Team Dynamics – A Force for Good or the Seeds of Dysfunction?

The business world is comprised of all kinds of teams – project teams, taskforces, interdisciplinary teams, leadership teams, departmental teams. You name it, if we have something to accomplish, we can assemble a team. Yet, it seems to remain a mystery as to how to create a **consistently high-performing, cohesive** and **accountable team**. So where's the breakdown?

 A collection of talented individual contributors does not itself make for a high-performing team. There are group dynamics at work; egos that fight for air time or the need to be right, differing communication styles, power struggles, and generally healthy or unhealthy driving forces that influence the norms and protocols. These dynamics become the unwritten and often unarticulated ground rules by which the team plays. When the team doesn't play well together, you experience enormous inefficiencies and lackluster results.

Recently I was working with a design-build team who was proposing on a large, complex healthcare project. They recognized that the pursuit would require astute listening and collaboration skills. They wanted to demonstrate a synergistic team ready to contribute and bring value, so they hired me to facilitate a teambuilding session. We started with asking, "***What are the traits of a high-performing team?***" Their answers were illuminating. While there were some of the usual suspects, "*Respectful. Accountable. Problem-Solving.*" they also included, "*Active Listeners, Humility*". Their list of attributes became their shared code of conduct and a set of expectations they collectively said "yes" to. In other words, this definition was what they were going to hold themselves accountable to as they interacted with each other moving forward.

Team Dynamics. Team dynamics is human relations in action and that can be messy. It can also be rich with **connection, camaraderie, achievement** and **pride**.

One client, recognizing they had some unproductive "**us vs. them**" mentality seeping into their culture, started examining the dynamics of their cross-departmental teams. This tendency to operate in departmental silos (*office vs. field; accounting vs. project management; production vs. customer service; or leadership vs. the rest of the staff*) can be devastating to an organization's performance.

As we examined the breakdowns between departments, we discovered that some team members were more strongly aligned within a department, rather than with the company as

whole. We addressed this with a new, unifying theme, "*One Company, One Team*." This was more than a fabricated mantra. It started shifting how team members communicated and collaborated. They stopped tolerating gossip-laced side conversations and excuses. They started re-defining success as *collective results,* not merely departmental progress.

Alignment. One key solution to what one of my clients termed, "siloism" is to create alignment through **common goals, shared values** and **clarity of purpose**. The leadership team needs to be in alignment on what matters most. If not, you'll find fractions breaking off; people building their cases to be "right" about an issue, rather than being a cohesive unit. Does that mean we should go blindly together off the cliff? Of course not. Healthy teams have spirited conversations and engaged dialogue to **flesh out the opportunities, issues, risks** and **benefits**, and then move forward as one team.

In the book, "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, A Leadership Fable", Patrick Lencioni identifies the core reasons teams struggle:

1. **Absence of trust**—unwilling to be *vulnerable* within the group
2. **Fear of conflict**—seeking *artificial harmony* over constructive passionate debate
3. **Lack of commitment**—feigning buy-in for group decisions creates *ambiguity* throughout the organization
4. **Avoidance of accountability**—ducking the responsibility to call peers on counterproductive behavior which sets *low standards*
5. **Inattention to results**—focusing on personal success, *status and ego* before team success

So let's flip that list of dysfunctionalities. Consider the "*The Five Key Indicators of Healthy, High-Performing Teams*" list:

1. **High Trust** – An environment where it is safe to admit faults and mistakes; there's a willingness to accept help and contribution from others; people give each other the benefit of the doubt and there's a shared focus on the issues, not on office politics.
2. **Embrace Conflict** – Meetings are lively, engaged; Conversations happen in the appropriate forums; issues are addressed early and with the right people; personal negative attacks or passive aggressive behavior are not tolerated.
3. **Commitment** – There's clear direction and shared objectives. There's less indecisiveness, more action.

4. **Accountability** –Peer-to-peer accountability is expected and exercised; positive pressure is applied to develop top performance; team members hold each other in high regard to call each other out (respectfully); there's no perceived favoritism or excessive bureaucracy.

5. **Attention to Results** – Teams are more focused and less distracted; achievement is the natural order of things; wins are celebrated; people don't tolerate what's not working.

When people feel safe to admit faults, can engage in hearty dialogue and know what's expected of them, you have an environment ripe for potential. When there's buy-in, transparency and consequences, your team will be poised to play to win; rather than playing to not lose.

Take the K Challenge:

Where will you start? You might start with making sure the company's goals and priorities are clear, concise and understood by all team members. You could invite dissenting opinions during meetings or facilitate a much-needed conversation between team members. You could stop tolerating what's not working, and keep your eyes on what matters most. You can also start by embodying these five traits in how you show up.

These shifts require regular attention and care to embed them into how a team operates day in and day out. This approach will **cultivate the kind of team dynamics that will serve as a force for good** – producing amazing results and building forward momentum!

Karen Natzel serves as a business therapist to leaders who want to create healthy, vibrant and high performing organizations. Karen helps her clients navigate change and growth by serving as a confidential sounding board; as facilitator, trainer, conflict-resolver, relationship-builder, awareness-raiser, communicator, coach and strategist. Her passion is inspiring others to cultivate their potential.

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