

## **All Groups Are Not a Team...Practicing Integrated Team Skills**

Jacqueline Reid

The Tuesday 2pm cross-functional team meeting erupted in violence. Two team members engaged in a shouting match of blame and accusations over who was responsible for the latest delays and over budget expenditures. The team leader, who had been told he needed to be more of a "people person" and less of a dictator, did nothing to intervene. Other team members took 'sides' or just quietly shut down, retreating from the chaos. Physical violence was threatened and impending, when a brave team member suggested the "discussion" be taken "off-line" for the two appropriate senior managers to decide on culpability. This incident was the culmination of a long series of dysfunctional events that destroyed the team's morale, commitment and ability to produce results. What went wrong?

Collaboration and teamwork are an integral part of the workplace changes that will become reality in the 21st century workplace. Whether "virtual" or real, Teams are here to stay. As exemplified in cutting edge businesses, a well-functioning team is more **creative, more productive, and more efficient** than each person is working independently. Highly effective team skills are necessary for surviving continuous, chaotic change.

Why are there so many problems with teams working and why have most of our team experiences been so difficult? The simple truth is that we have bought into an erroneous assumption that we inherently know how to make teams work. Haven't we spent a great portion of our lives participating in one kind of group activity or another? **We assume that just because we have participated in groups we know what it takes to make a team work.**

The workplace demands speed, results and customer focus. This requires teams that can come together quickly, produce a creative product, and move on to another project with the precision and skill of a marching band. Relying on compatible personalities, past experience with teams in sports, or hard work will not produce the outcomes we desire. It takes a plan, a structure, and a commitment that supersedes our individual "hit or miss" experiences with team success.

What does it take for a team to succeed? It takes **integrated team skills**. There are four critical components that work together to produce consistent team results. If any of the four are missing or are not attended to, failure or less than satisfactory outcomes will result. These are the four components:

### **MEMBERSHIP**

Each team member must know exactly what role she plays for the over-all team success. These roles have names, can be recognized by all team members, and are interchangeable based on the task at hand and the strengths of each member. The team has a sense of identity that separates it from others in the organization, and

members have a sense of belonging. Commitment to a common purpose and to all team members is a necessary part of the membership component.

### ***NORMS AND PRACTICES***

For uniformity and predictability, teams need a structure or “framework” that encourages efficiency, productivity and creativity. Ideally, this structure is determined by the team in its first meetings and follows a prescribed outline (Team Charter). This is where the “type” of team is determined, leadership options are discussed, and “rules” are created in two categories:

**Task Practices:** Task practices are those that drives the task in a productive manner, such as planning techniques, problem-solving strategies, and meeting skills.

**Relationship Practices:** Relationship practices are those that governs the interaction between members, communication protocols, consensus skills and conflict management. They are essential to the team’s success and are far more difficult to develop.

### ***OUTCOME FOCUS***

A team has no reason for existence unless it is producing measurable results. Results begin with a clear sense of purpose and a clearly defined, attainable and measurable goal to which all team members commit. The first step in setting the team’s goal is to expose and understand how the team’s work fits into the overall organization’s mission. It is also essential that the team understand the role it is playing in the organization’s success. Teams must be able to set measurable objectives that guide their performance. Before work can begin the measures must be in place. To be successful, **continuous process improvement** must be a standard practice in outcome focus.

### ***GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT***

Every team needs an internal guidance system that monitors its need for improving new working procedures and skills. The ability to assess the status of team performance in all four critical components is essential. Resources can then be then found to help provide the team with what it needs to continue to improve. All team members are charged with the responsibility of focusing on team growth and asking the question, “WHAT DO WE NEED TO GET BETTER?”

What could have prevented the “real life” events described in the dysfunctional team in our introduction? Truthfully, all four of our integrated team skills had been neglected. 1. there was no clearly defined leadership or roles 2. members had not made overt norms and practices 3. the “goal” had been set by senior management external to the team with no attempt at member alignment 4. and even though members knew there were problems within the team, no one took any responsibility for improvement. There can be no doubt that this is a clear recipe for disaster!

Take a moment and review the teams in your life in which you are a current member. Are all four integrated team components in place? Identify the problems that currently exist in your teams at work. Can you trace their origins to one of these components? Successful team functioning can be LEARNED! As we master the skills and procedures we must use to function in the teams of the future we (our organizations and ourselves) will become **more creative, more productive, and more efficient!**