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TEAM PLAYERS AND TEAMWORK: THE NEW REALITY

In the 1980s many highly regarded books on business leadership highlighted the value of teamwork and team players (Kanter, 1983; Peters, 1987; Bradford and Cohen, 1984; Lawler, 1986). In the real world, however, team building was more promoted by behavioral scientists than it was accepted and practiced in American business. Teamwork was considered “nice” but not critical for the success of the corporation. Teamwork as a goal was linked with other corporate goals that were given more lip service than real backing—goals such as community responsibility, affirmative action, a clean environment, and employee development.

Then, at the end of that decade, teamwork gained in importance as public and private sector leaders saw the tangible benefits of effective programs. Global competition, workforce changes, the impact of technology, and other factors pushed organizations in the United States to experiment with team approaches to achieving cost-effective, quality products and services.

A few solid examples from that era are instructive:

Honeywell’s commercial flight division in Minneapolis, devoted largely to manufacturing our navigational systems, switched to team organization about six years ago. Virtually all plant functions, including production, conflict resolution, even allocation of funds, is done by teams . . . [As a result] Honeywell’s Minneapolis plant has 80 percent of the flight-navigational systems market, and 1988 profits were 200 percent above projections [Chance, 1989, p. 18].

GEMICO's [General Electric Mortgage Insurance Company] experience in its Seattle office dramatically illustrates the benefits realized by creating a teamwork mentality. During 1985, GEMICO's market share in Washington hit an all-time low and delinquencies and loan declinations skyrocketed due to deteriorating business quality. At the beginning of 1986, faced with the prospect of withdrawing from the state, GEMICO's branch manager and newly-hired experienced sales representatives began to work together to turn the situation around. First, everyone agreed that their goal would be to increase the volume of quality business received from Washington lenders. Second, everyone on the team demonstrated a willingness to "wear different hats" to see this task accomplished. Sales reps met with lenders to discuss underwriting problems, and supported (rather than second-guessed) underwriters when loans were declined. At the same time, branch office underwriters accompanied sales reps on customer calls, and loan processors served as unofficial customer service reps. The result: GEMICO market share in Washington has more than doubled, while loan declinations have been cut in half and delinquency rates have dropped from 3.05 percent to 2.52 percent, lower than the average for all mortgage insurers [Barmore, 1987, p. 94].

At Xerox headquarters in Rochester, New York, on a typical work day they [encoders] process about 6,000 customer payment checks worth about \$6 million. With that level of volume, operators were frequently so overwhelmed that checks were left undeposited until the next time, watering down the company's return on assets.

Xerox encourages team problem solving—even awarding those groups that find new ways to cut costs or improve quality—so that's what the encoders did. They formed a team and set to work analyzing the problem.

The encoders found that productivity, morale, and communication were better on Saturdays than any other of the six work days. The reason: work flow was managed through a coordinator Monday through Friday, leaving the encoders little control over

what got processed, by whom, or when. On Saturdays, when the encoders had to distribute their work, assign machines, and juggle their lunch breaks themselves, workflow was far better. The end result: The coordinator position was eliminated. Now the encoders form a “huddle” twice daily at mail delivery time to divide the work. In one month, they found a 21 percent reduction in the number of checks carried over to the next business day, a 70 percent decrease in overtime, \$7000 in ROA improvements, and immeasurable improvement in employee morale, communication, and employee involvement [“Copy Cats Worth Copying,” 1988, p. 28].

Cheesebrough-Ponds used a high-intensity task force to reformulate and reposition its Rave Home Permanent product as Rave Moisturelock Perm. Management organized a team which included the brand group, research and development, packaging and the agency account group [Feder and Mitchell, 1988, p. 21].

Pratt and Whitney used special teams to reinvigorate its production capability by reconfiguring its engine manufacturing operations into numerous small units [Herman and Herman, 1989, p. 90].

Keithley Instruments’ plant in Salem, Ohio, saw output increase by 90 percent and absenteeism fall by 75 percent when its production teams went to work [Chance, 1989, p. 18].

A five-part management plan provided the framework for management improvement in the Department of Agriculture. Much of the credit goes to an emphasis on innovation and the cooperative effort of many employees [Franke, 1988–89, p. 11].

A recent study reported schools that have team management outperform schools that have hierarchical management (Chubb, 1988). For example, many school districts in Marin County, California, are encouraging a team-based effort which, among other things, schedules time for teachers and staff to work together and share decision making at all levels (Lambert, 1989).

In other areas, management, workers, and, often, unions teamed up to regain and maintain the competitive edge. Quality circles passed through the fad stage and were used as a strategy

for changing the cultures at many companies and government agencies. Fundamentally, the quality-circle approach is a team-based strategy for improving quality and reducing costs. On the heels of quality circles came the total-quality approach (“do it right the first time”) advocated by Philip Crosby (1979) and implemented at scores of companies across the country. One of the most dramatic efforts to meet the global challenge was the cooperation of Japanese and American auto manufacturers and U.S. trade unionists. During this era the New United Motor Manufacturing Inc. (NUMMI) joint venture of Toyota and General Motors, with the United Automobile Workers as the bargaining agent, was the most famous example. “In just four years, it has achieved productivity and quality levels that exceed anything in the American auto industry, and which rival Japan’s best” (Lee, 1988).

Many other automobile companies followed the Japanese lead and implemented team production. For example, at the Mazda Motor Manufacturing (USA) plant in Flat Rock, Michigan, the team method meant “Workers learn several jobs and are expected to participate in problem-solving” (Kertesz, 1988, p. 36). Another 1980s team experiment that was closely watched by American automakers was the Volvo plant that opened in Uddevalla, Sweden, in which Volvo traded the traditional assembly line for self-managed work teams of seven to ten employees. “Each team works in one area and assembles four cars per shift. Since members are trained to handle all assembly jobs, they work an average of three hours before repeating the same task” (Kapstein and Hoerr, 1989, p. 92).

It’s the Twenty-First Century: Team Players and Teamwork Are Here to Stay

Toward the end of the twentieth century the agenda changed. We were no longer justifying the value of teamwork or presenting case examples of successful teams. So the battle was over, and we had won. Teamwork was established as a critical aspect of business

strategy. Team players were considered valued partners in the process. It was clear that effective teamwork can produce tangible benefits for people and organizations:

- New products get to the market faster.
- Customers get better service.
- Employees are more satisfied.
- The quality of products and services increases.
- The cost of production decreases.
- There are fewer lost-time accidents.
- Students learn better.
- Creativity and innovation are enhanced.

The discussion has now shifted to tools for sustainability of high performing teams—how to do it right every time. The case examples from Xerox, GE, Honeywell, and others cited earlier in this chapter proved that teams could produce clear, measurable results. Now the challenge became how to create a model and tools to develop teams in the trenches. Then, in the 1990s, came the work of several researchers and thought leaders who provided various perspectives on how to develop and sustain an effective team.

Following my work on team players and teamwork came a breakthrough book by Katzenbach and Smith (1993), providing data from fifty teams in thirty companies and demonstrating the critical difference between high performing teams and other teams: the successful teams had “clear performance objectives.” Although I had previously identified a “clear purpose” as one of the twelve characteristics of an effective team (see Chapter Two), Katzenbach and Smith proved that it was *the most important characteristic*. In the same era, Larson and LaFasto (1989) analyzed a wide variety of successful teams and emerged with a list of eight characteristics of effectively functioning teams.

My colleague, Jack Zigon, did some great work on tools for measuring team effectiveness (1999). Another colleague and friend, Jerry McAdams, wrote the best book on recognition and rewards (1996), and Dave Jamieson did a masterful job of describing the elements of a team-based strategy (1996). The first edition of my book on cross-functional teams presented the first comprehensive examination of this growing teamwork trend. The book has since been revised and updated to include many of the emerging elements of the new team landscape (Parker, 2003).

While all this research and writing was taking place, the world of team players and teamwork was changing right under our noses. The environmental conditions in which teams were asked to perform were changing in a rather dramatic fashion. And these changes were not making life any easier for teams; rather, it was becoming significantly more difficult to develop and sustain an effective team over time. It is important to understand these changes in order to update and adapt the characteristics of an effective team and the team player styles.

Team Members Are Located in Multiple Locations. In the era of global organizations it is not unusual for a team to be composed of people from company sites in Asia, Europe, and the Americas. For example, I recently facilitated a team building meeting for a team that included members from Brazil, Italy, France, Switzerland, England, Germany, Japan, and the United States. There are a number of consequences of this factor:

- Communication is more difficult because of language differences.
- Communication is more difficult because of cultural differences.
- Communication is more difficult because of the inherent limitations of electronic communications technology.

- Informal interactions among teammates that quite naturally occur in the hallway, cafeteria, and offices on a colocated team do not take place.
- Team players have to be more assertive in developing effective relationships with their teammates who are located in other sites.

Many Meetings Use Teleconferencing, Videoconferencing, or Web Conferencing Technology. Because most teams require weekly or monthly meetings and members are not colocated, meetings must, of necessity, use teleconferencing technology, videoconferencing if it is available, or a web-based tool, if one can be found that meets the needs of the team. This factor creates the following consequences:

- There is limited or no visual or nonverbal communication.
- There are often breakdowns in the operation of the technology.
- Being an effective team player now requires an ability to communicate with people who are not in the same room.
- Being an effective team leader now requires a capability to make effective use of the new technology.

There Are Cultural Differences Among Team Members. With teams composed of members from different countries, members bring to the experience a wide variety of communication styles, approaches to decision making, and attitudes toward leadership. This factor creates the following consequences:

- There are misunderstandings that sometimes lead to conflict and negative feelings.
- Being a team player now includes understanding and working with people who are culturally different.

- It is more likely that deadlines are missed and progress toward team goals does not meet expectations.
- It is now incumbent upon the team leader to ensure that the channels of communication are appropriate for people with different communication styles.

The Bar Has Been Raised for Team Success. As teams have become an established part of organization strategy, it is expected that all teams will function at a high level. This is especially true in organizations where there has been a heavy investment in team development services such as training and consulting. These are the consequences:

- There is a greater impatience among senior management when they see lack of team progress.
- There is added pressure on team leaders to demonstrate progress, which can result in lowering the bar on quality, forgoing good team practices, and increasing the stress on team members.
- Being a successful team leader now requires regular and effective communication with senior management to manage the expectations of the team.
- Being an effective team player increases the importance of challenging conventional thinking to ensure the best possible team outcome.

There Is Recognition That Team Success Requires a Support System. Progressive organizations have come to realize that simply creating teams is not enough to ensure success. It is now clear that there is a need for a total system that includes a supportive management style, performance management process, reward systems, and a team-based culture. These are the consequences:

- There is a search for new and creative ways of looking at how leaders are selected, members are appraised, and teams are rewarded.

- The organization must shift to a more fluid structure that facilitates cross-functional collaboration.
- Senior management must adopt a style that is supportive of team players.
- There must be a conscious effort to alter the culture to one that values team players, encourages collaboration across functions, and rewards teamwork.
- The organization must adopt new methods for rewarding successful teams, recognizing outstanding team players, and incorporating performance on a team into the overall employee appraisal process.

There Is More Cross-Functional Teaming. As my earlier work (Parker, 2003) shows, the new world of business demands that an increasing number of teams be composed of people from many different functional organizations. It is no longer possible, for example, to develop complex new products, provide quality customer service, and close major sales with large clients without a coordinated approach among people from a variety of disciplines. This factor has the following implications:

- The job of team leader becomes more difficult because of the need to coordinate the work of people who may have different goals, work styles, and commitment to the team, with little or no authority to influence or control their actions.
- There is a greater need for adaptive team players on the team who are able to quickly develop trust, communicate with people who are different, and subordinate their functional goals to the goals of the team.
- There is an increased need for team training in such areas as meeting facilitation, conflict resolution, and communications skills in order to help teams take advantage of all the resources on the team.

The Team Leader's Role Is Both More Important and More Difficult. With many more teams being cross-functional, cross-cultural, and virtual, the demands on the leader have increased exponentially. It is simply more challenging to provide leadership when the members of the team report to a functional manager, are culturally different, and work in distant company locations. This factor has the following implications:

- It is critical that the leader have the requisite interpersonal skills to work with a diverse team membership.
- It is essential that the leader have high level influence skills to offset the lack of direct management authority over the members of the team.
- It is very important that senior management have a rational process in place for the selection of team leaders.
- The leader must have excellent diplomacy skills in order to develop and maintain effective relationships with a variety of stakeholders, including corporate leadership, department heads, support groups, and external regulatory bodies as well as suppliers and other vendors.

Successful Team Meeting Management Is Now Even More Critical. Meetings are still the most visible team activity. And, given the new reality of teams that are virtual, cross-cultural, and cross-functional, the degree of difficulty in achieving a successful meeting has significantly increased. The challenge for team leaders—and, yes, for team members as well—is to ensure that the increasing amount of time (and the corresponding costs) spent in meetings produces something of value. Implications of this factor include the following:

- Team leaders need high-level meeting facilitation skills or access to training that provides these skills.
- Team members need orientation or training in the skills of being an effective meeting participant. They also need to

feel equally responsible for accomplishing the meeting's objectives.

- Team members and leaders need easy access to a kit of tools, templates, and checklists for planning and managing a successful meeting.
- Senior management needs to set the standard for effective meeting management by using all the right tools and demonstrating high-level meeting facilitation skills.

Building Trust Quickly Is Now Even More Essential to Effective Teamwork. Because diversity—functional, cultural, and geographical—is now the norm on so many teams, the potential for communications breakdowns based on lack of trust is great. With limited opportunity to overcome barriers and build trust through regular face-to-face meetings and informal contacts such as hallway conversations, lunch, and coffee breaks, trust building has become a major challenge. This has the following implications:

- Effective open communication based on a high level of trust may take longer than usual.
- Teams may have to adopt the norm of *swift trust*, whereby members assume their teammates are trustworthy from the outset of their relationship (Myerson, Weick, and Kramer, 1996).
- Trust building exercises will need to be an integral part of a project kickoff meeting.

People Serve on Multiple Teams. In the new world of cross-functional teaming, it is not unusual for subject matter experts to be a member of three or four teams—I have known at least one person who was on six teams! Some of these people can spend a good part of a workday simply going from meeting to meeting,

resulting in an oft-heard complaint: “I can’t get any work done because I’m in meetings all day.” These are the consequences of this factor:

- It is more difficult to develop a positive team spirit because many members have divided loyalties.
- It is more difficult to get team tasks completed because many members have conflicting work priorities.
- It more difficult to schedule team meetings and to get people to attend meetings because meeting times often conflict with each other.
- For obvious multiple reasons, it is stressful for team members.

In this chapter we have described a number of important changes in the landscape in which many teams find themselves in the twenty-first century. We have also addressed the implications of these changes for the ability of organizations, teams, team leaders, and team players to be successful in this new world. In the chapters that follow we will build on our basic concepts of the effective team and team players by incorporating tools to address these new realities of teamwork in the twenty-first century.