A COACH'S PLAYBOOK FOR WORKPLACE TEAMS

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http://www.hodu.com/teams.shtml

We cheer for our favourite teams in sports, communities, schools and even families. So why don't we see workplace teams in the same rah-rah way?

For all the big talk, matching T-shirts and off-site strategy sessions, calling a group of people a team doesn't make it one. These groups are usually just a collection of individuals from the same department who meet periodically.

Few of us have been lucky enough to participate in a strong, united team. These groups rise to ever higher levels of performance and make all of us better than any one of us.

Laying ground rules, setting goals and dealing with naysayers are just a few of the guidelines that can help your team reach its goals, whether they be improvements in productivity, customer service, quality, process management, innovation, cost effectiveness, job satisfaction, morale or financial performance.

Why many groups aren't teams
Here are some of the reasons that many groups aren't effective teams:

Lack of focus
If members don't have a shared picture of what success would look like, they will pull against each other. They also should have an emotional commitment to what they're doing.

Confusion between team building and team development
Giving everyone a T-shirt may produce short term warm and fuzzy feelings but it rarely leads to a powerful, united team unless root issues are addressed. An example of a root issue might be chronic animosity between managers working with the team.

Too much attention on the team itself
Some teams are so busy sailing the ship they have gone off course. They confuse their frantic activity for progress.

Lack of priority setting
If everything is urgent, group members will feel overwhelmed.

Poor processes
Typical team members often have little training in such basic skills as meetings, conflict resolution, planning, follow up and problem solving. They may not even be aware of them.

Misuse of e-mail
It's a great way to share information but a poor way to communicate. Weak groups spend more time interacting with their computer screens than with each other.

Victim mentality

Less effective groups that feel powerless will point fingers at senior management, customers, shareholders, suppliers, governments or other departments. Instead of re-setting their sails and navigating through their problems they curse the wind and wait to be dashed upon the rocks.

Forming effective teams

What does it take to create a high-performing team? Here are a few suggestions:

Run meetings well

Meetings are more important than ever in our increasingly complex and interconnected workplaces. Research shows that when meetings are run effectively, teams make better decisions than individuals.

Among the basics are establishing an agenda that outlines the meeting's purpose. Are you solving a problem, seeking input or distributing information? Meeting leaders should choose decision-making processes -- among them are command, consultative and consensus -- and time allocated for each agenda item.

Later, they should summarize and document actions to be taken, and ensure follow-through. High performing teams also should frequently review and improve their meeting processes.

Agree on ground rules

Rules for debating issues, making decisions and resolving conflicts should be clear about unacceptable behaviour. Anyone who violates a ground rule is called to account by team members.

Focus on the big picture

The old adage says that "it's hard to see the picture when you're inside the frame." Team members build more excitement about the work they are doing if they can see how it plays an important part in a bigger effort. For example, a team working to improve processes in a health-care organization would benefit from learning how their work would benefit patients and caregivers.

Ask each team member to imagine the team's ideal future state in a few years from now. Listen to each person's vision, then summarize the key themes that have emerged. Some groups also use drawings, cutouts of pictures, symbols, metaphors or success stories to paint a picture of what everyone sees in the future.

Another variation on this exercise is to imagine that each of you is being interviewed by a prestigious trade publication or major newspaper about your accomplishments. What have you done that is noteworthy? What principles guided your success? Where do most people feel your team has made the biggest difference?

Set priorities and review them frequently

Effective teams navigate their way through setbacks, misdirection and negativity that cloud most organizations in mediocrity or low morale. They refuse to be victims of weak senior leadership, cynical colleagues, flawed organizational processes, demanding customers or poor suppliers.

One way to counteract naysayers, for instance, is to challenge them with deeper involvement or problem-solving. Don't allow the cynics to set the team's emotional tone.

Brainstorm a list of the biggest issues to be addressed by asking for ideas on the "dumbest things we do around here," "biggest barriers to reaching our goals," "major implementation issues we need to address," "pet peeves," "dumb rules and forms" and "things that drive you crazy."

Cluster the similar points until there are five to seven major groups.

Then divide them into things the team directly controls, can influence, and can't control at all. Prioritize the things you control and make plans to address them. Do the same for things you can influence. Agree on ways to stop fixating on the issues that the team can do nothing about.

If senior management does a poor job of setting priorities, the better the team must be at doing this.

Team leaders should establish a process to reset goals and priorities as conditions and demands change.

Keep highly visible scoreboards, big thermometers (for a fundraising campaign), bulletin boards, Intranet sites, voice-mail messages and newsletters to update everyone on the team's progress.

Build around strong members, and balance the team for strengths
Strong teams add people because of their strengths, not for their absence of weakness. To balance a team for strengths, the leader of a well-balanced team might assign a person with strong technical abilities and weak people skills to work alongside another member with weak analytical skills and strong communications abilities.

Celebrate and laugh
Strong teams have fun. They care deeply about their work but don't take themselves too seriously. Use humour to diffuse tension or keep things light. You could appoint a Director of Fun, take joke breaks, show humorous video clips or schedule dress-up theme days.

Learn to improve
The final component that continues to strengthen a team and take it to higher levels is a strong feedback and learning loop. Effective teams eagerly look at their processes and behaviours to streamline and improve them. Team members should regularly reflect on what they should keep doing, stop doing, and start doing for continuous improvement.

Team ground rules
Every team should have ground rules. Here are a few:

- Start meetings on time, with all the right participants present.
- Focus on the problem, issue or behaviour -- not people. No one should make personal put-downs and judgmental statements about others. If you have an issue with another team member, talk to him or her privately and resolve it.
- When discussions involve some but not all participants, encourage them to discuss the issue at another time.
- Don't cut each other off, finish another person's sentence or engage in side conversations.
- Practice "cabinet solidarity" by keeping disagreements and debates inside the meeting room. Don't continue them elsewhere.
- Don't discuss sensitive or emotional issues by e-mail. Talk to each other instead.
- Look for opportunities to celebrate the team's successes.
- Encourage team members to vent frustrations but avoid blaming, whining and wishing for the past. Focus discussions on the present and future.