

Strength in Numbers



Creating high-performance teams means focusing on shared goals

By Patrick Williams, EdD, MCC

Teams are the most common business unit for high performance. Although the word “team” gets used loosely and not always appropriately, there is universal acceptance that teams create opportunities for high-performance results. As coaches, we can be highly instrumental in team-building and defining a team’s direction.

True teamwork represents a set of values that promote individual and collective performance. Effective teams value listening and communicating, sharing work responsibilities, providing support – and they can even make work more social and enjoyable.

Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith (*The Wisdom of Teams, Teams at the Top*) provide the clearest definition of teams:

A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and an approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.

The essence of a team is common commitment. Without it, work groups are just collections of individuals working together but separately. A

coach’s goal is to help facilitate teamwork and to generate a common goal among team members.

Work & Social Needs

Working together towards a shared goal can create social ties and enjoyment – important factors that contribute to high achievement. The Hawthorne Studies in the 1930s revealed that people work better together when they are allowed to socially interact with one another and are given supportive attention.

The Hawthorne Studies have importance for executives interested in increasing results without command and control tactics:

- Pay attention to people and their teams;

Focused Feedback & Follow-up

The need to build effective teams is increasing and the available time to do so is decreasing. How do you increase team effectiveness in a climate of rapid change with limited resources? Here is an excellent team-building exercise developed by Marshall Goldsmith (Goldsmith, 1998).

This exercise requires team members to courageously:

- ask for feedback,
- be disciplined in developing a behavioral change strategy,
- follow up, and
- “stick with it.”

To implement this process, the coach directs the team leader to facilitate rather than be the boss. Members should develop their own behavioral changes, rather than have them imposed upon them.

1. Begin by asking each member of the team to confidentially answer two questions:

- a)** On a scale of 1 to 10, how well are we working together as a team?
- b)** On a scale of 1 to 10, how well do we need to be working together as a team?

2. Ask the team, “If every team member could change two key behaviors which would help us close the gap between where we are and where we want to be, which two behaviors should we try to change?” Prioritize the behaviors and determine the two most important behaviors to change for all team members.

3. Ask team members to also choose two behaviors for personal change that will help close the gap. Then request that they ask for brief progress reports from each other monthly.

Progress can be charted. Results have clearly shown that if team members have regularly followed up with their colleagues, they will invariably be seen as increasing their effectiveness in their selected individual “areas for improvement.” The process works because it encourages team members to primarily focus on changing their own behaviors.

- Express genuine interest in them;
- Give them opportunities for social interaction;
- Provide frequent feedback; then
- Stand back and let them perform.

This is not to say that management should leave teams alone. Teams left on their own can become confused. Management is responsible for clarifying the challenge for the team, and for being flexible enough to leave the team to develop commitment to purpose, sets of specific goals, timing, and work approach.

Meaning & Emotional Energy

The best teams invest considerable effort in exploring, shaping, and agreeing on a purpose that belongs to them both individually and collectively. Coaches can assist teams in developing a common purpose that supports both individual effort and team results.

The best teams also take their common purpose and translate it into specific performance goals. These goals relate to the common purpose and build on each other, moving the team forward towards achievement and creating powerfully motivating steps to success. The achievement of goals along the way builds momentum, fosters trust among members, and helps maintain continued commitment.

Specific performance goals may be different for each group, but the importance of helping a team define its goals is immense. Transforming broad directives into

specific goals is a process that provides first steps for forming the identity and purpose of the team. As the team progresses with small wins, they reaffirm their shared commitment.

Clarity & Focus

The combination of purpose and specific goals is essential to performance. Each depends on the other. While the clarity of goals helps keep a team on track and focused for accountability, the broader, overlying aspirations of a team's purpose can provide meaning and emotional energy.

When people are working together toward a common objective, trust and commitment follow. Members hold themselves responsible both as individuals and as a team for the team's performance. People who par-

“Coaches can assist teams in developing a common purpose.”

ticipate in effective teams find the experience energizing and motivating in ways that their usual jobs could never match.

Groups that are established as a “team” but that do not have a clear common purpose rarely become effective teams. Only when appropriate performance goals are set does the process of discussing the goals and the approaches to them give team members a clear choice: they can disagree with a goal and opt out, or they can pitch in and become accountable with and to their teammates.

“True teamwork represents a set of values that promote individual and collective performance.”



Mutual Accountability

Though it may seem trivial, establishing mutual accountability can lead to astonishing results. Team members must do more than just listen, respond constructively, and provide support to one another. In addition to sharing these team-building values, they must share an essential discipline.

Katzenbach and Smith highlight five essential disciplines of effective teams:

1. A meaningful common purpose that the team has helped shape.
2. Specific performance goals that flow from the common purpose.
3. A mix of complementary skills.
4. A strong commitment to how the work gets done.
5. Mutual accountability.

I would add to these essential disciplines: A relentless focus on performance. This is another area where coaches can help define the mission of the team and assist in the establishment of guidelines for performance.

Eight Keys To Performance

Here are eight key approaches for building team performance that Katzenbach

and Smith found in their research of high performing teams. These are specific goals to be achieved for a coach who is working with a team.

1. Establish urgency, demanding performance standards and direction.
2. Select members for skill and skill potential, not personality.
3. Pay particular attention to first meetings and actions.
4. Set some clear rules of behaviors.
5. Set and seize upon a few immediate performance-oriented tasks and goals.
6. Challenge the group regularly with fresh facts and information.
7. Spend lots of time together.
8. Exploit the power of positive feedback, recognition and reward.

We should always strive to make teams self-reliant and internally supportive. Because so many of these ideas are new to business, coaches can be an essential part of team building, defining commitment, and generating performance goals.

The real key is coaching for sustainable results either with an internal coach within the company or an external coach hired to coach the team to be accountable to the changes they want to create. I actually got my start in executive coaching with a firm that did executive

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boot camps to create self-directed work teams. It became clear that unless the team leader or the highest level executive in charge of this team was coached to support the changes, they rarely were implemented. Hence the real value of coaching for creating sustainable results *over time*. •

Resources:

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