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Team Building Basics for the Workplace

A recent visit to the Workplace Advice section at the local Barnes and Noble revealed an abundance of publications with titles like *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* and *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork*. The topic of corporate teamwork not only sells a lot of books, but it also fills seats at corporate workshops, and is the basis of many work training programs. This fact bodes the question, "Why are companies in every industry spending a lot of money on team building education and training?" The answer is strong work teams, in which all employees aim to achieve a company's "big picture" goals, increase overall success and bottom line profits.

Many of you are probably reading this and thinking that with all of the different team building literature and workshops available, all guaranteeing to deliver the best results, it is difficult to determine what works and what does not. Ultimately, the best way to build, evaluate and rebuild your team is by using a handful of basic team building concepts that are present in nearly all corporate team building literature.

Basic Team Building Concept #1: Establish Clear Team Goals

By definition, a team is a group of people drawn together, from sharply defined but related roles, to perform a specific function for an organization. Good team members are driven by the bigger picture or the overall success of the organization and act accordingly.

Whether you believe that individuals are naturally selfish creatures or not, it is hard to argue the fact that without a set of team goals, employees will likely work toward individual goals such as gaining personal recognition, securing their job within a company, or personal promotion. Establishing clear team goals and attaching each team members' personal success to the overall success of the team at achieving those goals is required to build an effective team.

If you are team leader or company executive wishing to improve the efficiency of your team, the key is to ask yourself the question, "Have expectations for the team's performance and the expected outcomes been clearly defined and communicated to all team members?"

If you answered "no", then you need to start brainstorming right away! First, determine exactly what you want your team to accomplish for your organization, not just today or tomorrow, but in the long-term. Second, communicate these expectations to each and every team member until you are sure that they have all received the message. Finally, encourage and carefully consider feedback from team members regarding set expectations. There may be certain issues, not obvious from a management standpoint, that prevent a team from feeling

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*"Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results."*

*-Andrew Carnegie*



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as though they can successfully achieve company goals. By considering team feedback, you can identify these issues, make adjustments, and enable teams to be more productive.

### **Basic Team Building Concept #2: Establish Clear Roles**

As mentioned above, teams are, by definition, made up of a group of individuals. If each of those individuals has a very clear role and knows how that role fits into the team dynamic, then the result will be an effective team in which each member fully utilizes his/her strengths while compensating for one another's weaknesses.

However, if roles are not clearly established for a team, a very different effect occurs. According to one expert, "different personalities, instead of compensating and balancing each other, may build up conflicts... Or, similar personalities may start fighting for authority and dominance in certain areas of expertise" if team member roles are not well defined.

Again, if you want to improve the efficiency of the teams within your organization, some team-evaluation is necessary. Consider all of the different positions that contribute to your company's team and what is currently happening in that position. If there are employees in roles that appear to be inefficient you may need to define the tasks associated with those employees' role more clearly. If certain employees are constantly conflicting, clearly designating each team member's areas of authority may be the solution to your team's problems.

### **Basic Team Building Concept #3: Establish Team Norms**

Establishing team norms also helps foster a teamwork friendly environment. Team norms should include: general rules of conduct that set the standard for fair and respectful team interactions, guidelines for recognizing and rewarding individual members for outstanding contributions, and an outline of the consequences of poor performance. Establishing team norms in this fashion creates an environment that is conducive to positive team interactions, offers reward as motivation to individuals to contribute to the team, and creates a sense of accountability for failure to contribute to the team.

Some questions to ask yourself when building or evaluating norms for the team at your office include: What is the established method for teams to give and receive honest performance feedback? Is this the best method to encourage respectful and open team interactions? When conflicts are raised, how are they addressed? What rewards or recognition is given when team members are successful? Do the rewards or recognition motivate team members to contribute to the team? If not, how can they be adjusted to motivate team members to perform well? Do team members fear the consequences of poor performance? If not, how can they be adjusted to deter team members from slacking?

### **Basic Team Building Concept #4: Communicate Clearly, Communicate Openly, and Communicate Often**

Of all of the team building basics, communication is the most important. None of the other team building basics listed above can be done successfully without communicating clearly, openly and often.

Clear and open communication is required to determine if team members know the organization's goals, are on board with those goals, and feel they have the resources and abilities to achieve them. Clear and open communication is also required to ensure that team members know the scope of their role within the team, can apply their greatest strengths to their role, and ultimately coordinate with other members of the team to achieve more together than any member could do individually. And, clear and open communication is required to inform members about norms and create accountability for individual performance.

To reap the greatest benefit from communication, it should not only be done clearly and openly, but it should be done often to ensure that all team members are habitual communicators and to allow the team to constantly grow and evolve by using communication to make appropriate adjustments for the betterment of the team dynamic.

At the end of the work day, there is an "I" in team. In fact, there are a lot of "I's" that make up the team. However, in work environments where the company's big picture goals are specifically defined, each employee's role is clear, team norms are established and upheld, and all of this is clearly communicated to everyone in the organization, all of the "I's" can begin to associate their success with the success of the team. Individual employees will start to think of the "we" and success and profits will increase as a result.

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