

HOW TO MAKE TEAMWORK WORK

By Robert E. Lefton, Ph.D.

Teamwork is a highly respected concept today, but it doesn't exist in most companies. *Reason:* Underestimating the challenges involved with building effective teams, and being blinded by myths about teamwork. *Most common myths and realities:*

■ **Myth: Getting along is a sign of a good team.** *Reality:* The compromises needed to keep employees happy usually mean that honest discussion doesn't take place and real cooperation doesn't exist. Don't confuse congeniality or camaraderie with productive collaboration. Watch out for team leaders who say

things like, "I never think of myself as the boss—I'm just one of the gang."

■ **Myth: There's a correlation between intelligence and teamwork.** *Reality:* Intellectual sparks often cause conflict. *More important:* Personality dynamics. When *no one* is trying to show off his smarts, and everyone is committed to the same goal, the team is functioning properly.

■ **Myth: People who have been successful in business in the past are good team players.** *Reality:* Not always. *More common:* CEOs who use the divide-and-conquer strategy. Overtly or subtly, they *discourage* collaboration, preferring to deal with subordinates one-by-one.

■ **Myth: Restructuring to reduce bureaucracy improves teamwork.** *Reality:* It might help, but don't count on it. The fears and resentments that go along with cutbacks often impede teamwork. Leaders need strong people skills to reestablish cooperative spirit.

REAL TEAMWORK

In the ideal team, the leader always remains in charge, but gets team members to participate in setting goals, planning, problem-solving and making decisions. The leader listens—a skill that many managers need to improve—but the leader is still the one who makes final decisions after hearing from the team members.



The smart boss doesn't skew honest discussion by revealing his personal opinions or prejudices at the outset. He knows that this squelches dissenting views and thereby demoralizes team members.

Real teamwork is built on constructive candor and unbridled frankness. Team members can disagree with each other without embarrassment. In fact, most of the teams we've studied are usually *too* quick to agree on things. More friction would produce greater creativity and would certainly reduce the potential for disasters.

Goal: Constructive openness, where everyone is committed to achieving a great outcome.

GETTING RESULTS

An important first step toward achieving genuine teamwork involves implementing the right compensation system. In addition to conventional base salaries, the system must be built around group rewards for achieving shared goals. The more teams are asked to take responsibility for results as a unit and are rewarded as a unit, the greater the effectiveness of the team effort. *Other steps to improve teamwork:*

- **Self-examination.** Get the team to review itself and the way it does things. Is there enough conflict? Are there too many



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meetings? Is the team really helping to solve problems and make better decisions? If not, why not? What steps can the team take to make itself function as a real team? Have the team draft a mission statement or detail its short- and long-term goals. Team planning is an excellent team-building activity.

- **Sharpen group leadership skills.** Most managers aren't familiar with the many subtle ways of eliciting information from team

members and improving interaction. Get outside help, if necessary, in teaching managers such important communication skills as probing for information, reflective statements, summaries, pauses, neutral probes, brief assertions and open-ended questions.

- **Learn to broach sensitive subjects.** Team members must learn the diplomacy of criticism. *Example:* Use first-person statements such as, *Something about your idea troubles me—let's discuss it*, instead of, *Why do you keep bringing up that tired old idea?* Or, use the technique of soliciting help, through such statements as, *I'm feeling frustrated about this. It's costing us money, and I don't know what to do about it. What do you suggest?* Shifting the emphasis from "you" to "I" makes a big difference in gaining cooperation from teammates.

- **Improve meeting discipline.** Nothing kills teamwork like frequent, unproductive meetings. *Solution:* Only call meetings for well-defined purposes—information-exchange or problem-solving. Distribute an agenda with the needed back-up material in advance, especially if it's a problem-solving meeting. If decisions are made, assign follow-up responsibilities before the meeting adjourns. Ask for feedback later. ■