

Reinvigorating Life at Work:

By Michael P. Boyes

Part Three



Building High Performance Teams

In previous issues I discussed how leaders could use their authority to foster prosperity in their circle of influence. Underlying the ideas I shared in those articles are: 1) the belief in the uniqueness and value of our colleagues, and 2) belief that business success depends on leaders' ability to tap others' talents. They are, likewise, the assumptions underlying my ideas on building high performance teams.

Building High Performance Teams

Recently, my brother-in-law made this observation: "I am convinced that only teams can accomplish great things." You probably won't be surprised to learn that he is not a famous management guru. Rather, he is an ordinary entrepreneur who is alert to ideas that will bring him success. And, since he is not guru, I feel okay about tweaking his words a little: **"Only high performing teams can accomplish great things."** High performance teams are different from average, run of the mill teams in several ways:

- They exceed traditional and accepted standards of success.
- They are live and humming for as long as it takes to achieve their goal.
- They are flexible and able to adapt to changes, new ideas and new conditions.
- Team members are committed to personal, mutual and team success.

The Problem of Teams

With the increasing rate of change and associated competitive pressures, high performance teaming is becoming a necessity. If you are a business leader, you can't afford to settle for anything less. You also know that it is difficult to build a team of people who work together toward a common goal. Teams are made of people and their ideas. That is the problem. People have their own individual ideas, preferences, personalities, goals and standards. The problem with teams is the problem with herding cats: they scatter in 100 different directions according to their individual whims. However, this is also the beauty of teams. Each individual has a storehouse of experiences, and they are available to the whole team — if you can tap in.

Wise leaders know how to tap into team members' personal reserves and use

them to build high performance teams. Here are three of their "secrets."

Vision

All meaning, all motivation, all hope is found in the future. The past contains a strong dose of reality; life is a mix of pleasure and pain. By way of imagination, vision can elevate our thoughts above the muck of today and stir our desire for better things. It can also devour hope if we gaze too long at the muck.

In a sense, people follow a leader's ideals as much as they follow the person.

"To put an American on the moon and return him safely by the end of the decade."

"I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

I may not have the words exactly right, but these are some of the ideals that propelled our country through the '60s, '70s and '80s. With those words, JFK dared NASA to dream big dreams. And it was transformed from a hapless organization to a scientific powerhouse. With his vision, Martin Luther King, Jr., challenged men, both black and white, to put aside their shameful prejudice and malice. Today, Condoleezza Rice serves our country as the National Security Advisor.

Don't be alarmed if you aren't the visionary type. Good leaders need only to understand the vision and to communicate it. It may not be your original idea at all. A vision is the ideal image of your team at some point in the future. It captures what is unique and special about you, your products or the way you treat customers. Your vision reflects your values and helps you remember what is right, desirable and worthwhile about your team's purpose.

A leader's vision alleviates the "problem of teams" by uniting the goals and desires of individual players. Team members will put aside their personal agendas and overcome their conflicts in pursuit of a worthwhile vision. Within each person there is a desire to belong to something greater, to engage in worthwhile endeavors and to make a difference. The vision a leader casts helps team members see the possibility of great things and desire to take part in the "game." It gives meaning to drudgery and draws our eyes away from the toils of everyday labor. Vision is

the stand-in when the leader is not present, and it gives guidance to leaders and employees alike when they are faced with difficult situations.

In one sense, vision is larger than life. In another sense, it is an everyday thing that ordinary men cast. But it is not done in one day, and it is not done alone. Vision is a shared dream, home grown and nurtured by the team. There are many ways to sow a vision. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

1. Consider how your business is worthwhile and valuable others.
2. Ask your team members:
 - What makes us or could make us different from "the others?"
 - What do we want said about us?
 - When all is said and done, what is the value we provide for people?
3. Speak of your vision over and over again.
4. Tell stories about team members who do things to make your vision real.
5. Discuss and reward job performance in relation to how it supports your vision.

Significance

In parts I and II of this series, "*Hiring Positive Performers*" and "*Productive Work Climates*," I alluded to the human drive for productivity, value, self-expression and personal relationship. Each of these drives is an expression of the more basic human need for significance. Each person must find significance in order to commit and devote his/her energy to it.

Teams are outlets for people to affirm their personal uniqueness and find social significance, and to accomplish things they simply can't do alone. Everybody knows what it is like to feel unwanted and out of place. Maybe you were picked last for the team in the playground. Or maybe you've been the date to a class reunion where nobody knows you and nobody cares. Perhaps you were hired only to see your boss leave the company. Each of those situations is awkward precisely because you aren't confident in your place and your value to the people around you. High performance

continued on page 20

Rejuvenating Life at Work:

Continued from page 19

teams are places where people know their roles and value and those of their teammates.

Roles

Many of the teams people admire such as sports teams, orchestras and the Green Berets have this in common: they have clearly defined roles for each team member. As a result, you don't often see people confused or misguided about what their job is or how to do it. This isn't always true in businesses though. Quarterbacks follow playbooks, musicians read their music, and team members should follow their job descriptions.

In my experience, small companies struggle with role clarity the most. Leaders and team members object to job descriptions because "they don't permit flexibility" or "because everybody has to be prepared to pitch-in where ever they can." In fact, that flexibility and pitch-in attitude is often the source of their competitive advantage. However, neither of those are reasons to not clearly define a person's role in the company. Clear role definitions permit organization and coordination, and prevent wasted effort, frustration and conflict. As companies grow, communication becomes more difficult, and as a result, behavior that once bred flexibility soon breeds chaos.

Role clarity has benefits beyond the organization and efficiency it promotes. Everyone has limited abilities no matter who you are. Each person on your team should be in a role that fits with his/her talents and temperament. By putting people in roles where they can be successful, you honor them and maximize your

team's performance. You give them a place that feels right on a team that is going somewhere. As a rule, you should put people in the biggest job they can fill, maybe even a bit larger. Most people get bored when they are not challenged by meaningful work.

Personal Affirmation

Most "leadership experts" talk about praising and rewarding employees, but people need something more. Rewards are given for what a person does — to encourage the individual to continue doing good things. But they don't fill the soul of the person because they have



nothing to do with the person. And past rewards won't always carry a person through tough times. But personal affirmation will because it has everything to do with the person.

In contrast to rewards, affirmation recognizes who the person is and communicates his or her value. Affirmation recognizes the unique personality, gifts or character of an individual rather than what he or she does. Let's look at the contrast:

Praise/Reward: "Wow, Claire, I saw

how you handled that customer. I like how calm and courteous you were even though she was yelling at you. You listened to her and answered all of her questions. Good job!"

Affirmation: "Wow, Clare, I saw how you courteous you were to that angry customer. You really are a patient and kind person. I am glad to have you on our team, we need you."

Both rewards and affirmation must be real. It is insulting to receive rewards that aren't deserved. Worse still is telling a person that they are something they aren't. Affirmation that doesn't ring true can be discouraging because it makes a person feel unknown and misunderstood.

Communication

Neither your vision nor the roles you establish have any value until they are communicated. Vision statements and job descriptions are fine tools, but they aren't enough. Communication hasn't occurred until your team members have the same understanding of your vision and team roles as you do. That will require repetition, discussion, encouragement and occasional correction.

The type of communication needed to be a high performing team extends beyond vision casting and roles though.

There is a lot to say about communication in teams, but we will focus on only two facets of it: Productive Disagreement and Straight Talk.

Productive Disagreement

The beauty of teams is that they get more done, solve more problems and generate more creativity than individuals, or collections of individuals. In other words, a team of eight working on a problem performs better than eight people combined. But teams out-perform others only when people are permitted to bring

their individuality to the table. That means that dissent from the leader and the group has to be encouraged. Conflict in organizations however, is often mishandled. Leaders sometimes mistake disagreement for personal attack or a challenge to their authority. Rather than examining different opinions and using them as learning opportunities, teams often avoid disagreement or bury differences. Other times, team members will compete with each other to advance their idea's positions.

Competition is beneficial at times, and so is avoidance and smoothing over problems. Competition motivates and tests the resolve of team members. Conflict avoidance keeps the peace and conserves your emotional reserves for another day. And smoothing over a problem communicates that the relationship is more valuable than a difference of opinion. When overused though, those strategies wear people down and degrade team functioning.

High performance teams learn to listen and consider different opinions and perspectives because what matters is their common vision and goals. These teams are willing to explore strange ideas because team members understand the value of diversity. Teams and people grow when they start looking at their work in a new way.

Dissent is usually avoided because it can quickly get out of control, halting work progress and harming team relations. High performance teams choose productive disagreement, create spaces for it, and learn ways to explore their differences. They don't secretly plot against each other, gossip like the cast of a *Survivor* episode or humiliate others.

One technique for promoting productive disagreement is the practice of "dialogue." It is a disciplined conversation about a topic that requires each person to:

- Suspend their beliefs
- Listen
- Ask questions
- Allow others to influence them
- Not advocate or defend their beliefs
- Think with people
- Pay attention to what is "going on" with others

Dialogue is different from normal business discussions, which always move toward decisions and action. Dialogue moves toward understanding different perspectives. Decision-making comes later. Use dialogue the next time your team has a disagreement. You will find that it is a great learning tool!

Straight Talk

Professionals learn all sorts of techniques for handling difficult conversations. They are taught to use "I" messages, and to talk about "observed behavior" rather than the person. Those approaches minimize defensiveness and allow the other person to accept your message. Once again, those approaches have value, but they are not enough. Sometimes people just need to be "told it like it is" because the won't get it any other way. We all need the unvarnished truth sometimes. And contrary to our fears of rejection, people who deliver tough messages usually earn respect and admiration from their team.

In my experience the most common "character" requiring straight talk is the sly fox...

Sly Foxes

I've coached many leaders who absolutely know that someone is causing problems or performing badly in some way, but haven't caught them in the act. As a result, the leader feels at a disadvantage in the situation. Often the misbehavior involves:

- secretly undermining or working against policy,
- treating others badly,

- inappropriate relationships,
- or the misuse of company time and resources.

My council is always to give some straight talk that includes these words:

"I believe that you are...."

And if that is the case, you had better stop. If not, here are the consequences I am prepared to deliver."

The great thing about high performance teams is that they don't wait for a leader to deliver the message to the fox, any team member is willing to do it.

A large portion of life is conducted at work, with work colleagues. Our lives are wrapped-up in our work, and relationships are part of our work. We deserve to enjoy prosperous lives. We can do that by engaging our colleagues honestly and our work with pride. Excellence is the product of teams that understand the value of work, pursue worthwhile goals and appreciate other's talents.

Virtually all companies seek profitability and growth, and expect their employees to give their best efforts. Leaders are in a position to grow the business by tapping into the creative energy of their team. Before that can be done, leaders must hire and place people in roles that suit their talents, and they must nurture a productive climate.

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