

PULLING TOGETHER WITH A PURPOSE

A high-performance team balances task accomplishment and effective working relationships, and is built on trust, respect, and a common goal. Here's how to clarify and encourage the basic elements for synchronized success.

By Gregg Goldman, Amy Duran, and George Myers

When people don't have all the tools they need to communicate effectively, work teams easily become dysfunctional. That's certainly what Gregg Goldman recalls about his arrival in 2003 at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business, Los Angeles. As the new senior associate dean and chief financial officer, he quickly recognized that the office of finance and administration's 13 staffers had some serious communication issues. Individuals withheld information from each other, competed instead of collaborated, and ultimately decreased the overall effectiveness of the organization. Lack of unified efforts also led to various work groups breaking away from the larger team.



At every job level, the skills needed for people to communicate with each other directly, openly, and honestly were missing, more often than not. In the absence of such expertise, the office of finance and administration was prone to overlook important priorities by focusing on just one department, one team, or one personal agenda. In addition, staff were likely to misalign tasks with goals and targeted outcomes.

Without open dialogue, Goldman knew the employees would remain at cross-purposes and would have a negative impact on the customer service levels he'd planned to achieve. He also knew that productive, successful teams are not accidental. They are the result of purposeful effort by all team members to engage, collaborate, develop, and improve collectively. And while most members of Goldman's department indicated that they *wanted* to be part of a high-performance team, he knew that it wouldn't be so easy to make it happen.

He concluded that he needed to do something significant in terms of training and guidance, before his department wasted time on fruitless activities and failed to reach desired productivity levels.

After some consideration, Goldman decided to work with the Effectiveness Institute, a consulting firm that specializes in organizational development issues in higher education and corporate institutions. Following is a description of the implementation of the institute's Teams That Work model.

ONLY TEAM PLAYERS NEED APPLY

Organizational experts at the Effectiveness Institute helped Goldman identify for his team six variables essential to the development and growth of high-performance teams. If a work group fails to adhere to these essentials, time and energy are spent on "people problems," where defending, blaming, and justifying actions take time away from task accomplishment.

Conversely, when the six characteristics (for details, see sidebar, "Teams That Work") are practiced consistently, the process can create rich context for conversations that improve team performance and organizational productivity. Applying the model also provided the team with a common vocabulary (see sidebar, "A Question of Order") and a way to understand behavior of other team members.

TEAMS THAT WORK

Work groups that exhibit high performance and efficiency generally have these six essential qualities at their core:

1. High level of trust.
2. High level of respect.
3. Commitment to a clear and common purpose.
4. Willingness and ability to manage conflict.
5. Focus on results.
6. Alignment of authority and accountability.

KEEPING YOUR BALANCE

"The Teams That Work model," explains George Myers, Effectiveness Institute senior partner and consultant, "is based on the yin-yang concept, with the accomplishment of tasks (what the team does) being contrasted with the ability to effectively work with others (how and why each individual does his or her tasks). Consider the risks to a team when a colleague who is brilliant at task accomplishment can't collaborate with team members." Likewise, says Myers, "What is the value to the group of someone who can get along with everyone, but is unable to perform tasks at the necessary level? These mismatches demonstrate the kinds of imbalances that cause animosity, missed deadlines, frustration, and overall disconnects in the workplace."

By contrast, in a high-performance team the task and people skills are in balance, meaning all team members have the skills required to work together toward a common purpose. Additionally, everyone in the work group has the ability and willingness to address and resolve behaviors or actions that are counterproductive to the purpose.

In the current higher education environment, with decreasing budgets and increasing workload, the workplace often becomes overwhelmed with a focus on task accomplishment, resulting in hyper stress and burnout. When this happens, the team will actually work harder but accomplish less. Tempers are short, sometimes leading to unprofessional behavior such as coworkers making demands of each other.

The goal is to create a balance between task accomplishment and people skills. This balance does not imply that a team will spend half its time on tasks and half on people, but that it will spend the *appropriate* amount of time on each. Because there are fewer people issues, a team will actually spend most of its time and effort on task accomplishment.

PROGRESS THROUGH PRACTICE

"This continues to be a journey," admits Goldman. "Even after using the model for a number of years, we find value in it because of external conditions and internal staffing changes." Myers continues to work with Goldman and his

department to foster and strengthen the six characteristics outlined in the model, which are described below.

1. High level of trust. "Knowing that your colleagues will come through for you is not a feeling you can build at a weekend retreat," says Goldman. "It must be created over time as people work and face challenges together."

Every interaction among team members will move their relationships closer to or farther from the goal of trust. While *unconditional* trust is a lofty goal, it is not necessary to reach that point for a team to work at a high level, notes Myers. All that needs to happen is for team members to consistently demonstrate behaviors that reinforce trustworthiness.

The outcome of this will be the belief that members can rely on each other. "Now," says Goldman, "we are better at asking questions to clarify something rather than questioning a team member's work or integrity." The intersections are about creating a context within which team members can collaborate instead of defending or justifying independent behaviors. "The bottom line," says Goldman, "is that work colleagues can now say, 'I trust you because you consistently do what you say you are going to do.'"

However, cautions Myers, a single action can completely erode or destroy a trusting environment. Openly criticizing someone in front of his or her peers, for example, is a sure way to accomplish that. When something like this happens, trust is not easily regained. The pattern of expected behavior has been interrupted. The parties involved need to revisit the "people" side of the yin-yang balance and clarify appropriate behavior.

The major benefit of facilitating a trusting environment is that it creates the safety necessary for asking difficult questions and keeping things open and on track. Individuals can let themselves be vulnerable, sharing thoughts and ideas for which they know they will not be personally or negatively judged.

Before an individual takes on that risk, however, all team members need to perceive in each other (a) integrity-the fact that you'll do what you commit to and in the way the team has agreed to; (b) authenticity-you are transparent, genuine,

and not two-faced; and (c) caring-you consistently demonstrate win/win behaviors in the team relationship.

2. High level of respect. Respect is linked to the ability to achieve results, with each person having a high regard for the skills and talents of other team members. Sometimes this characteristic is confused with *treating* one another respectfully. While that is important and always appropriate, respect is tied to the task. Staff want to be able to say, "I have a high regard for your talents and skills to accomplish our goals."

As staff productivity at the Marshall School of Business has steadily improved, "We take time to celebrate the successes and recognize individual efforts that take place within and across teams," says Goldman. "With monetary recognition not always available during these times, the recognition itself has become even more important to staff." The department provides annual staff awards, community-building activities, and team recognitions, sometimes including gift cards and other small items. Goldman says that they'll add "Spot" awards this fall that will give supervisors and managers an opportunity to recognize a special accomplishment by a staff member within a day of its occurrence.

Trust and respect are definitely related, sometimes directly, sometimes conversely. For example, a team member may be trusted as a person but not respected in terms of the ability to perform the job. This situation eventually can erode the overall level of trust others feel toward the person. Similarly, just because a team member is brilliant at his or her job does not mean others will perceive the person as trustworthy.

3. Commitment to a clear and common purpose. Rather than being presented as a mission statement or a plaque on the wall, the team's purpose must be articulated such that everyone has a clear understanding of the reason the team exists. Then each individual knows "why we are here," and can genuinely buy in ("I'll do whatever I can to make this happen") rather than exhibit only general interest ("I will do it if it is convenient.").

"Starting with our dean and going on down through our administrative leadership," says Goldman, "we ask questions that enable us to keep our focus clear, direction set, and everyone on the same page. We work to create an

environment where we do not have surprises at any level." Examples of such questions include:

- What obstacles could divert our focus?
- What do we get out of this purpose both individually and as a team?
- Have we involved everyone affected by our decisions?
- Is there any part of this you/we cannot support with action?
- Assuming we have commitment and purpose, how are going to know if and when we don't?

To reach commitment to a clear and common purpose, three things must be present. If one is missing, there will most likely be interest but not commitment.

The purpose of the team must be bigger than self. Members will be compelled to give full buy-in only if the team's purpose makes a positive impact in some way in the world. "At the Marshall School of Business, we believe our jobs are multifaceted," says Goldman, "and we create a supportive administrative environment where our faculty can do research and be productive while serving the growth and learning of our students. Our actual articulated purpose is: 'The office of finance and administration enhances the academic effectiveness of the school by delivering excellent, relevant, and seamless support to the school in the areas of financial management, facilities administration, and human resource management.'"

Goldman likes to tell his staff that the team is like a dial tone-if everyone is doing the job, no one notices. But, if the dial tone disappears, the department's network of connections stops and it would be close to impossible for the mission of the school to be carried out.

Include something in it for everyone. If there is a belief or perception that the team exists to support the needs or self-esteem of only some members, it will be impossible to get full commitment from all members.

Leave room for disagreement. People won't commit to something that doesn't align with their beliefs and values. So, when determining the group's purpose, invite open discussion and even disagreement, advises Goldman. This does not mean *ongoing* disagreement once the purpose is established. Working through negative opinions and disagreement helps clarify the purpose and foster buy-in.

Team members generally don't need to "control" this process, but they need to be able to "influence" it.

4. Willingness and ability to manage conflict. Conflict typically results from an unmet expectation or a values violation. Although usually unintentional, these are inevitable when two or more people work together. The challenge is not the conflict itself, but how it is managed. When all team members are willing and able to manage conflict well, these situations provide an excellent opportunity to increase the kind of clarity and understanding that improve performance.

So the goal is not to eliminate conflict but to address what is often the elephant in the room, says Myers, by asking the difficult questions and then effectively managing the resulting conversation. If the issues that trigger conflict are not addressed, it could be because of lack of willingness or skills. Unwillingness indicates a lack of buy-in on the team's purpose; a lack of skills indicates a need for training on how to ask tough or sensitive questions and conduct a difficult conversation.

For the finance and administration team, Goldman and Myers started out making sure that they addressed differences and misunderstandings on a timely basis. If a conflict wasn't addressed, they knew it simply would go underground, where it would linger, grow, and negatively influence the development of trust and respect. The challenge is to surface, discuss, and resolve conflict to achieve clarity so that all energy goes into goal achievement and not into protecting or defending individuals or their positions.

Initially, resolving conflict was a counterintuitive behavior for the finance and administration staff. But, they learned that they needed to seek more information during troublesome situations instead of instantly attacking or blaming individuals for things they may or may not have done. A key technique is to avoid pointedly referring to "you" (which is judgmental and places blame), and "asking for" accountability instead of "holding" people accountable. (See characteristic No. 6 for an explanation of these distinctions.)

5. Focus on results. Team members who are committed to the team's purpose will want to know how they are doing. This means they will measure the achievements and outcomes of the team's performance as a way of seeing if its

work is supporting department and institution purposes. The tangible benefits of this measurement are: (a) the team will see evidence about the value of its work to the organization and (b) staff will have information to help them determine whether they're measuring the right things. The intangible benefits include the powerful sense of affirmation and ownership team members will feel when they see results they know they contributed to.

TASK YOUR TEAM TO GET STARTED

How do you begin using the Teams That Work model? Go to your respective staffs, sit down with the individuals for an informal discussion, and encourage your team members to ask these questions:

- Which of the six characteristics does our team demonstrate well? How do we sustain these behaviors?
- Which of the six characteristics does our team seem to lack or not practice very well? How can we strengthen these areas?
- What do we need to work on first? What two or three actions do we need to take to address organizational issues?
- When will we follow up on our actions?

Ask everyone on the team to write down his or her answers and then discuss the responses as a group. One option would be to take the time to collate and distribute the answers as prelude to a further discussion. Don't force the process on the team. Let it be the beginning of the conversation that leads to actions or behaviors that the group needs to (1) keep doing, (2) start doing, or (3) stop doing.

We all want to see our progress and know that our work matters and makes a difference. It is important also to look at some of the intangible things that collecting performance data will *not* tell us. For example, says Goldman, "Talking with faculty, staff, and students enables us to get feedback on our performance that we cannot get via forms or other instruments. It is the little things that move the school forward and cumulative results that make a difference. This kind of evaluation on a regular basis leads to the clarity that drives execution, achievement, and accomplishment. Such outcomes increase self-worth, commitment, and personal energy."

6. Alignment of authority and accountability. Once there is commitment to a common purpose, team members will need to know their roles in supporting that

purpose. Everyone will be responsible to act on defined roles and expectations that are based on four elements:

- We have the authority we need to do our jobs.
- We know what we are accountable for.
- We know why we are accountable for it.
- We know how to ask for accountability.

Understanding these four elements is foundational for building trust and respect. It allows individuals to go directly to each other when they have problems.

Invariably, things get derailed-something doesn't get done-and someone must talk to the person responsible, asking for accountability. If someone does not do what he or she promised to do or does not do it at or above the standard or level agreed to, then others must find out why. If they don't, someone ends up overfunctioning to make up for the shortcoming of another, and the team no longer performs at the highest levels.

But how can we question what someone did or did not do while retaining trust? The key can be found in the word "ask." The common expression is to "hold" someone accountable, taking a power position that assumes or suggests someone was not fully committed to the purpose. But, asking is different. If everyone is already committed to the purpose, we can assume mutual commitment and ask for accountability. When done well, this approach supports trust and respect while keeping performance expectations aligned.

Of course, the process can make for high-intensity conversations. The key is not to take a power position. Rather, consider what the finance and administration team practices:

- **Start the conversation with "I," rather than "you."**
- **State the feeling you have,** ("I'm confused," or "I'm frustrated") but make it less intense than what you may actually be feeling. Then pause to let the two of you recalibrate.
- **Explain why you have this feeling; avoid "you;" use first and third person.** Making statements using the word "you" virtually guarantees defensiveness and resistance. Hence, avoid language like "You said you were going to have this done on time, and you didn't do it." Instead use first and third person-"I'm confused [pause]. The agreement was a Wednesday deadline; it is Friday and the work is not completed."

- **Ask a question to gain clarity.** "Will you help me understand what happened?" When you ask such questions, make sure your muscles are relaxed and you speak at a normal volume level. Using this tone and perspective allows both parties to retain dignity-particularly *you*, if it turns out that you happen to be wrong about your interpretation of the situation.

Having a mind-set of mutual responsibility is helpful when asking for accountability. Instead of the typical model, in which all individuals go to the leader with complaints or questions, finance and administration team members go directly to the person involved and search out more details, asking genuine questions to find out why something did or didn't happen. Once more information comes to light, you can either set a new expectation or reach a deeper level of understanding.

Of course, every work group is unique, with different styles and processes depending on the institutions and the individuals involved. Further complications arise with ad hoc teams that have their own dynamics. Regardless, the key to effective, high-performance work teams is clarification of the common purpose and the behavior expectations. Considering the style of each team member, the ways that you present information to gain commitment, and the method that you evaluate performance and communicate it are all critical. You can either adopt a model that is sequential and rational or work in an environment that is random and unpredictable.

But, remember, says Myers, "Productive, successful teams are not accidental. The simple truth is that when the 'What?' 'Why?' and 'How?' are clear, individuals can enjoy working in a group that pulls together to reach its goals and make a difference."

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A QUESTION OF ORDER

When addressing human resources and performance issues, it's easy to overlook the importance of the order in which you or someone on your work team asks the questions, "How?" "What?" and "Why?" While the sequence is critical to building commitment, there is a difference in the order that we are paid to do things and the one that gets results.

Typically, leaders start the conversation regarding an assignment or task with "What?" Much to their surprise, simply explaining the task usually doesn't work very well. Observe the following examples: "I need you to take over this project," or "I want you to meet with the deans," or "I want you to cover for me at the president's council meeting." Spoken or unspoken, the response or thought that surfaces is "Why? That is not my job/responsibility." If the leader is not careful, power can become the driver and reluctant or malicious obedience the result.

The key is to begin with "Why?" This represents the driving force that initiates action. If we return to the earlier examples and insert a "Why" at the beginning of each sentence, we now have, "Dr. Jones has a family emergency and will be gone for several days. I need you to assume responsibility for this project until his return." Or, "Funding for your proposal is being discussed at the dean's meeting, so I need you to attend to create context, discuss implications, and answer questions." Or, "I was just scheduled to attend a meeting with the governor, so I need you to cover for me at the president's council to clarify our stance on project Y." Once the "Why?" is clear, volition generally follows.

How the task or responsibility gets done should not be discussed until the assignment or task is clear and the reason for doing it is explained. It is a major trap to talk about how something will get done (and by whom) before these other issues are understood.

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