

# Zen and the Art of Team Building

*Teams create more visionary and creative results than one person ever can. But how do you build a successful team?*

BY BEN TANZER

**H**ow many times has this happened to you? You ask staff members to join a work group for a one-time project. At the first meeting, you tell them how they can help implement your vision. The loudest among them speak, a lot. The quiet ones have little expression, though their body language makes their lack of interest clear. After that first meeting, the group barely meets. The project is completed, but few feel much ownership for it, much less a sense of team.

Why do things go so horribly awry when it seems so easy and you're such a good leader? The answer is simple: You haven't thought about what team members need. To lead a successful team, you need to do six things:

## 1. Stop Flying Solo.

The main reason your team efforts fail is this: Even when leading a team, you still act like you're flying solo. To overcome this tendency, here's what you need to do:

**Rethink your idea of a leader.** Leading a team calls for immersing yourself in a messy process in which your sense of identity and your need for individual recognition gets lost. What you need to recognize, howev-

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er, is that a leader isn't just someone who can get things done. Almost anyone can get things done. Leaders do so while building confidence, loyalty, and trust in those they lead.

**Rethink success.** Another reason you prefer flying solo is that you've never seen team efforts yield greater results than the solo ones you successfully perform every day. Ask yourself this thought: If you haven't witnessed team success, is that because the team failed or because the team was failed by a lack of belief in its strengths and promise?

**Learn to trust.** A third reason you favor flying solo is that you don't trust others to do it as well as you do. You don't want to share, and you don't want to give others a voice. But staff members want to be challenged. They want to develop leadership, facilitation, and collaborative skills. If you don't give them such opportunities, they'll go elsewhere or, worse, stay on, unhappy, unsatisfied, and ultimately unproductive.

**Be patient.** It's easier for you to dive in, bull through, and make things

happen when flying solo than when working with team members. Teams require time, buy-in, and an appreciation for the team process. However, teams also let you draw on staff members who possess a variety of skills, experiences, and perspectives. While that takes patience, the result is always more visionary and creative than any one person can be.

**Learn the process.** Finally, you prefer to fly solo because you don't know what a team needs to be successful or what a team process looks like. Following the tips in this article will help you learn about the team process and your place in that process.

## 2. Engage People.

Here's what you need to do before the first meeting ever takes place:

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**Tell people why you want them.** Don't just ask people to join your team. Recruit them. Spell out your goals, and explain why you want them to participate.

**Ask people what they want.** You need to learn what people want to gain from the effort. Explore their feelings about the project in advance so you're prepared to address their needs when you get started.

**Identify dissenters.** You need to know up front who holds dissenting views. They're the people most likely to disrupt a planning process with incessant second-guessing. The key is to talk to them beforehand and discern the issues that lie behind their dissent. Then you'll be able to build those issues into the discussion.

### 3. Facilitate People.

Next, you must guide those you have invited to participate. Here are the keys to facilitation:

**Create a safe place.** Foster an atmosphere in which people feel free to express themselves. Assure that all participants are heard, regardless of what they say and how loudly, or quietly, they say it.

**Listen.** Take the time to listen actively. Clarify people's comments when necessary.

**Think progress.** Don't get mired in process at the expense of progress. For the most part, it's progress that brings participants back.

### 4. Deal with Dominators.

If you're not prepared, dominators—people who agree or disagree strongly, feel they know a lot about the subject, and are all too willing to dominate the discussion—can derail the discussion. When dominators take center stage, you lose respect and authority. You also lose the insights of people who are quiet or internally focused.

Before beginning your first discussion, ask the group for suggestions on dealing with dominators. There are group dynamics at play, and the group has to take some ownership for them. Just bringing up the subject at the beginning of the discussion may be enough to forewarn people to give everyone a chance to express their opinions.

If that doesn't work, and someone still insists on dominating, follow this series of responses:

**Look in the direction** of the dominator. Sometimes a glance is enough to remind them to let others talk.

**Ask someone else** for their thoughts.

**Call a break**, and talk to the dominator separately.

**If all else fails**, ask the person to leave. Schedule a time to meet with them to discuss their behavior.

Whatever you do, don't get into a power struggle with dominators. Participants need to feel they're in a safe working environment. They don't feel safe when a tug-of-war breaks out between their leaders and fellow participants.

### 5. Share the Vision.

A team needs a vision of where it's going and how to get there. Without vision, a team has no direction, much less anything to fuel the team process. It's not enough, however, just to have a vision. The team has to own that vision. To own it, they must have the opportunity to share their thoughts throughout its development.

Letting everyone have their say about the vision may seem time-consuming. But if team members don't help shape the vision, they won't be invested in its success.

A common mistake is to arrive at the first meeting with a plan, looking for people to put that plan into

action. This approach discourages other team members from feeling any sense of ownership in the vision. It also fails to take advantage of the vast wealth of knowledge, expertise, and perspective that participants bring to the table.

Leave your personal agenda at home. Share your ideas only as the discussion progresses. Let your vision complement and shape the team vision rather than control it.

## 6. Commit Yourself to the Process.

Leading a team takes time, patience, and respect. You need to assess your role in the process and your personal issues around control, power, and trust.

Given all this, you may ask whether you're capable of leading a successful team. The question you need to ask yourself, though, isn't whether you have the capabilities—you do—but whether you have the interest. ■

#### References

- Kieffer, Laurel, "Building a Team," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 4.  
Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Personnel & Human Resource Development, Leadership Series, Vol. I and II*.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, 800-424-7367, [www.snpo.org](http://www.snpo.org).

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