MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

Teamwork

From the Editor

A gold medal win — the fourth in four years for the Canadian junior hockey team. Quite an accomplishment.

The medals had been handed out; the cheers had subsided; the high fives had been exhausted; and the crowd had all but disappeared. An interviewer approached Nolan Baumgartner, a player on the Canadian team, for some final words. His question provoked some reflection and some analysis, "What's the difference between your team and the other one?" It didn't take long for the young man to provide a response, "The other team hoped; we believed."

Simple and to the point. Organizations, I thought, are no different. Some hope; others believe. Those that believe plan and think with a passion that fires up commitment; those that believe move strategies and tactics to action; those that believe invent the future with flawless focus and energetic execution.

At LIVE Consultants, we help organizations move beyond crossed fingers and magic potions. Through the education programs we develop and the strategic planning we do, we help organizations and the people who are part of them increase their believe-ability and create their futures.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

For better or worse, management can be as trendy as Paris fashion. What is in today can be out tomorrow.

There are some management strategies and techniques, however, that deserve more than a moments glory in the spotlight on the runway. Teamwork is one of them.

In this article, Stephen Baetz defines seven reasons why teams often fail to live up to the potential they have. His premise is that if we can understand the reasons for failure we have a better chance of having teams make an exceptional contribution to organizational life.

Stephen is a principal partner of LIVE Consultants and has worked with organizations in developing strong, productive teams.

Stephen Baetz

Why Teams Often Fail

Andy Warhol who turned the photo of a soup can into trendy art claimed that each of us would have 15 minutes of fame in our lifetime. I rather suspect the same is true for many management strategies, ideas, and techniques. Each claims in its first few minutes at centre stage to be the final word. We all listen and read intently, are intrigued momentarily, and then promptly forget what all the fuss is about. Just 15 minutes later we move on.

But before Andy's fatal prediction claims teamwork as a victim, I'd like to make the case for using teams as an enduring strategy for organizations. Not that I want to restate the benefits but rather to understand why teams, in some organizations, are struggling. My hope is that if we can learn why teams are failing to live up to expectations, we can change our approach so we can take advantage of the real benefits.

Reason 1: Unclear reasons
Every strategy — and teams are an organizational strategy — has to contribute to a purpose. The unfortunate reality is that in many organizations few people can tell you why teams are being used as the basic organizational unit.

It should be clear whether teams are being used to spread risk, increase buy-in, respond to complexity, improve co-ordination, or spark creativity.

Reason 2: Confusion about what team model is appropriate
There are a myriad of team models and each offers different benefits. A basketball team, a swim team, a football team, a family, a theatre troupe, and an orchestra are all teams — but much different teams, each from the other, in terms of how they work, what they expect of the members, and what they can achieve.

For example, a basketball team requires individual specialists who are extremely capable of quickly reading the environment and making adjustments. The players are expected to be creative and innovative within the structure of the offense and willing to help out at a moments notice if someone misses an assignment. A theatre troupe, by contrast, has a static environment in which individuals are expected to create magic within the guidelines established by the Director. Actors don't do lighting and technicians stick with their role and never pretend to be marketers.

In each of these two teams, the roles, expectations, and skills of the leaders are different and so with the roles, expectations, and skills of the members. If the organization is unclear about what type of teamwork they want, each member will use a team model that works for them or one they have experience with. Disconnects among the members of the team are an inevitable result.

Reason 3: Organization rewards support individual accomplishment
Organization members are not likely to engage in team behaviours — supporting, encouraging, pitching in, co-ordinating, collaborating, trading, facilitating, etc. — if the systems of the organization encourage individual action and accomplishments.

Selection, training, performance management, compensation, recognition, and promotion systems have to be redesigned to support team behaviour. When these systems aren't modified, old individual behaviours remain.

Reason 4: Team building activities focus on building trust and appreciating personality differences
Teams will fail if the training they get is focused on building trust and learning the personalities of all the other team members. There's no doubt team members find it fascinating and many revel in quoting what their style is and explaining why they have conflict or potential conflict with other members.

Appreciating diversity and valuing difference — although important — is insufficient when building a team.

The place to start when developing a team is by defining its purpose ... what is the team to achieve. The purpose becomes the team glue; it's what will hold the team together through challenging times, what will help it distinguish a good decision from a bad one, and what will define problems and opportunities. Once the purpose is clear, roles can be defined. The team must understand who is responsible for what on the team. That puts the team in a position to define its procedures ... how does the team problem solve, make decisions, communicate, encourage, and reinforce the other members of the team.

A clearly defined purpose, well-understood roles, and agreed-upon team procedures unify teams and cause everyone to make outstanding contributions. When team members know what they are to achieve, who is responsible for what, and how things get done on the team, trust, tolerance, respect, consideration, and acceptance are the result.

Reason 5: Assume teams mean that we can eliminate leaders

If the organization figures that the primary reason for moving to a team strategy is so that it can eliminate a level of leadership, teams will fail. Leaders are needed to focus the energy of the team, to coach, to encourage, to inspire, to buffer, to champion, to secure resources, and ... well, the list goes on.

The counter argument, of course, is that those responsibilities can be either shared or parcelled out to team members in some type of self-managed team.

But the experience of many of our clients is that self-managed teams only work in production environments where the output and the task are clearly defined and understood — which these days are few and far between. Most work environments are dynamic and require teams that are innovative, flexible, and ingenious. Leaders are required. However, the skills that a team leader must have are different.

The other faux pas that many organizations make is to assume that a leader's behaviour will be modified once they have the responsibility of managing a team. Teams rarely have the ability to shape the fundamental behaviour of the leader ... so team leaders should be selected prudently.

Reason 6: Failure to supply training for everyone

Of course, the type of team model an organization selects will determine what training is provided and what on-going support is given. The most common mistake in team training — next to merely training on how to build trust — is training only the team leader and assuming that somehow or other the leader will be able to train all the other members of the team.

As much as leaders have to learn new skills and acquire new knowledge about roles and responsibilities, so do the members.

In fact, teams ought to be learning as teams.

Reason 7: The organization gives up too soon

In any change, things get worse before they get better; it's to be expected as people learn new skills, gain new knowledge, and accept new responsibilities.

In making a change to a team environment, we should expect a drop in overall productivity at the beginning. However, organizations often get cold feet in the move to a team environment and withdraw support too early.

Full transitions to team environments will take a couple of years, although the biggest price will be paid in the first six months. This is the time when attempts at new behaviour have to be encouraged and training has to be most active.

Learning what not to do can be as helpful as learning what to do. When moving to a team strategy, avoid some of these shortfalls and ensure yourself and others in your organization that teams rightfully own more than 15 minutes of fame.

Select Your Best Facilitators

Think about the cost of education and development.

Got it in your mind's eye?

Now consider what it would cost if your people weren't skilled, knowledgeable, and supportive of the organization's goals, strategies, and values.

Calculated that one broadly? An even larger number.

Go one more step. Imagine what opportunities you will have lost or sacrificed if you have invested in education and development but have program facilitators who aren't skilled at helping adults learn.

Sure, there are train the trainer programs that can be used but maybe you're missing an important prior step — *selecting the best facilitators possible*. That challenge is particularly important if you are using line managers to help make the learning relevant.

To help you *select the best*, we have developed a Facilitator Assessment Centre. At the end of the day-long process, each candidate will know whether they are suited for the classroom or not. As well, each candidate will receive a report which identifies their strengths and their areas of development. The report is based on more than a dozen key factors that we know lead to facilitator success.

The net result is that the facilitators that do qualify, come to a train the trainer program focused, ready, and eager to learn.

Imagine the cost if you don't select the best!

For more information about our services, contact us at (519) 664-2213.