Cultivating Teams

Robert C. Ginnett

"You know what the problem is with teams?" a senior executive once asked me. "You just can't make them work right. You can't order teams around. You can't make them develop and you can't make them perform."

His statement suggested two things to me. First, he definitely liked to control things around him and he probably didn't like to be controlled much by others. This was not a great flash of psychological insight on my part. He fit the pattern of many senior executives in that regard. I'm not exactly sure why this occurs. One hypothesis is that they have to be controlling because the position they are in requires them to be that way. But I don't think much of that supposition because there are too many outliers: excellent senior leaders who are not control freaks. I believe the data reflect a pattern found among a generation for whom the principal organizational unit is the individual performer. In that kind of system you can order some, if not all, individuals around.

And that realization tied directly to the second thing his statement suggested—that he had had a lot of experience with teams that had problems.

My observations of him aside, he was absolutely correct. You can't order teams to develop—but you can grow them.

Editor's note: Issues & Observations is a venue for CCL staff members and associates to express their personal views about leadership.

PREPARE THE GROUND

Think about it this way. Suppose you wanted to grow a beautiful, award-winning flower garden. First, you would need to select a spot with appropriate amounts of sun and shade. Then you would need to prepare the soil. This takes a lot of work, especially near the Rocky Mountains, where I live. The soil must be tilled and augmented to the proper particle size. Organic material such as humus or compost must be added. The soil must contain the proper chemicals to nurture the plants you want to grow. The pH must be measured and adjusted. Next come the living things such as bacteria and fungi—and don't forget the earthworms. After all that, you plant the seeds and ensure they are kept moist until they germinate. Then comes daily watering, adding appropriate amounts of fertilizer on a regular basis, and pruning. This is, indeed, a lot of work.

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And do you know what's wrong with flowerbeds like this? You can't *make* them grow! You can't order them into beauty. All you can do is create the best possible conditions so they can do the work of growing and producing beauty.

Teams function pretty much the same way. You can't order teams to grow or develop or be high performing anymore than you can order flowers to do these things. But if you are a creative and forward-thinking leader and have decided that you need high-performance teamwork to achieve your vision and mission, then you can create the best possible conditions for teams, giving them a fair chance of growing, developing, and achieving high performance. And as with the flowerbed, most of the work of leadership is done up front—not in controlling but in creating.

If you accept this analogy, you probably won't be surprised by the next part. Creating the right conditions for teamwork takes a lot of hard work at three distinct levels. At the individual level you want to select people who have the interests, skills, abilities, values, attitudes, and interpersonal orientation not only to do the task work but also to do the teamwork. Moving up to the team or group level, you want to ensure that the task is designed appropriately for teamwork; that the composition of the team is appropriate in skill, scope, and size; that there are appropriate norms in place to foster team behav-

iors; and most important, that the team leader exercises appropriate authority behaviors. Finally, and perhaps most difficult, the leader needs to examine and create or develop appropriate structures and systems to support teamwork. These include team-oriented reward, education, information, and control systems throughout the organization. Although changes in systems are the most difficult to make, they are also the most powerful in creating the appropriate conditions for teamwork to occur.

Let's return once more to our flower garden. Assuming that you've done all the hard work and that nature has cooperated, your garden is just about to reach its peak of beauty. You may think everything will be fine—but not so fast. You could make a serious mistake if you're not careful. Suppose you reach for a can of pesticide but instead mistakenly pick up a can of herbicide. If you spray that on your flowers, you'll kill the entire project. And you can do the same thing with teams. Even the best-designed teams can be destroyed by relatively common leadership mistakes.

DO NO HARM

It often strikes me that there is a limited methodology for nurturing teams but an infinite number of ways to destroy them. Just ask around and you'll find this to be true. Some leaders have a personal theory about how to create teamwork, but almost all leaders can cite an example of how to destroy a team—and there is a huge variety of mechanisms to accomplish this.

At a recent leadership summit sponsored by the El Pomar Foundation—a Colorado philanthropy that supports nonprofit organizations working in the arts and humanities, education, health and human services, and civic and community initiatives—I was asked to work with student leaders from around the state on two subjects. A three-hour session in the morning was devoted to helping leaders enhance team success. This session was similar to ones I do for CCL with business leaders from around the world. As was predictable, those students who had experienced a successful team situation could talk about it but, in the absence of an underlying theory, recognized that their experiences could not be easily generalized.

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In the afternoon I facilitated two sessions on why teams fail. These were interesting but unusual for me. I have never been asked by business leaders to provide a seminar on why teams fail. Presumably, business leaders have enough experience with this concept already. But it turned out that students too have had a plethora of team failures. Not only had everyone had an experience of team failure but in most cases the students also agreed that methods of killing a team were much easier to define than methods of helping a team succeed.

Here is their list: lack of a clear goal, vision, or dream; too many yes-people on the team; leaders who reject the input of team members; leaders who want to do everything; hidden agendas; apathy; the assumption that team members are incompetent; lack of structure; communication failures; failure to learn from mistakes and successes; rewards solely for individual performance; and dispersed leadership. Not a bad list.

I once participated in a conference with other scholars who, like me, had been studying teams and teamwork. We had hoped to produce a checklist for leaders to follow that would guarantee their success in working with teams. Unfortunately, we were unable to achieve that objective. It seems that there are many coexisting paths that will get you to successful teamwork.

Amazingly though, we were able to agree on ways to destroy a team. Here are a few critical ones, as noted in the book *Groups That Work (and Those That Don't): Creating Conditions for Effective Teamwork,* edited by J. Richard Hackman, a psychology professor at Harvard University.

Give People Authority Whiplash

Arguably the most damaging error once the team has started work is what Hackman has labeled *authority whiplash.* Few leadership decisions are more consequential for the long-term well-being of teams than those that address the partitioning of authority between leaders and teams. It takes skill to accomplish this well, and it is a skill that has emotional and behavioral as well as cognitive components. Just knowing the rules for partitioning authority is insufficient; one also needs practice in applying those rules in situations where anxieties, including one's own, are likely to be high. Especially challenging for leaders are the early stages in the life of a team, when new leaders are often tempted to give away too much authority, and the rough stretches, when the temptation

is to take authority back. This inappropriate giving and taking of authority gives the team authority whiplash.

I once worked with an urban police chief who wanted the benefits of participation and teamwork from his force but who was unwilling or unable to relinquish any authority to his teams. After months of working with him, I finally persuaded him to allow some input from his officers on the question of which weapon they should choose to replace their outdated revolvers. I was so excited by the possibility of even a slight shift in authority that I neglected to coach him on the rules of effective participation. One of these critical rules is that if there are constraints on the decision, they need to be made clear up front—not after people have made an input without considering these limits. As it turned out, the police officers voted for a powerful handgun with tremendous penetrating ability but only limited capacity for ammunition. According to the experts, whose inputs were not given additional weight initially (a second error), that was a terrible choice for an urban police weapon, and the chief lost his composure. He withdrew all authority for input from the teams, and it took months to recover from that situation.

Research shows that effective leaders use much of the continuum of the authority dimension without creating whiplash. The management of authority relations obviously takes a good measure of knowledge, skill, and perseverance; managed inappropriately, these relations can destroy a team.

Call People a Team but Treat Them Like Individuals

One way to set up work is to assign specific responsibilities to specific individuals and then choreograph the individuals' activities so their products coalesce into a group product. (This, incidentally, is the way my high school football coach built a "team.") A contrasting strategy is to assign the group responsibility and accountability for an entire piece of work and let members decide among themselves how they will proceed to accomplish the work. Either of these strategies can be effective at accomplishing the work, but a choice must be made between them. When people are *told* they are a team but are *treated* as a group of individual performers with their own specific jobs to do, mixed signals are sent, confusion is created, and in the long run, these individuals will not become an effective team.

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To reap the benefits of teamwork, one must build an actual team. Calling a set of people a team or exhorting them to work together is insufficient. Instead, action must be taken to establish the team's boundaries, to define the task as one for which members are collectively responsible and accountable, and to give members the authority to manage both the team's internal processes and its relations with external entities such as clients and co-workers. Once this is done, leadership behavior and organizational systems can be gradually changed as necessary to support teamwork.

This leads to a final team destroyer.

Assume That Members Are Competent in a Team Setting

Once a team is launched and operating under its own steam, leaders sometimes assume their work is done. As we have seen, there are some good reasons for giving a team ample room to go about its business in its own way: inappropriate or poorly timed leadership interventions have impaired the work of more than one team. However, a pure hands-off style also can limit a team's effectiveness, particularly when members are not already skilled and experienced in teamwork.

It is not wise to assume that just because employees have clamored for the opportunity to work as a team they have the requisite skills to do so. Often employees' only prior experience in teamwork came years ago when they were members of a high school sports team—often with coaches who gave them bad team advice.

Even after initial team training is accomplished for the members, the leader's work is not done. Teams need ongoing maintenance and development. Not only will the context and environment likely change over time but, if the organization is truly committed to team effectiveness, the organizational systems in which team members operate should be expected to change over time as well.

A flower garden, like a team, requires good preparation and regular maintenance. If that is done effectively, enduring beauty can be created, and perhaps some awards will even be won.

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