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High Performance Teamwork

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As I write this in late June of 1999, the San Diego Padres have just swept the Los Angeles Dodgers in three straight games. What makes this interesting to those of us who study human performance and how to create winning teams is that the Padres are one of the lowest paid teams in baseball and the Dodgers are one of the highest paid!

When Rupert Murdock bought the Dodgers from the legendary O'Malley family, he instituted some changes. He spent a lot of money assembling the best players money could buy. He began placing advertising on the outfield walls. He eliminated tailgating parties in the parking lot and required all food consumed by purchased on site. Good business decisions? Maybe, maybe not. Attendance is down and team spirit is in the cellar. The old team had a very different feel to it than the new team. And that feeling makes all the difference.

Morale and teamwork make bottom line difference. There is now no question whatsoever that a team with high morale will outshine a team with low morale every time. You can't just throw a lot of money at people to make them do their best. In fact, it has been my experience that many people will work for less money if they are doing something that they really believe in, and if they don't believe in the mission of the organization, it matters not in the least how much money you throw at people. They have to believe. With that in mind, let us review four principles of high performance teams.

Make your mission motivating

An organization that can articulate an overarching mission will inspire its workers to be at their best more of the time. If you wander around your organization and ask a dozen people what the mission of the organization is, what will they say? How much consistency will you find? Unless you find everyone in the organization can tell you the same mission, there is no inspiring mission for them. Everyone has to have their eye on the prize, and they must agree on what the prize is.

Articulating that mission is the job of the top leadership. Unless the CEO and the President are tireless and enthusiastic in expressing that mission, the organization will wander aimlessly, expending more energy into internal politics than onto locating, serving, and retaining the best customers.

Individual teams can make the mission motivating by reflecting on what gives their work spirit and joy. I recently worked with a groups of social workers who serve abused children and their families. Their morale was low and the thought of themselves as burned out. At a retreat we

explored times when their jobs were satisfying, when they found satisfaction in what they were doing. By the end of the morning, one of them spoke for the group and said, “I never would have believed that I would feel so good about my job, but for the first time in years I am feeling excited about what I do.”

Delight in your diversity

It is only natural that we hire people who look like us, who talk like us, and who make us feel comfortable. It has been said that the mission of religion is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. You can accomplish both by hiring and placing a very diverse workgroup. Studies have shown that a diverse team will outperform a homogeneous team every time. Brianna Scurry doesn't look like the rest of the 1999 U. S. women's soccer team. She is larger, her body build is totally unlike her teammates . . . and she is black in a white dominated sport, at least in the U. S. And she is a breathtaking goalie. Watching her deny the opposing team's goals is inspiring and astonishing.

There is a good deal written about managing diversity. I take that to be a mistake. We don't manage it, we take advantage of it. For example, ask your team to reflect on ways the diversity of the team has been helpful. If you look for it you will find it.

Recently I did a project of helping a company reduce turnover. In a retreat we asked each employee to interview a colleague and ask why they were working there, what helped them stay with the company. Groups of six then formed a report on what they had found and to everyone's delight, each group found different factors. While the HR people were going crazy (all the answers were different!) the employees loved it. Each new reason reminded everyone of some other good reason for staying with the company.

Galvanize with goals

Terrific teams turn problems into goals. The difference between problem solving and accomplishing goals is the difference between mediocrity and achievement. Suppose you were in charge of helping get off welfare. Taking away a welfare check is a problem. Getting a job that pays exactly the same as the welfare check did is the solution. But is it an inspiring achievement. Of course not. Rather, let us inspire that welfare recipient to achieve far more than he ever did on welfare.

If your team is thinking about problems, the language will be negative and deficit-focused. But when the team thinks about goals, the sky is the limit. Teach your teams to create their own inspiring goals in the context of the organization's mission, and you will have high performing teams.

Our work has found that a group with goals is a group that will function at a higher level. If your teams aren't functioning at a peak, look at how well the goals are explicit and measured.

Share the success

When the team begins to achieve goals, give team members a chance to thank each other for help. Good teams are places where the top performer on the team thanks the other members of the team for their help. Create a culture of sharing the success. While stars are always a part of a good team, the journeyman workers who support and empower that star are a vital foundation. Make sure your culture emphasizes thanking them.

Teamwork is an essential part of success. We at Solutions Consulting Group find that the best place to train teamwork is at work. While confidence courses with ropes, river running expeditions, and expensive retreats at exotic locations are all entertaining and fun, when is the last time you heard of a football or baseball team building teamwork in that way? We believe that teamwork is built with the team at work. You should spend your time and resources in brief, focused training on team skills, feedback about results, and communication with customers. Use the river running and the exotic getaways as rewards for jobs well done, not for training a team in how to achieve.