TEAM DEVELOPMENT HERESY – IS THE SPORTING METAPHOR A WINNER?

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This week marks the beginning of the AFL (Australian Football League) season. I thought I'd mark the occasion by kicking into the wind and challenging some of the conventional beliefs about team building at work. Some may see my views as heretical. This post may be risky :-). I live in Melbourne, the spiritual home of Australian Rules "footy" where connecting team development and sport has been elevated to an article of faith.

 Sports metaphors are often used in workplace team building activities. I believe these are not always helpful when applied to teams within organisations. Sports teams are focused on winning, so there is a lot of aggressive energy and the goal is to beat the other team. In contrast, organisations are made up of interdependent work groups and supporting the image of the sporting team with its win/lose model can take attention away from the shared purpose of the organisation and the need to cooperate with other teams / divisions. A win/lose paradigm may reduce team members' readiness to cooperate through difficult patches.

I once worked with an organisation that had an extraordinarily competitive culture. Sales teams focused on beating other teams to win an annual award. Sadly this was at the expense of retaining customers. In valuing the annual award, the company was reinforcing the very silo-ism I had been brought in to address. A company restructure highlighted these problems when individuals previously competing against each other in different sales teams, needed to work together. A pyrrhic victory for members of the award-winning team as they lacked the much needed collegial relationships that would stand them in good stead when dispersed to new teams.

There can be a difference between achieving and winning. It depends on the definition of success for the team. Learning to work together as a team to maximise performance is vital, but winning may not be the ultimate objective. The win-at-all-costs mentality has been instrumental in the increasing number of corruption scandals in Australian sport. Then end result is loss of faith in the team and brand damage to the team and the sport. Not something organisations want to emulate.

In the above project I helped the teams focus on achieving both organisational and team goals and develop interdependence within and between teams. Some characteristics I observe in effective work teams:

- a shared understanding of overall purpose and focus on achieving tasks
- synergy – combined efforts is more effective and productive than when individuals work separately.
- relationships are healthy enough to withstand challenge and disagreement
- a reciprocal sense of accountability
- individuals speak up, demonstrate initiative and take on additional responsibilities when needed
- communication is respectful and team members are comfortable to share both thoughts and feelings
- the leader isn't the only person who can take a leadership role
- a willingness to negotiate ways through the task and relationships problems that inevitably arise when people are working together
- a collaborative approach to working with other stakeholders

Just as I'm reluctant to use sports metaphors for team development, I'm also reluctant to use the term "team-building" due to its unfortunate association with off-site recreational approaches. There's lots of "ra-ra" and fun and games and even a temporary "esprit de corps". But the feel-good factor quickly fades and too often nothing really changes when faced with the realities back at work. The rules and tasks of engagement at work are different and how people interact during a physical game may not transfer to how they work together in the office to deliver to a deadline on a project.

My approach is to focus on the actual work of the team: what they are there for and paid to achieve; their workplace goals and targets. The day-to-day interactions around small tasks: who does what, how, when, with whom and why, can create so many of the problems we identify within teams. A crucial step is for the group is to understand how they are currently functioning. Working at both an individual and group level we identify existing strengths; uncover hindrances to performance then develop action steps to improve individual and collective performance.

I usually use profiling instruments as a means of opening up dialogue around current and future performance. My preference is for the KGI™ (Klein Group Instrument for Effective Leadership and Participation in Teams) or Facet5. Both instruments are evidence-based with strong validity and reliability. The KGI is specifically designed for team development (and leadership within teams). It includes a scale for negotiation orientation that relates to my comments above on cooperation and the risks of a win/lose mentality in teams. Facet5 has a range of applications.

But instruments in themselves are not enough. People need to be better skilled in communicating with each other and holding each other accountable. The aim is to develop the above characteristics of effective work teams by learning and modelling them in workshops and individual coaching sessions. Discussions may hone in on avoidance, defensiveness and /or insensitivity. It can be challenging, but the rewards are great. Work is more productive and collegial relationships are more enriching. There is a sense of shared achievement: for individuals, the team and **the whole organisation**. That's win/win.

What do you think? Should I be excommunicated from the team development facilitation community?

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Rhonda has decades of experience as a trainer, coach and facilitator working with major corporations and organisations around the world. Her facilitation focus is usually: navigating organisational change after restructures, strategic direction setting and planning, and team development - particularly when work relationships have become dysfunctional.

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