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How Will You Make Your Team a *Team*?

by Paul Michelman

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How Will You Make Your Team a Team?

What do you do when the whole of the team you're leading appears to be *less* than the sum of its parts? Everything seems to be in place: solid people, a demanding but ultimately reasonable plan, sufficient resources. Yet there's still something missing from the effort, and finding a solution to this problem falls squarely on your shoulders. No, leaders can't single-handedly boost performance, but they can guide the tone, the tempo, and the mechanisms that create the opportunity for better things.

Begin by considering this seemingly simple question: Does the group you have assembled view itself as a team? Often, executives "have recruited and promoted a number of executives, all with specific goals and objectives," says Rodger Stotz, vice president of Maritz, a St. Louis-based performance improvement company. "Whether these individuals see themselves as a team is another thing." Perhaps they have "noncomplementary goals and are encouraged to compete with each other for resources and recognition."

So a leader's first step is often to declare that a team exists and to support that assertion with "clarity as to how the participants are to interact and support each other," says Stotz. While leaders must encourage trust and support, they should also provide an environment that promotes disagreement, says Patrick Lencioni of the San Francisco-based management consulting firm The Table

Group. "Healthy conflict enables teams to bring all team knowledge and opinions to the surface, which leads to better decisions."

Performance expectations—and the accountability measures that should ride shotgun with them—must be as clear as those governing behavior. This applies both to the team as a whole and to the individuals who make it up, says Hellen Davis, CEO of the Philadelphia-based consultancy Indaba Training Specialists. "Each person should know the stakes and clearly grasp how others will determine whether they meet expectations, fail to deliver, or exceed expectations." Says Lencioni, "Teams that cannot hold one another accountable are susceptible to allowing individual and department priorities to supersede the goals of the team."

The expectations you set as a leader become building blocks for the shared vision held by the most effective teams. "Most people have an idea of what they are trying to achieve," says Marcia Reynolds, author of *How to Outsmart Your Brain* (Covisioning, 2001), "but their picture of what this destination looks like varies, causing differing goals, priorities, and needs. Visions need to be visual and specific, then negotiated so everyone is focused on the same path." The development of a shared vision might begin with a discussion of how the team builds value.

A compelling vision, based on clear goals and expectations, is only as effective as the communications

strategy put in place to support it. Again, it's up to you to set the pace. Steve Farber, author of *The Radical Leap: A Personal Lesson in Extreme Leadership* (Dearborn Financial Publishing, 2004), suggests seeking "extreme feedback on your own performance. Put your own ego directly at risk and ask, How am I doing?" A leader's willingness to hear criticism establishes the model for others in the group to follow, while creating "a strong human connection that engenders commitment and loyalty," he notes.

Effective communication is more than simply the currency of interpersonal commitment. Managers in IBM's Engineering and Technology Services group who were surveyed for this column say it is the core of a team's operational effectiveness. To exploit opportunities that arise, team members must "communicate constantly—so they understand direction changes, updates, and key issues" as they evolve, says IBM's Cary Ziter. This is essential to the process of building value. As an example, he notes, "if the Research Group [at IBM] has just earned a patent on an important technical innovation, can the design engineers leverage that intellectual property in a current or near-term client engagement?" This is possible only if project managers continually convey their knowledge of what's going on to other parts of the company.

To support this kind of behavior, Bill Treasurer, author of *Right Risk: 10 Powerful Principles for Taking Leaps with Your Life* (Berrett-Koehler, 2003), suggests that leaders establish systems that "reward team members who give others the heads-up on changing circumstances, updated information, or potential risks.

"The best team members," he continues, "anticipate the needs of one another." ♦