

## Team Building: The Eight Engines Of High Performance Teams

There are quite a few methods currently in use to get teams to work better. All the way from outdoor experiences like ropes courses and climbing mountains to the classroom and on the job experiences. Some, obviously, work better than others for your situation.

While many of these methods are enjoyable, they may not lead to better team performance over time. How many of you have gone out into the wild to "team" only to come back to the office and still not trust each other or have fuzzy goals or run across unexpected political barriers.

No matter what the method, you will have difficulty achieving successful team outcomes unless you turn on the eight engines of effective teamwork. Over the past 26 years of practice and research, the following eight engines have surfaced as consistently powering effective team performance:

- Defining goals/objectives/success
- Sorting out roles/responsibilities/accountabilities
- Identifying barriers to success and developing contingency plans
- Improving interpersonal relationships between team members
- Feedback systems
- Team member recruitment and departure
- Team leadership
- Intra- and inter-team communication

There is, however, a significant difference between how ordinary teams and high performing teams run these engines.

Ordinary teams list out all their goals and objectives and prioritize the entire list. I've seen some teams with lists of objectives as long as my sleeve. The best teams limit their goals to only a few. Those that need to be accomplished within a short period, say 30 days. These few near-term goals are then prioritized. As time passes, some longer-term goals move into the shorter time frame and are included into a newly re-prioritized list. What exceptional teams do, is identify those goals that seem to consistently drop to the bottom of the priority list. Then they get rid of them; delegate them upwards, outwards (outsourcing) or eliminate them totally since they will never have the time to get to them. This process seems to relieve a lot of guilt associated with not getting those things done that you know you'll never have time to do. In essence, then, high performing teams only work on short-term continuously high priority goals.

Ordinary teams divide up their roles and responsibilities as best they can. While exceptional teams take little for chance. The best teams identify the gaps and overlaps in roles so that people don't fight over their responsibilities (turf wars) and important (but often dull) tasks (hot potatoes) don't get left undone.

Exceptional teams go on to identify three types of barriers that have potential to upset the apple cart. People barriers, process barriers, and structure barriers. People barriers show up when someone doesn't get along with others and is seen as an impediment to progress. Most team jerks fall into this category. In fact, there are very few real jerks; they just may have a toxic relationship with someone else on the team. Process barriers are policies and practices that have outlived their usefulness but remain in place anyhow. Most effective teams either ignore these policy barriers or have them redone. One place to look to improving these outdated policies is to change the date at the bottom of each policy page to an "expiration date" instead of an "effective date" or "revision date." Structural barriers are created by a mismatch between how the team is structured (hierarchical vs. self-directed) and the skill level of the team members. For example, knowledge workers work best in a hierarchical structure.

The most effective teams tend to help each of their members understand their own personalities as well as those of the other team members. This knowledge not only goes a long way in helping the team build bridges across toxic relationships (versatility), but also helps assign roles that take advantage of the natural strengths of one's personality.

Exceptional teams tend to make sure the infrastructure supporting their team efforts is continuously maintained. They make sure, for example, that there is an informal continuous feedback loop between all team members/leader. They make sure every team member is operating from the same page in terms of agreed upon decision-making methods. They make sure that they are continuously looking for ways to improve communication within and between teams. They divide their team members up into "core" and "resource" to take advantage of time commitments and needed skills. And they look at varying their leadership models depending on the changing needs of the team.

Moving from ordinary to a high performing really depends upon your commitment to run your team using the eight engines of effective teamwork.

## About the Author

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