals, team members become confused and revert only to what they like to do or want to do. Goals that motivate always contain a “stretch element” to them. In other words, they go beyond what you did last year and cannot be accomplished by simply plugging in last year’s methods and strategies.

When your goals are clear, you can discuss and focus on how you can achieve them or even modify them if necessary. This is part of what it means to be effective. The right kind of goals are motivating. People are excited by the opportunity to be a part of such a challenge and languish at the thought of being left out. Real teams flourish on achieving results-- on winning, not just playing. Goals allow a team to know where it stands--it is either fulfilling its goals or it is not. Your job is to help your team do what God wants done and what they came on staff to do. Most staff would rather fail at attempting something great than to succeed at something mediocre that just feels like failure.

To be effective you don’t have to have the same goals every quarter. However you do need one thing that you are together trusting God to do that you together are working toward. Your first quarter goal might focus on exposures and evangelism. Your second quarter goal might be built around the number of students you want to bring to the Christmas Conference or number of students you want leading groups. Your third quarter goal might center on students that you will send on projects. It’s not that you abandon other activities during these times but you really form your team around accomplishing these few goals. Without specific goals you will not have the team you could have.



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Team leaders

Teams work because of dedicated leaders. Without leadership on a team there is chaos. The task is the composite of many but the leader is the one who must guide the process toward completion. People stay on a team because they feel significant and because they are winning. The leader's job is to help those on the team to contribute significantly and to let them know when and how they are winning. Leading a team is a difficult task. Your job requires that you lead the charge. You must assume responsibility before the Lord for two things:

- 1) The accomplishment of your objectives. This is where you exercise your role as vision caster, change agent and direction setter. Just as too much leadership will stifle a team so will too little leadership. If they could do it on their own they wouldn't need you! During the Orientation Stage the team leader must be very directive in respect to what needs to be done. Teams falter at this juncture for a lack of clear purpose and direction than for any other reason. Remember, leadership is not inherently evil! Don't mistake leadership for legalism. As teams mature, the role of a leader moves to that of a coach and encourager. The team leader never gives up control—he simply must learn to share control if the group is really to become a team. Empower your team by providing resources and then getting out of the way.
- 2) The shepherding and development of those on your team. This is where you are exercising your role as coach. You cannot “win” without skilled players. Learn to recognize the value in the contribution of others. To effectively develop your staff you must really know your staff. Development is seen in how you develop your weakest staff person. A team, like a chain, is only as strong as its weakest link. Your staff need new skills to take on new responsibilities in order to accomplish greater tasks. People don't grow on their own any more than children, raised by their peers can become successful adults. You must recognize, affirm and develop others and help them accomplish the agreed upon tasks.

Application