

TEAMBUILDING EXERCISES – AN OPINION

What we need to do is learn to work in the system, by which I mean that everybody, every team, every platform, every division and every component is there not for individual competitive profit or recognition, but for contribution to the system as a whole on a win-win basis.

(W Edwards Deming (1900-1993), American statistician and consultant)

It is now widely recognised that for any organization, division, section or group of people to perform effectively it must, to use mechanical and sporting analogies, learn to function as a well-oiled machine or as a team. However, in increasingly knowledge-based businesses many people work either as an individual, or in individual specialist areas, or, they tend to work alone with their own group of contacts and, even when they belong to a group or section they resent being micro-managed.

However, that does not mean to say that people within a section, division or group should not, where and when possible, provide support or assistance as necessary. But it is not teamwork; that is reserved for people whose combined skills are essential for the safety, security or well being of one another, or for the safety, security and health of others, and for the continued success of their organization.

The fact is that the continued, and successful, operation of any organization demands effort, enthusiasm, attention and input from everyone at every level all performing as part of a team committed to the company's primary objectives. To achieve those objectives in a timely, efficient and effective manner people need to be trained and developed to increase and improve their skills individually and as a team.

Do not, for one minute, believe that the success and/or good fortune of any company or organization is due solely to the ability of its Chairman, Chief Executive or Managing Director. Rather, it is the efforts of those much lower down the 'pecking order' who grind out their daily rituals and procedures to provide the goods or services offered by their company.

There are, of course, individuals who have the charisma, the message and the ability to communicate their visions clearly to their employees, shareholders and to financial institutions but they are few and far between. Far too many directors and senior managers have little or no idea what their employees do and how they do it because they, apparently, do not understand or subscribe to the theory of "management by walking about", and far too many who do not seem to understand and accept that a company is not just the man at the top but it is the combined efforts of those lower down the management structure and teamwork that makes or breaks an organization.

Besides, when the person at the top concentrates much of his time and effort to maximising profits for the benefit of shareholders, increasing the company share price and maintaining a high level of return on investment then they tend to be dry and uninteresting.

Common sense should tell us that all progress really depends on the effort and ability of the group of people at the top, the Board or in the case of a charity a Council, binding together, and trusting one another, with the aim of agreeing, pursuing and achieving common goals. But, too many companies seek to recruit, train, promote and churn out clones when what they really need to do is to weld together different individuals committed to achieving and capable of communicating and promoting the companies goals or objectives, not a group of 'yes' men.

In my view that is why so many companies are badly managed. It is the group at the top, the six, eight or even twelve executive and non-executive directors, who so often fail to accept and appreciate that it is combined commitment and effort and not just individual effort that achieves results. That is because to reach the higher levels in organizations most tend to be strong individuals, they each have their own goals to pursue, they are ambitious and keen to reach the pinnacle and they often use political influence to undermine other perceived threats from around the table.

Nonetheless, teamwork, effort and commitment are what make for a successful professional sports team - there are people whose strength lies in defence, others in attack and other in a co-ordinating role. We cannot all be football strikers, the ones who gain the glory and recognition, or lead batsmen or fastest bowler or most prolific scorer of baskets; the fact is that it is just as important to provide the necessary supporting roles throughout the game.

We have all seen, depending on our level of support and commitment, our favourite football, rugby football, basketball or cricket teams perform during the appropriate season. But, how many times, when one side or another loses, do we hear the manager, assistant manager or the coach suggest that his people lacked fire, enthusiasm, determination, the will to win or, more often than, that they did not pull together as a team? I suggest that no matter how skilled or committed an individual might be when he or she is faced by an opposing team, committed to supporting one another, the singleton is unlikely to succeed?

So, how do you, a manager or a coach, get everyone pulling together and moving in the same direction just like the optimum example of teamwork, a rowing 8? I say optimum example because where else do 8 people have to work together in complete harmony to achieve the objective but in a rowing hull?

Firstly, before embarking on any teambuilding exercise, programme or away-day, call it what you will, the most senior management have to be present, completely involved in the proceedings and, most importantly, open, honest and very clear about what it is they are trying to achieve. It is of paramount importance to identify and define objectives for the section or company. Any strategic policies or plans must be communicated to the group and managers should prepare a list of specific questions that require answers.

Secondly, for any teambuilding session or exercise much will depend on the facilitator, the arbitrator, the devils-advocate, the motivator or inquisitor, whatever your choice of title. He or she should, preferably, come from outside the group, section or even company but should be 'au fait' with what the company does, its products or services, area of operation, strategy, policies and plans. They must be briefed on what the director or manager hopes to achieve from the session and, must be capable of bringing the discussions back under control if for any reason they stray too far from the core objectives.

Just as important, managers and the facilitator must be prepared for failure. That is because the real danger with any teambuilding exercise is that it can quickly degenerate into a team destruction day and you may end up with a very unhappy, disillusioned, demotivated and even disgruntled group of people. That is because they may have heard criticism about their attitude, their training, their professionalism and it may even have been personal. It is possible that bad feelings may emerge and, if that happens, then the objectives may have been wrong, the briefing and introduction may not have been clear or the facilitator and managers did not keep the programme on track.

Also, there is a slightly invidious or insidious side of teambuilding and that is the process can be used to promote, encourage and support the formation of cliques of managers, those people of the correct, acceptable or even brain-washed attitude and approach to organizing, managing and administering people. This process allows for the selection of 'right-minded' managers who will go along with the 'party-line' and will support and re-enforce the inner circle of controllers and organizers to the extent that anyone questioning the decision-making process or responding in a manner that does not follow the supposed and often accepted wisdom of those in power are, at best, frozen out and, at worse, removed from the system by one means or another.

This leads not only to nepotism but also undermines the democratic process and to the corruption of the general guiding principles of management and administration, and that is in a manner that best meets the interests, needs, demands and requirements of all stakeholders and not just a few.

However, genuine teambuilding events to promote, support and encourage effort are organized for a number of reasons. For example:

- Dealing with specific problems.
- Establishing a new section or group – Project Management.
- Introducing new members to the section, group or division.
- Improving internal and external communications with other sections and with customers.
- Seeking out fresh ideas or new ways of doing business.
- Brainstorming a business plan – Strategy and direction.

And, where such events are organized away from the work place and away from every day distractions like telephone calls, e-mails, facsimile messages and the general bustle of office or shop floor life then participants are more likely to relax and be prepared to get involved. However, before you reach that stage it is imperative to be completely open and honest and spell out the reasons for any such exercise. And again, to be successful, senior managers and the facilitator should, for example:

- Have a prepared agenda with the objective or objectives clearly stated.
- Prepare a list of questions to be answered.
- Brief everyone beforehand and tell them how the programme will be conducted and the areas to be covered.
- Invite everyone to write down their ideas in response to each question or, invite round the table off-the-top of the head comments and have 2 or 3 people write down responses or, divide the gathering into groups of say 4 or 5 and let them brainstorm their replies and then present their ideas to the gathering.
- Set a time period for groups to come back with ideas in order to keep the process moving along.
- Encourage any kind of response. Sometimes wild ideas have merit and can turn out to be something very worthwhile.
- Emphasize quantity to stimulate lateral thinking.
- Not worry about detail. You can sort the wheat from the chaff later.
- Encourage contradiction but discourage clear and outright criticism.
- Try not to be arrogant – by that I mean give the impression that you already have the answers and that they are present to confirm your pre-determined views.

So, do not forget, in your teambuilding exercise, that a successful organization is a group of people; among them will be 'alpha' males and females who will try to gain centre-stage and also many who prefer not to be in the limelight; and, that people are a combination of attitudes, abilities, knowledge, skills, desires and differing levels of commitment and self-motivation. And, it must be recognized that for the most part team-building exercises are sometimes farcical and unnecessary management-speak sessions that are totally unrelated to the needs of a group of people and the way in which they operate. Oftentimes they are used as an excuse to bring in outside people and self-styled management consultants who have their own agenda based on the notion that we all must get along all of the time, which is nonsense.

Do not forget that we are all individuals and we have different likes and dislikes, different ways of working and different ways of conducting ourselves and of doing business. I am reminded of the quotation attributed to the Russian and then naturalised American aeronautical engineer Igor Sikorsky,

"The work of the individual still remains the spark that moves mankind ahead even more than teamwork."

(Igor Sikorsky (1889 – 1972), Russian born US Aeronautical engineer)

Teamwork is about getting individuals to pull together to achieve a set of widely accepted common goals and to establish trust, commitment and support in achieving objectives, it is not about making them like one another. The manager or facilitator should provide a short verbal précis of the areas that have been discussed and emphasize any outstanding points that were raised and indicate that a short written report will be distributed for further input. You may not necessarily get what you want and you may not necessarily improve motivation but it is essential to establish the fact that you have provided all the 'players' with the same information.

These sorts of exercises do not always bear fruit but do make sure you show a positive attitude to the day's proceedings. At the end of the period do not forget to thank people for their involvement and effort; the days of adopting a superior attitude through status or position should be long gone and management is now about consensus and not orders and instruction.

The only team-building session that I ever attended and not related in any way to my three decades in the Royal Navy in charge of various groups of people in differing ships and establishments, in a group of some 22 people, turned out to be somewhat farcical because some did not have the right attitude and approach to the exercise; others were very clearly not interested and felt it was a waste of their time and effort; others carried out the various tasks with the least amount of effort; and, that left about half a dozen who actually made an effort to carry out the tasks and complete them within the set time-frame. What made matters worse was the fact that the person who was, allegedly, in overall charge of the team was not particularly liked because of their general attitude and management-style.

So, if and when such exercises do not work then you need to take another look at your organizational structure, levels of responsibility, motivational factors and advancement opportunities. If too few people have too many tasks to undertake and appear to be constantly under pressure you are unlikely to be successful; if a manager has too many people directly responsible to him in his section, group or division, a figure of 10 to 15 is considered optimum, then you may not succeed; and, if people are not well rewarded for effort there will be underlying tension.

If you try to micro-manage the efforts of people, especially in a knowledge-based organization, that is one that requires individuals to work on their own on specific tasks or specific projects and often not related, then it seems unlikely you will succeed for the simple reason that determining and setting targets leads to an increase in administrative effort to complete electronic and paper pro forma and subsequently leads to a corresponding reduction in operational effort.

And, when you apply too many rules, regulations, guidelines, procedures and principles then you are likely to deter people from committing themselves and are more likely to de-motivate them from responding. You cannot build a team unless there is a clear objective, acceptance of both responsibility and accountability and a real, not imagined, desire and motivation to succeed; and, you cannot build a team when your own attitude and approach to the group as a whole is perceived as, for example, arrogant, unhelpful, domineering or demanding.

However, teambuilding and teamwork are all part of leadership. If the people you choose as managers do not show leadership, that is the knowledge, ability and experience to motivate others to succeed, by listening as well as talking, then a company will not succeed; if the people you select or recruit as managers are unable to empathize with the existing staff then productivity is unlikely to improve; if the people you have as senior managers do not have candour, compassion, commitment and composure and are unable to communicate with those who work with and for them, then the group is unlikely to perform; and, if the directors of companies and organizations do not know what the employees are doing then there will be a lack of understanding between the two leading to a lack of efficiency.

I have watched a few episodes of some management-type programmes on the television and, frankly, most of the people who appear on these programmes I would never recruit as a manager because they do not display leadership qualities. Indeed, most of them appear to be arrogant, aggressive and abrasive, full of self-worth and self-opinionated, and that is most probably because they are encouraged to be competitive in the extreme. This proves the point that you cannot have leadership and direction when everyone wants to take charge believing they know best and when people are unable to reach a degree of consensus.

Teamwork, teambuilding and leadership are about communication and planning and agreed objectives, shared responsibility and accepted short-term tactical plans to achieve the objective; they are not about point-scoring to climb the greasy-pole of a company management ladder.

(2800 words including quotations)

KENNETH ARMITAGE

(1999)