

Addition by Subtraction

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

The title of this article came from a student in one of my online classes on Team Dynamics. He got the phrase from an "extraordinary" Chief Master Sergeant named Jim, currently serving at the Pentagon. I really love the phrase because it is so simple, yet so profound.

We are all familiar with some of the problems that occur when working in teams. In this article, I want to focus on the impact that can be made by a single person who is a misfit in the group and slows down all team progress.

I need to be careful to describe the phenomenon correctly. Normally, I am an advocate of having diversity of opinion and styles within a team. Reason: respectful differences in outlook or opinion are healthy because they usually lead to more creative and robust solutions. If you have a team of clones who all think alike on most issues, you have a mono-culture that may seem to work well, but it will probably lead to myopic solutions. In general, having "different" people on a team is a good thing.

Unfortunately, we have all had the experience of being on a team where one individual simply stops forward progress on a regular basis. The root cause may be a personality deficiency or some kind of chemistry problem between members. The person may become moody or bellicose and derail group processes at every opportunity. In rare cases there is an intent to stop the efforts of a team, sort of like a sport.

I am not writing about a person on the team who fills a Devil's advocate role from time to time in order to prevent the group from slipping into a dangerous group think. Nor am I referring to the person with a concern or observation who voices it in a polite way. The person I am describing is one who habitually takes a contrarian view and refuses to accept the fact that he or she is derailing conversation rather than fostering a balanced discussion.

I advocate that any team should have a written and agreed-upon set of expected behaviors. These statements indicate our agreement on how we will treat each other along with specific consequences for members who do not comply. If peer pressure and

body language fail to convince the person to stop the disruptive behavior, then it is time for the person's manager to do some private coaching. Sometimes that can make at least a temporary improvement. However, some individuals just cannot or will not change. Stronger measures are required. The solution is rather obvious. The person needs to find some other way to get entertainment, and should be excused from the team.

This surgery is really "addition by subtraction." Reason: once the problem person is removed, the entire team will breathe a sigh of relief, because now decisions and progress can occur more easily. I have had grateful team members come to me with tears of gratitude in their eyes saying, "Oh thank you! Removing Frank from the team took some courage, but we are so grateful to have the ability to navigate without him. Life will be so much better for all of us because of your action."

Removing a problem person from a team is often a painful process. Egos can get bruised or there may be an ugly scene. My advice is to take the action, but only after you have exhausted all remedial efforts.

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