Building a Team

To turn your group into a team, here's what you need to know.

BY LAUREL KIEFFER

TEAM BUILDING RECEIVES much attention in publications, media, and seminars these days. The idea of team development sounds great and indeed allows for maximum use of available resources. But it's not as easy as it seems and can't be learned in a one-day workshop.

The reality of team building is that it is a long-term process. It requires effort by all team members to change their personal attitudes and integrate new skills.

In the nonprofit organization, team members can include paid staff, volunteers, board of directors, consumers, and community stakeholders. There are six components to team building:

1. Have a Clear Mission and Vision.

Before team building can begin, the organization must have a carefully developed mission and vision.[1] The mission and vision must be congruent with the innermost values of team players.

The mission will provide the foundation for team development through the tasks of problem solving, program development, and service delivery. Fulfilling the mission must become the team's "raison d'etre."

2. Add Balance and Diversity.

For a team to be productive, diversity is essential. Welcoming diversity allows conflict and problem solving to occur at the committee table rather than in the larger community where conflict is often distorted and exaggerated.

If you have the luxury of choosing team members, look for culturally and socio-economically diverse individuals. Also, seek out people with different ways of processing information. Detail-

Team Self-Assessment Checklist

Ask yourself these questions about your *team as a whole*:

- How are team members working together?
- Is everyone involved?
- Are we listening to each other?
- How do we deal with differences of opinion?
- What is the climate among team members?

Ask yourself these question about your team's *task*:

- Do we have our goal, mission, and purpose in sight?
- Are we doing the right things?
- Are we following our meeting agenda?
- Do our discussions stay on topic?
- Are we getting the work done?

Ask yourself these questions about the *individuals* on your team:

- Do individuals understand their role on the team?
- Are individuals expressing their opinions?
- Do individuals display a positive attitude?
- Are we tapping into the expertise of each individual?
- Do individuals feel comfortable being on the team?

From *The Compleat Facilitator* (See "Selected References.")

minded people (who see the trees) and visionary, big-picture people (who see the forest) are both vital to a well-balanced team.

If you're part of an established group that wishes to build a team, begin by creating appreciation for the group's diversity. A good way to do so is to use one of many personality inventories.[2] These inventories can help build confidence and enhance "community-building" within the team setting.

3. Hone Communication Skills.

Critical to developing a team is enhancing team members' communication skills. Poor communication will quickly sabotage a team effort. Remember these two keys:

Listen Actively. Try to hear the words from the speaker's point of view. To do so, you need to clear your head of your own agenda and fully tune in to the speaker. Often we are so busy planning our own responses that we do not even hear the speaker. Active listeners read body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. Before they respond, they often ask the speaker to clarify points.

Speak Clearly and Concisely. Words have different meanings to different people. Check with listeners who look confused and ask if you can clarify something you said. Avoid using generalities, colloquialisms, and trendy jargon. Use "I" statements to share concerns, feelings of frustration, and confusion.

4. Learn to Resolve Conflicts.

A poorly functioning group will do anything to avoid conflict. The results of such avoidance—gossip, backstabbing, and the like—destroy group trust. Conflict and confrontation are unavoidable in any truly functioning work group or team.

It is important to differentiate between task-oriented and person-oriented conflict. Addressing the root of the conflict, while it may feel emotionally risky, will save time and enhance team commitment in the long run. Positive confrontation using "I" statements will help prevent emotional outbursts and find a common starting point.

5. Assess the Resources of Each Individual.

Team leaders often have inaccurate assumptions of team members' skills and motivations. Such false expectations will derail the team effort. It's vital to assess the personal resources each individual brings to the team—and to do so realistically and thoroughly.

Most people can become good team players. However, an individual's desires, attitudes, and self-discipline will have a profound impact on the success of the team. These attributes affect a person's ability to integrate knowledge, change inappropriate behaviors, and build a cooperative spirit.

Health and family concerns will also inhibit team building. These issues will take priority over the team effort. Addressing these personal concerns can be tricky, but empathetic listening, caring, and being open to creative solutions can turn such obstacles into opportunities for team growth.

Giving team players the chance to learn essential skills is critical. It is also crucial that team members hold each other accountable for using their new skills in the team setting.

6. Make a Firm Commitment.

Making a commitment to team building should not be taken lightly. You should seriously consider both the costs and benefits of teams. First, the benefits:

- Team members will learn to appreciate their own potential and that of others.
- People who use inappropriate power and control to advance their agenda will either grow through the process or become frustrated and leave the team.
- Team members will be better informed and able to make decisions that support the organization's mission and goals.
- Interpersonal skills for all team members will improve, benefitting both personal and work-related life.

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- Team effectiveness will improve as members learn to address concerns before they become crises.
- Team membership will become a privilege and honor, as well as a personally fulfilling experience.
- When a commitment is made to team building, cultural changes within the organization will occur, albeit slowly. Decision making will be shared by more players, resulting in higher levels of ownership and accountability. The organization will become more productive and quality-oriented.

Think about bartering with another "team leader" for an exchange of talent.

But don't overlook the costs of team building:
- It does not happen overnight, and it is a never-ending process. Team building takes a great deal of patience and planning.
- Team building requires a large investment in people and time.
- Team building "forces" personal and organizational growth. Team members—and the organization as a whole—must be willing to grow and change.
- All team members must learn communication and conflict-resolution skills.
- Everyone must embrace diversity, skill building, self-assessment, and quality improvement.
- The organization's infrastructure must support new methods of doing things.

Whether or not your group is making a concerted effort toward team building, you can begin with your own individual commitment. Here are steps you can take:
- Read current literature on team building.
- Discipline yourself to improving your own interpersonal communication skills.
- Identify issues that push your "hot buttons" and learn how to talk to others about them in a non-threatening, non-emotional way.
- Learn to recognize and view differences as opportunities for growth and enhancement.
- Find a coach or mentor to guide you through the initial part of the journey.
- Think about bartering with another "team leader" for an exchange of talent.
- Look to nonprofit support organizations for technical assistance and support.
- Find a consultant you'd like to work with for an 18-month to two-year minimum commitment.[3]

Don't depend on one-day workshops and seminars to transform your group into a team. Commit yourself for the long term. ■

Footnotes

[1]Note that your mission is a description of your organization now, while your vision is a picture of your desired future. See "Demystifying the Mission Statement," *Nonprofit World*, January-February 1994, and "Putting Vision to Powerful Use in Your Organization," *Nonprofit World*, July-August 1995.

[2]See the personality inventories described in "Shared Leadership: A New Model for the Next Century" in *Nonprofit World*, September-October 1996. These include the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, based on information from Carl Jung.

[3]See "How to Choose and Work with a Consultant," *Nonprofit World*, March-April 1992.

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Nonprofit World • Volume 15, Number 4 July/August 1997
Published by the Society for Nonprofit Organizations
6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, WI 53719 • (800) 424-7367