



Teaming

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

If you have ever played a sport for a major university, you will identify with the concept of teaming. You may have also encountered great teamwork in a group within your community, church, or job. It's the kind of thing we all recognize and appreciate.

Unfortunately, in the work setting, I often observe a kind of hollow team situation where people talk about a strong team but do not model team behaviors daily. The good news is that really great teamwork only needs one ingredient. The bad news is that the one thing is great leadership, which is extremely rare. That explains why so few teams actually reach greatness. Let me explain why great leadership ensures an effective team.

Great leaders instinctively know that excellent teamwork requires four things and they do not rest until the team has all four elements in place.

1. **A common goal.** Every person on the team needs to buy into the goal 100%. The group needs a purpose, and that purpose must be evident in every activity.
2. **Trust.** People on the team must trust each other. This is where leadership is critical. First of all, an excellent leader will not allow a person on the team who will not participate fully in the work of the team. The leader recognizes that trust is built by him or her and always models trustworthy behavior.
3. **Team Behaviors.** All team members buy into the stated behaviors including the fact that they will contribute to the work of the team without fail. There is zero tolerance for "social loafing," where some members let others carry most of the load.
4. **Spirit** –The team exudes a kind of electricity that is amazing to watch. They know that they have found something extremely rare in this group, and each person crackles with excitement about what is being accomplished by the group. There is no hogging of credit, because each person knows it is the group performance that is creating the greatness.

Great team leaders are a rare breed. You will find all kinds of pseudo leaders who make feeble attempts at getting cohesiveness. They fail to produce the scintillating results because one or more of the critical elements above is missing. The logical question to ask is why more leaders do not achieve the greatness that is available to them.

Four typical excuses leaders use for lackluster performance

1. **Time:** The element of time is often used as an excuse. Leaders are so busy with tasks that must be done, and the complexity of a virtual world, that taking the time to do the simple blocking and tackling of setting up a great team seems out of reach. The paradox is that the time investment really pays off in an easier life in the end. As Vince Lombardi once said, "Perfection is not possible, but by pursuing perfection excellence can be achieved."
2. **Dedication:** Another reason given for poor teamwork is that not all team members are dedicated. This is also a lame excuse that again comes back to leadership. Most team members will respond well if they are well led. The sheer joy and relief of serving on an excellent team is reward enough to make most people gladly toe the line with a smile on tasks to be done. Occasionally you will run into a rotten apple, but a great leader sees this and quickly expels the laggard so he or she does not poison other members of the team.
3. **Unrealistic Expectations:** A favorite excuse for poor performance is that too much is expected of the team. The paradox is that smart leaders set really **aggressive** goals for their teams. Actually, great teams routinely accomplish feats that seem impossible. They rise up and astound everyone watching, including themselves with what can be done with focus and the right spirit. Things that previously would take a year can be done in a matter of a few days, and the team revels in the glory.
4. **Toxic Environment:** Another favorite excuse for not performing well is a toxic environment at a higher level. Team leaders complain that there is so much micromanaging and confusion from above that the team is habitually demoralized. This excuse is pretty handy, but it does not stand up to real scrutiny. Great leaders know how to advocate for the needs of the team and simply refuse to let upper management mess things up. Sometimes this means taking great heat, but excellent leaders do this gladly because they know team performance will soon provide all the cover they need.

There is a myth that achieving great teamwork is such hard work that you might as well give up at the outset. The truth is that achieving outstanding teamwork through excellent leadership is so joyful that the investment in some effort at the start is a small price to pay for the benefits that ultimately accrue to all team members once the group

clicks. It becomes easy rather than difficult to manage such a group to accomplish great things.

If you are the leader of a team that is not working well, I urge you to not make the excuses above or make up any others. Rather, seek to establish the four things in this article and reap the benefits of an amazing group of people that make up your team. It is the quality of your leadership rather than any other factor that will make the difference.

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