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Why Team Building Doesn't Work & How You CAN Build Your Team

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If the calls to our consulting office are any indication, there are only 2 solutions any organization would need to fix all their woes - a retreat or team-building. Just about every initial call asks for one or the other, making me state the following right up front in this first paragraph: Team building doesn't work. (I wouldn't be true to myself if I didn't say that we don't put much stock in the healing power of retreats, either, but we'll save the topic of "Why Most Retreats are a Waste of Time" for another article.)

The term "Team Building" has been used to cover a wide variety of exercises, all intended to boost morale and/or productivity (usually both) by focusing on the folks who have the bad morale or are being unproductive. We've all heard about or experienced for ourselves exercises like the one where we fall backwards into a team member's arms, in an effort to learn to trust. While the exercises aren't always that hokey, the thinking behind team building is always the same:

Team Building proposes that it is possible to build trust and engender positive working relationships among people who obviously aren't feeling any of those feelings to start with (otherwise, the team building wouldn't be necessary!), all through concerted effort on the part of those who are "misbehaving."

We have seen numerous organizations who have tried Team Building and declared it a failure - usually blaming the team. "We've tried everything, but we just can't get them to work together!" And although we have never seen an organization successfully transformed by Team Building, organizations continue to look to Team Building to boost both morale and productivity.

Clearly there are problems that need to be solved. And if Team Building isn't the solution, that doesn't mean there is no solution.

To understand how to get past those bottlenecks that seem to scream out for Team Building, the first thing we must understand is why "Team Building" doesn't work. That understanding will lead to solutions that really do work.

Why "Team Building" Doesn't Build Teams.

There are a number of reasons why team building exercises don't build teams.

First, people hate these exercises. Most reasonable people have little patience for going through contrived touchy-feely activities with folks they are distrustful of in the first place. Yes, it's true that we don't have to like medicine for it to be good for us, but in this case, the fact that folks don't trust the exercises that are intended to help them build trust - well you see the lack of logic and incredible irony at work here. You can't build trust with a tool the participants don't trust.

Secondly, team building often happens in a retreat-like setting - away from the workplace, or over a weekend. And retreats are renowned for having their effects be short-lived. (Ok, so I did end up dangling a toe into my treatise on retreats.) The

immediate results of a retreat may be that you are sitting around a lake, baring your soul to your new closest friends and feeling like anything is possible. But come Monday, when you face the pile on your desk and they face the piles on their desks, very little will have really changed.

Which leads to the main reason Team Building doesn't work:

In virtually every situation where "Team Building" is requested, the lack of a sense of team is merely a symptom of other larger issues.

We have yet to find a situation where the perceived need for Team Building doesn't somehow stem from problems at the root of the organization - a lack of direction, policy or leadership; a lack of vision or clearly articulated values. What team building tries to do is to change the behaviors of the team (the symptoms) without getting to the root cause of why those behaviors exist in the first place (the illness). By simply attempting to replace a "bad behavior" with a "good behavior," we create a temporary fix for the symptoms, but the illness continues to exist. And that can only mean that at some point, symptoms will start to pop up again.

The symptoms are simply indicators - the outward signs of what we humans do when problems go unaddressed for a long time. We become frustrated, and our actions stem from that frustration. It's a survival mechanism, a way we can feel like we have some control when things feel like they're out of control.

A lack of leadership, direction, policy, vision, values - these are NOT problems that can be solved by addressing the rank and file - which would be any staff team. These are also not problems that can be addressed through a change in the team's attitudes towards each other - whether that team consists of staff or board.

These are problems that can only be solved by dealing with those critical issues head-on. And that is why having the staff and/or board go through team building exercises, rather than addressing the root causes of the organization's problems, is a huge waste of time, no matter how fancy and psychologically sound the individual activities and overall program may be.

Note: There are some teams that really are dysfunctional, generally due to serious personal issues on the part of one or more members of the team. Those issues need to be dealt with directly. In those cases, professional intervention and mediation are what's needed, NOT team building. But if the calls to our office are any indication, these cases are the rare exception.

Why Groups Think of Team Building

At about this point, someone generally asks, "So if it doesn't work, why do people still pay money for Team Building?" The answer is that they earnestly want things to improve, and so they are addressing what they really think is the problem - the thing that is the most visible.

When an organization has those bigger picture problems - problems related to leadership, policy, etc. - those problems become deep-rooted, laying underground, hidden in the foundation of the organization, where they can't be seen. Layer upon layer is built upon those problems, further obscuring them from view.

By the time things really get out of hand, digging away at one layer of symptoms simply uncovers another layer of symptoms. Usually those surface-layer symptoms (the ones that are easy to see) are ugly - bickering, backstabbing - the kinds of behaviors that suddenly have grown adults sounding like 8 year olds in the back seat of the car - "He started it!"

Morale plummets, and as goes morale, so goes productivity. It can happen to the board just as it can happen to the staff.

So now we have highly visible symptoms to point to - a bickering, backstabbing, ill-tempered team. And we have highly visible negative results from those symptoms - morale, productivity. And so it is logical to assume that if we can turn this unruly group into a loving nurturing supportive team, then morale and productivity will soar.

Therefore the answer to "Why do they consider team building if it doesn't work?" is that it just seems so logical! We have a problem with our team, and it's affecting our morale and productivity. It's not that the powers that be are trying to hide from the real problem - most often, they don't even realize that the problem goes any deeper than the team. They just know they are frustrated and sick of listening to everyone bicker. So please, oh please, won't someone make these folks just get along!?!?!?

So If Team Building Isn't the Answer, What is the Answer?

The answer comes from a combination of awareness and the willingness to get to the bottom of what's really going on.

Awareness that when people behave badly, that we can't just tell them to stop, and can't just teach them to change to "good" behaviors. Awareness that when people behave badly, it's time to find out why.

Once that awareness bell has rung, it will take the willingness to peel back the layers of symptoms so that real answers can be found.

Exercise When the idea of team building or a discussion of morale arises, or when infighting or all those other bad behaviors rear their heads, use the following diagnostic questions to get to the root of the problem

1) What is this stopping us from doing?

2) Why is this important?

3) How is this keeping us from better helping the community?

This may sound simple, but in practice, it's not easy. It takes commitment on the part of the whole group to be honest in looking at the issues, AND to be insistent that they will continue to peel back layer after layer of symptoms until they have diagnosed the core problem.

During these discussions, it is critical to stay on ISSUES and away from PERSONALITIES and POINTING FINGERS.

When the discussion gets through those surface layers and onto the work you do for the community, the tone in the room will become positive instead of negative, and you will hear a sigh of relief. And then you will be able to start working on a real solution.

Board Example:

The board of the ABC Agency feels it needs Team Building because board members bicker all the time and don't accomplish much. Taken at face value, one would assume the goal of Team Building is that the ABC Board work better together.

By asking "What is this bickering stopping us from doing?" the ABC board might note that the bickering was keeping them from doing their job effectively. When asked "Why is it important that the board do its job effectively?" some board members might smile shyly and admit that they really don't know. Now the board

can begin talking about their uncertainty about their role in the organization, and how they don't really know what they're supposed to be doing. By asking "How is this keeping us from better helping the community?" the discussion can lead the board to realize that if they don't know what their job is, they can't do much to make the community any better.

Now they're at the heart of it. The board does have a problem - NOT that they bicker, but that they don't understand their role within the organization, and don't really know what they are supposed to be doing. Maybe that uncertainty is making the group feel ineffective, or maybe the board members secretly feel like they are wasting their time. It would certainly make sense that this would lead to bickering!

Now that their real problem has been uncovered, they can determine ways to address it, whether that is board development work or training, or a myriad of other approaches. The result is that the board comes out stronger, with a purpose, a role, a mission.

If this sample board had gone through Team Building to solve their bickering, they might respect and trust each other, and they might even work better together for a while, but they still wouldn't have fixed the problem. And chances are, the minute an emotionally charged issue arose at the board table, they'd be back at their old behaviors.

Staff Example:

The Executive Director at the Save Our Schools Organization thinks the staff needs Team Building because the various divisions are constantly warring over organizational turf. Taken at face value, one would assume the goal of team building might be to increase productivity and stop wasting the time of both the team AND the senior management that must negotiate the truces to these petty wars.

By asking "Why is this important?" they might see that these wars are jeopardizing everything from donor trust to Save the Schools' ability to serve its mission. By asking "What is this stopping us from doing?" it might become clear that it is not only stopping them from serving the current mission, but stopping the organization from taking the dramatic leaps forward that are only possible from a cohesive integrated group. By asking "How is this keeping us from better helping the community?" they would have the opportunity to see that the community isn't getting anywhere near what it could be getting from the organization, all because of these wars.

Again, the heart of this problem is NOT that folks are at war, but that there is no cohesive organization-wide understanding of how to best serve the community. It might be that there is no plan for how the organization will do its work, or if there is a plan, that it doesn't have buy-in across the various departments (perhaps the plan had little input from those departments individually, or there were no joint planning sessions between the various departments).

With this diagnosis, the organization can work to create systems and mechanisms whereby they can best provide service to the community, both now and into the future. The solution may be an organizational planning process that involves all the departments and looks for big picture effect on the community.

Again, these are not the kinds of deep-seated problems that could possibly be solved by team-building exercises, no matter how well the staff suddenly started to get along. The wars are just the symptoms.

We have seen both these situations, and watched as years of trying to get everyone on the same page has failed. By constantly asking "Why does this matter? Why is it

important?", and diagnosing the real problem, organizations can stop continually treating the symptoms, only to have them return again and again. Instead, they are able to find solutions to the real problems holding them back.

Vision and values and strategy - those are the things that will move your organization forward as a team. Follow the big picture and get to the heart of why you feel you need team building, and you simply won't need it. You may find you need other types of assistance, but at least none of your group will have to worry that when they fall backwards, there won't be anyone there to catch them.

Epilogue:

Two weeks after putting the final touches on this piece, an article appeared in the Wall Street Journal that made me smile. It seems that in the spring of 2001, the E Commerce Group began thinking about taking their staff on a team-building retreat. E Commerce had almost tripled its staff, had hired 8 managers, and started having weekly management meetings that everyone hated. The COO was quoted as saying, "So we thought maybe we'll go to the country for a weekend and hire a team-builder and play games like falling into each other's arms." (I'm not making it up - he really said that! Check out the front page of the Marketplace section on 10/23/01.)

The article goes on: "Then came Sept. 11. Suddenly, there was no time for games. As in numerous other companies, the managers at E Commerce had to learn their lessons in team-building in a real crisis - and it will change their company culture forever." The company founder and CEO learned to delegate more, while employees pitched in to do work not normally assigned to them. The founder was quoted as saying, "This crisis broke down the barriers."

The article continues: "Employees have had to communicate more directly with one another. 'In the past if a person in one department needed help from another department, he went first to his manager,' said the CEO. 'But now people are going straight to the person who can fix the problem.' "

I smiled because the crisis made them address the real issues. Falling into each other's arms would never have made the CEO delegate more. And it never would have broken down inter-departmental walls and managerial egos to immediately make it ok to circumvent established communications channels.

They fixed the real problems. And you know what? **The team is working just fine.**

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