The Keys to Forming Effective Teams

Summary:

Think of your most recent experience with teams. Were others as effective as possible? Were you? Not likely.

By: *Dean Harring*

America loves teams and team players, even outside of sports. What?s not to love? Team players are selfless?they set aside their personal goals and focus their talents on coordinating efforts with their fellow team members to achieve a common goal. Teams personify cooperation and collaboration and synergistic effort. And, of course, So it?s good to be on a team, and teams do good work, which means teams and teamwork are iconic realities of life in America?socially, educationally and professionally. It really doesn?t matter whether you are a toddler, a college student, a retail clerk or a corporate executive, today you regularly find yourself slotted onto teams (or onto committees or into small groups) where you are expected to behave like a good team player. And how does a good team player behave? According to leadership coach Joel Garfinkle, ?You just need to be an active participant and do more than your job title states. Put the team?s objectives above yours and take the initiative to get things done without waiting to be asked.? He identifies five characteristics that make a team player great:

1. Always reliable
2. Communicates with confidence
3. Does more than asked
4. Adapts quickly and easily
5. Displays genuine commitment

Seems obvious, but think of your most recent team experiences. Were your team members behaving that way? Were you? Not likely, and J. Richard Hackman, a former professor of social and organizational psychology at Harvard University and a leading expert on teams, knows why. When interviewed by Diane Coutou for a 2009 Harvard Business Review article (*Why Teams Don?t Work*), he said:

> Research consistently shows that teams underperform, despite all the extra

resources they have. That?s because problems with coordination and motivation typically chip away at the benefits of collaboration.

Problems with coordination and motivation interfering with team collaboration and performance?doesn?t that sound like a rather modest challenge that could be resolved with more effective team management? Sure, to a certain extent. Teams are often too large; they are thoughtlessly staffed (proximity and position rather than proven talents and ability to produce results); and they are routinely launched with murky objectives, vague group member accountabilities and no formal support network for team process management. In other words, most teams don?t meet the five basic conditions Hackman, in his book *Leading Teams*, said teams require to perform effectively:

1. **Teams must be real.** People have to know who is on the team and who is not. It?s the leader?s job to make that clear.
2. **Teams need a compelling direction.** Members need to know, and agree on, what they?re supposed to be doing together. Unless a leader articulates a clear direction, there is a real risk that different members will pursue different agendas.
3. **Teams need enabling structures.** Teams that have poorly designed tasks, the wrong number or mix of members or fuzzy and unenforced norms of conduct invariably get into trouble.
4. **Teams need a supportive organization.** The organizational context?including the reward system, the human resource system and the information system?must facilitate teamwork.
5. **Teams need expert coaching.** Most executive coaches focus on individual performance, which does not significantly improve teamwork. Teams need coaching as a group in team processes, especially at the beginning, midpoint and end of a team project.

But there?s another challenge, and it is presented by the people who don?t want to be team players. People who, when added to a team, immediately focus their attention and effort not on being a good team player but instead on dodging work, avoiding exposure and manipulating the conscientious team players into doing more than their share of the work. This is known as social loafing (or slacking), and it describes the tendency of some members of a work group to exert less effort than they would when working alone. Kent Faught, associate professor of management at the Frank D. Hickingbotham School of Business, argues in his paper about student work groups in the Journal of Business Administration Online that social loafers can?t be successful, however, unless the other team members permit the loafing and complete the project successfully:

> ?the social loafer must find at least one group member that CAN and WILL achieve the group's goals and ALLOW themselves to be social loafed on. "Social Loafer Bait" is the term used here to describe the profile of the ideal target for social loafers.

This problem isn?t new. Max Ringelmann, a French agricultural engineer, conducted one of the earliest social loafing experiments in 1913, asking participants to pull on a ?tug of war? rope both individually and in groups. When people were part of a group, they exerted much

less effort pulling the rope than they did when pulling alone. According to Joshua Kennon, Ringelmann?s social loafing results were replicated over the years in many other experiments (involving typing, shouting, clapping, pumping water, etc.), leading psychologists to believe that humans tend toward social loafing in virtually all group activities. Kennon shared two other conclusions:

- The more people you put into a group, the less individual effort each person will contribute;
- When confronted with proof they are contributing less, the individuals in the group deny it because they believe they are contributing just as much as they would have if they were working alone.

I recently asked a group of friends and colleagues who have been involved in group work at school or in their jobs to respond to a brief, unscientific survey on how they deal with social loafing. Their response pattern is shown in parentheses, and, although respondents varied in age from 20 to 50-plus, answer patterns didn?t seem to vary by age group: *You are working on an important, time-sensitive project with a group of people. One of the group members is slacking off, not contributing to project work. What do you do about it? (choose one)*

- *Ask/Tell the slacker to commit to the project and start contributing (40%)*
- *Report the slacker to the project sponsor (3%)*
- *Complain about the slacker to other team members (10%)*
- *Work harder to pick up the slack and ensure the project is successful (30%)*
- *Follow the slacker?s lead and reduce your commitment and effort (0%)*
- *Other (17%?Most respondents who chose this reported they would employ more than one of the listed strategies)*

How effective is the response you identified above?

- *Solves the problem (27%)*
- *Partially solves the problem (53%)*
- *Fails to solve the problem (17%)*
- *Causes other problems (3%)*

Respondents who took some action (talking to the slacker, or reporting the slacker to the project sponsor) were much more likely to report that their actions solved all or part of the problem. Complaining to other team members failed to solve the problem?no surprise there. And even though 30% of respondents elected to address the slacking problem by working harder to pick up the slack (earning themselves a ?social loafer bait? ID badge), the effect of doing so was mixed, spread fairly evenly among solving, partially solving, failing to solve and causing other problems. What?s not clear is why we are so willing to tolerate social loafing in group projects and why we are so reluctant to call slackers out and hold them accountable. According to Kerry Patterson, co-author of the book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*:

> 93% of employees report they have co-workers who don't pull their weight, but only one in 10 confronts lackluster colleagues.

I suppose the reality is that unless work groups are tightly managed, they offer excellent cover for slackers?relative anonymity, little or no pressure from team members, great individual performance camouflage?with only a slight threat of exposure or penalty for not being a good team player. So the solution to the social loafer problem probably involves not only changes in how groups are formed, resourced and supported but also changes in the group work dynamic to eliminate the cover and camouflage and to illuminate how each individual contributes to the group work effort. (This is sometimes accomplished in university student work groups by using a formal peer review process to help group members hold each other accountable.) As you might expect, Google is serious about teamwork (all Google employees work on at least one team), and Google wants teams to be successful. A recent study of team effectiveness at Google determined that five team dynamics (psychological safety; dependability; structure and clarity; meaning of work; and impact of work) are more important to successful teams than the talents of the individuals on the teams. To help teams manage these dynamics, Google developed a tool called the gTeams exercise, described by Julia Rozovsky of Google People Operations as:

> ?a 10-minute pulse-check on the five dynamics, a report that summarizes how the team is doing, a live in-person conversation to discuss the results and tailored developmental resources to help teams improve.

According to Rozovsky, Google teams reported that having a framework around team effectiveness and a forcing function (the gTeams exercise) to talk about these dynamics was the part of the experience that had the most impact. That?s not surprising, because any ?forcing function? that puts a public spotlight on ineffective or unacceptable behavior makes it easier to identify and eliminate that behavior. Given the concentration of talent at Google, I imagine the social loafers there probably boast a more refined slacker ?craftiness? pedigree than most of us normally encounter. Still, I am betting the Google slackers aren?t very pleased with the light and heat generated by the gTeams exercise spotlight.

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