

An exercise to improve teamwork

As a neutral Ombuds, I am often asked to facilitate a team meeting. That usually indicates that the team may need some help in becoming more collaborative, more effective, more productive or more motivated. It also could reflect an unresolved conflict that needs to be addressed.

My first task when meeting a team for the first time is to create a comfortable environment that allows all of the members the opportunity to voice what makes a “good” and “effective” team in their eyes. Although we know what makes a good team, the challenge is how to put in practice what we already know.

For example, we know that open and honest communication within the team is critical for its success. Here are some other factors important to a team’s success:

1. Strong leadership;
2. Appreciation of and commitment to the mission of the team;
3. Taking calculated risks;
4. Accountability for actions taken;
5. Accepting mistakes as teaching moments;
6. Celebrating milestones reached; and
7. Trusting fellow team members.

Team exercises can be conducted to highlight the importance of the foregoing factors for team success. One such exercise, described in this article, touches mainly on open and honest communication and includes a self and team evaluation. A follow on action plan, described towards the end of the article, applies the findings of the exercise to help the team members achieve their own goals and the goals of the group in a more collaborative and effective manner.

The duration of this exercise is a reflection of the number of team members. This exercise is performed in two parts and can be performed in person or on line. The online exercise has been created due to the 2020 pandemic.

Each team member receives index cards entitled *Feedback Cards* either via email or in person. All team members will have *Feedback Cards* with their own name as well as the names of other team members. The total number of cards received should be the total number of team members.

In the first part of the exercise, each team member is asked to complete the following sentence on the card with his/her/their own name:

One of my biggest assets is _____

One area I would like to improve in is _____

I enjoy my job because _____

In the second part of the exercise, each team member is asked to complete the following statements on the card of each of the other team members:

As a colleague, I appreciate that you _____

because it helps our team _____

because it helps me _____

As a colleague, I prefer you do not _____

or do less of _____

because _____

If the exercise is conducted in person, cards from all team members who have completed the second part are given to the Ombuds. The team members are asked to hold onto their individual cards that they completed for the first part of the exercise.

Team members are then asked to share their responses about themselves from the first part of the exercise.

Then the Ombuds anonymously reads out loud the comments reflecting the behavior appreciated by other colleagues, namely the positive feedback.

If all team members agree, the constructive feedback portion of part two may be shared anonymously and openly with everyone. The authors of both positive and constructive feedback are anonymous. No member will know who provided the specific comments on the feedback cards.

If any team member prefers, the Ombuds can hold onto that team member's constructive feedback card until the individual requests it. But one should not wait too long. The best time for an individual to receive constructive feedback is when that individual feels good about a recent accomplishment or strong and humble enough to receive it. Even if the individual does not agree with the comments, perception could often be reality to many.

No matter how prepared or how strong one feels, the constructive feedback may not be appreciated and even cause some resentment. But that is not unusual. The resentment will gradually and hopefully translate into action. I have experienced situations where those who have resented constructive feedback at first have later come around to appreciate such feedback as a very valuable gift.

The exercise described above plays a critical step in creating a landscape for greater understanding, collaboration and trust among team members. It will motivate team members to be more engaged and eager to play a role in making a stronger, more effective team.

The recommended follow up activity, described below with questions to be answered, applies the findings of the exercise and focuses on specific actions each team member can take to improve oneself, to help each team member and to help the goals of the group.

The questions to be answered in this phase include:

- What can *YOU* do to address your desire to improve in the area you mentioned?
- How can you play a role in helping other team members address *their* area of improvement?
- Can you consider collaborating with another team member in order to be more effective in addressing that team member's desired areas of improvement?
- How will your collaboration and ideas help your team members, yourself and the overall goals of your group?
- Should we eliminate any existing goals?
- Should we include new goals for our group and mission?

Please remember this is a process, and it may take a few weeks to see significant results. The small steps and small successes will lead to bigger successes.

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