

Team Building Principles and Practices

GROUP COHERENCE often called “team” is no small matter. Nobody has just the right magic words or exercises or principles for turning a group of people into a ‘TEAM’. True teams have complex inner structures and dynamics that are hard won the way all good things are won, through hard work, practice and perseverance. This dire warning said, there are principles, practices, understandings and skills that promote the possibility for TEAM emerging in a group. The following is a discussion of some very basic areas of understanding that are always present in group formation. Each one of these understandings involves a lifetime of practice and awareness building. Getting the basics, though, can go a long way.

This writing is a cursory glance at each of these complex phenomena. Any one of these topics could be, and has been, expanded into a doctoral thesis. Be aware that there is always more going on than meets the eye.

When building a team, these things don’t necessarily appear in big bold lights. These things might all be happening at the same time, more or less, in a big action stew. That said, it is possible to slow down, be aware, and learn the fundamental principles of these concepts and practices, and enact them.

If you want to build a team, here are practices and concepts that are crucial:

STATUS

Status refers to pecking order. Where in any given group does an individual exist in relation to other individuals? Who has power? Who doesn’t? Who is considered important? Who is not? Animals are always sizing each other up. When two dogs meet, they size each other up for power and authority. This is true in all groups of animals. Every animal knows where they stand. It’s not a good or bad thing. It just is a part of life experience. Human animals are always aware of where they rate compared to the next person. It’s not good or bad, it just is.

A few other things to remember about status. It is very fluid. I may be the King of the Hill on the playground, but the Butt of All Jokes in the classroom. I have high status at work, but low status in my family. Status is relational, not fixed.

Most importantly for our purposes here, it must be understood that high and low status is a behavioral phenomenon. We “play” high a low status. There are high and low status maneuvers. For example, talking louder than everyone else, interrupting over and over, physically dominating people, these are all high status maneuvers. Low status maneuvers include apologizing incessantly, showing up late, being clumsy, and so on.

Everyone plays status. Everyone has status habits. But, we can all learn and be aware and change our behaviors. We can eliminate status as a phenomenon, but we don’t have to be utterly subject to other people’s status maneuvers. Awareness of self and others is crucial. There is a tremendous amount of liberation to be had in understanding the mechanisms of status.

I also do not want to oversimplify this discussion. High and low status play is complicated business. For our purposes it's important to understand that high and low status and everything in between are simply ways to be. This isn't a judgment about one or the other way of being as "good" or "bad". High and low status play maneuvers are just different, and playing them has different consequences. Low status players are often very much in control. Ironies abound in status interactions. Take a look at Shakespeare for the richness of status play. Some of the most powerful characters in the plays are "fools" – Hamlet, Lear. Complex business status.

In team building, it's important to recognize that status negotiations are happening all the time: between those in power and those who don't have it, but may want it, between the members of a group, between the leaders themselves, and so on.

I urge people to become flexible status players. Know when playing high status creates team and when it doesn't. Know when to let someone else have authority. Know when to go along. Having the full range to play with is empowering for you, and everyone around you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT and POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Give credit where credit is due....nothing is more important for building team. The truthful and honest expression of appreciation for work or performance well done is crucial in building team. Withholding affirmation is not only stingy, it can be fatal to a team.

PRIMACY OF LISTENING

Teams perform best when everyone knows where they stand. Opportunities to speak honestly are crucial. And, this requires that listeners know how to listen without defensiveness. There is an entire array of skills involved with listening and speaking. This is no small matter, and requires practice. See Active Listening for a more on this.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The rules of engagement are the explicit agreements any group has about how they conduct themselves. What will leadership look like? How does communication go? Who gets to speak? Who does not? When? What can be said? What is off limits? How do we dress"? How do we walk? What about time? How is communication made? Does everyone get the same information? And on and on and on. It is crucial that every member of the team understand the rules of engagement. Everyone might not like all of them, but there has to be basic agreement, or team is impossible.

DECISION MAKING

How are decisions made on the team? Who has the power? Who says yes? Who says no? Team cannot be formed unless the decision-making apparatus is clear.

There are a nearly infinite variety of ways for teams to structure decision making. Some teams (traditional sports teams for example) have one clear power voice: the coach. Many other team situations--social action groups for example --actively disperse power and decision making.

There are a couple of important principles to consider when making decision-making apparatus:

- Who are the stakeholders, who will be most affected by decisions, do you want them involved in the decision making?
- Who has the veto power, who finally can say “no”?
- Is the decision making majority rule (51-49) or does it require a larger majority (60-40 is common), or even consensus (all in, or “not blocking option”), or Fiat (I am the Lord) or just plain bullying. There are a lot of ways decisions get made. One thing no team can survive, is if the decision-making is made secretly and things happen for “no reason”. This makes people crazy.

LEADING

Teams that function well know who is leading at any given moment. Some teams have a single designated leader. Other great teams change leaders depending on the action or the moment. In either case, it must be clear who is leading and facilitating at any given moment. Someone has to have their hands on the steering wheel!

Good leaders do two things:

- 1) They know how to facilitate, know when to interrupt, when to direct
- 2) They know content, and have a handle on curriculum – in other words, what are we doing!!