

Building an Extraordinary Team

By: Tim Link

Have you ever participated in a team or led a team that delivered less than stellar results? If you've had this experience-and most of us have- then your team was likely missing one or more of the characteristics of high functioning teams. A high functioning team can accomplish things a group of independently functioning individuals can never accomplish. This is hardly earth shattering news. So if highly functioning teams are so important, why do so few teams deliver results?

As the [Total Quality Management](#) movement gained momentum in the United States in the 1980's, there was a heightened focus on teams. Teams were often used as a forum for surfacing ideas on process improvements that would help manufacturing become more efficient, and when these process teams were successful, an additional benefit of teams was realized: teams could also help improve employee engagement and satisfaction. Eventually, companies grew to understand that happy employees created happy customers, and while the emphasis on teaming remained, the strategic reason for teams was often forgotten. Teams were often formed only as a "feel good" device to make management feel like they were doing something. As a result, individuals and organizations became increasingly dissatisfied with the teaming process.

In cases where teams don't work, it's often because team members have been chosen based on availability instead of specific skills and abilities. And many times, teams are assembled as a way to keep the troops happy by providing them a forum to provide input, without a full organizational commitment to translate their input into something meaningful. These approaches are a waste of time.

In his best selling book, "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team," Patrick Lencioni uses the story of a fictional team to elegantly illustrate five very simple characteristics that must be present for a team to be fully functional. Ensuring the presence of these characteristics will help ensure that the collective work product delivered by your team will be extraordinary.

The Heartbeat of an Extraordinary Team

Often when a team comes together the primary motivators of team members are to impress, protect, judge or criticize. Because they operate with the assumption that "it's a jungle out there" and they feel pressure to be perfect, people are conditioned to value strength, power and results. Weakness, vulnerability or mistakes are to be avoided at all costs. Unfortunately, when "strength" and "power" rule, there is no ability to assemble on neutral territory, admit to the unknown and create solutions from a place of learning rather than share answers from a place of knowing.

What is missing is trust. The basic element of trust is the heartbeat that continuously feeds and nurtures teams. Trust allows team members to shift to a place of collective

learning that's critical to the success of a team. Trust is so fundamental to the team process that without it, a team cannot be successful. Regrettably, ensuring an atmosphere of trust is often overlooked.

Here's what happens in teams without trust:

- People avoid conflict and don't say what they really think in a misguided attempt to maintain harmony. Unfortunately, all this does is send conflict underground, allowing passive aggressive behavior and secret agendas to flourish.
- People fear retribution for articulating an opinion outside of what's generally accepted in the organization. Thus they either learn to "tow the party line" or find another job.
- Individuals conceal their weaknesses and mistakes due to a focus on defending themselves and/or advancing their careers. This prevents members from engaging in healthy dialogue and debate which inhibits the development of creative solutions.
- People judge and criticize in an attempt to protect their individual power base.

Building Trust as the Cornerstone for Extraordinary Teams

Without trust, the other four dysfunctions of a team are allowed to flourish. It prevents healthy conflict and makes it virtually impossible for the team to realize the benefits of comparing and contrasting different opinions in an environment of respect and healthy debate. When potential issues- be they technical or interpersonal- are not aired, real commitment to a decision or plan of action cannot take place. Team members simply pay lip service to agreed upon goals and do their own thing anyway. When they don't really buy into the group goals, they avoid accountability both for themselves and other team members. They avoid accountability because they are not sure what is expected of themselves or their co-workers. This creates an environment where each member becomes more focused on their own career than the results of the group. And obviously, you can't have a successful team if each member is more focused on their own goals than the team goals.

The Role of the Leader

The executive team or team leader plays a crucial role in determining the success of a team. How they behave sets the tone for the rest of the team. In order to create an environment of trust, the team leader must be willing to be vulnerable. They must be willing to take risks in order to show other team members that it is safe to do so.

Taking risks makes room for healthy conflict but the team leader needs to be careful not to immediately jump in when things get heated. The leader needs to have a healthy tolerance for respectful, and sometimes emotional debate. If the leader shuts down conflict, team members learn that conflict is "dangerous" and don't develop the ability to drive through the conflict that is an inevitable part of developing creative solutions.

The leader must also ensure a consistent focus on results. If team members feel there is an over focus on keeping peace, protecting sacred cows, or burying potentially negative issues, they will read it as permission to do the same.

What You Can Do to Turn the Tide

Establishing trust first requires that team leadership, whether formal or informal, authentically models vulnerability and risk taking. Secondly, a process involving an intentional focus on creating trust will help build the cornerstone that leads to achieving extraordinary results. Some ideas for the process include:

- Personal sharing of individual stories in a way that the team learns both the unique talents as well as the personal triumphs and challenges of individual members.
- Personality and Behavioral Preference Profiles. Popular tools and assessments for this include DiSC, Meyers Briggs (MBTI) and Birkman. These types of assessments provide a non-threatening way for people to understand the strengths, weaknesses, thinking styles and communication styles of each team member. They help teams come to appreciate the differences among them.
- 360 Degree Feedback " An experienced coach can interview individual team members and debrief the overall team on concerns, fears, opportunities and other themes and patterns that exist within the team. When shared in the appropriate way, a coach can help a team use these collective insights to build a solid foundation of trust.

Extraordinary teams are not created by accident. Although they may have a high level of conflict they also have a high level of trust. They also have strong leaders who can both model team behavior and allow a certain level of trust. Read Patrick Lencioni's book "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team" to learn more about you and your team can achieve the results you want.

Article Source: <http://www.articlesnatch.com>

About the Author:

Tim Link is an executive coach and management consultant with a record of successfully guiding leaders and organizations from small business through Fortune 50 to increased [employee productivity](#)

and satisfaction. Link Resource Group provides customized business coaching, consulting and leadership training programs, both large and small.

<http://www.LinkResourceGroup.net>