

Team Building Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

The importance of a good team cannot be overstated. And yet, while we know that we need our employees to act in unison and support one another, we also set up workplace environments that are competitive and seemingly designed to work against our stated interests. We expect that good management and the rewards (and punishment) systems we have in place will lead to employee compliance and conformity. We are wrong.

The only way we can have a team atmosphere is if we construct one, and the act of building one is replete with potential errors that can be made – to somewhat disastrous consequences (for the team building effort). Tudog has decided to take a look at this very critical process that most companies need and should go through and determine where the pitfalls lie and how to best avoid them.

There are potentially six danger zones when trying to develop and deploy a team environment. They, and the ways to bypass them, are:

1. Poor Team Model - we all know that every team is only as strong as its weakest link, and so too is it true that every model used for the team is only as strong as its weakest component. In many cases teams are constructed by management (who, quite frankly, know nothing about team building) or consultants who have misconceptions about team building as see it solely as a function of communication or processes. These approaches, while providing some of what is needed, do not provide all of what is needed, and so they create the weak links that ultimately serve to place pressure on the entire team building program.

Fix It: You need to have a comprehensive model that serves all the elements of team building. Make certain that your training and post-training programs include:

- *Common goals and a vision that everyone on the team subscribes to.* A team works best together when everyone is working in the same direction and everyone believes in the same worthiness and desirability of the stated objective.
- *The necessary skills among the team players to meet the goals.* Remember, just about every professional athletics team goes on the field each day with the intent to win. The team with the right balance of skill does the winning, leaving the team without the skills constantly losing and very frustrated.
- *A clear delineation of roles and functions.* People cannot work together when they are stepping on each other's toes or competing against one another. The best way to make certain that this sort of head-butting doesn't come up is by making sure that every member of the team understands his/her role and why that role is very important to the overall success of the team.
- *An agreement on rules and procedures.* The core definition of a team is everyone working at the same time toward the same goal using the same rules and procedures. You need to make certain that everyone on the team understands and agrees with the rules and procedures so that there can be no breakdown in compliance.
- *An understanding of the team's importance to the company.* You need to make makes sure that the team fully understands the role it plays in the overall success of the company and that they feel sufficiently important and appreciated.
- *A way to celebrate.* Every team wins sometimes and when they do they have every right to celebrate. You need to make sure you have the infrastructure in

place to enable your teams to celebrate their victories, no matter how small they may be. By allowing them to celebrate you are not only acknowledging and reinforcing their success, you are giving them a valuable tool that will make them more cohesive.

2. Poor Team Analysis – just like every person is somewhat different even though there are commonalities in human behavior, so too is every team a bit different even though there are common trends to how they operate and what makes them work better. You cannot review each team's performance based on the same scale and you must be certain to analyze each team's performance based on criteria suitable for the specific team.

Fix It: Measure each team against itself, meaning when you measure a team's performance use your last evaluation as the guideline. Did the team succeed in meeting its objectives and was it successful in improving in the areas it most needed improvement? By analyzing the team based on its own performance you not only avoid comparing it to other teams, but you are able to focus on making the team better by strengthening its weaknesses and playing to its strengths.

3. Quick Fixes – like the guy who thinks the chewing gum is a solid short term solution for the whole in the dam, the use of mini-sessions, retreats and other such events that spike motivation but fail to address fundamental issues are short term solutions at best. In order for a team to function well long term you need more than the occasional pick-me-up session.

Fix It: Make sure you have a long term plan that allows you to grow and maintain the team environment. Your plan should include periodic sessions designed to build cohesiveness, continual training, constant reinforcement of roles and objectives, and celebrations. These combined activities will help build and maintain your team.

4. Failure to Keep Up With Progress – there is a need for team members to know where they are in the progress of their mission and how their performance is being viewed by management. The failure to keep up with progress leaves the team in limbo, not knowing whether their activities are being noticed and appreciated. Insofar as team building is a long term process, the lack of feedback can damage confidence, erode morale, and set back the team's development.

Fix it: Have scheduled evaluations. By putting the reviews into your process you will both engage in them as a matter of course, but also your teams will know when they can expect feedback. This will enhance the communications between you and the teams and also make sure that compliance is high, as everyone knows that reviews are forthcoming.

5. Unfocused Leadership – management is the foundation upon which teams are developed and sustained. It is easy for management to put the teams together, assign a leader, and then assume that the teams will function well without any additional intervention. Unfortunately, this assumption is wrong.

Fix it: Stay involved. As management you need to set the example and show that you too work as a team with your teams. Make certain you are complying with the processes you put into place, that you are communicating well, and that you are working within the

context of the rules you set up. By being a team player and demonstrating how important teamwork is to you, you can reinforce the strength of the teams throughout your organization.

6. The Absence of Openness – teams that are malfunctioning are usually riddled with poor communication, competition, people seeking to blame one another, and an overall inability to deal with conflict. These teams cannot break out of their cycle of dysfunction without the ability to openly and honestly discuss what is wrong and the mechanisms to establish the rules and procedures that will correct them.

Fix it: If you do not have the internal expertise to address the issues facing the team and lead them to a better way of communicating and functioning, you should bring in an outsider who has the neutrality necessary for all parties to view him/her as an honest broker. The key is to make sure that everyone involved feels they have an equal chance to be heard and that the conflict will be resolved through consensus.

The development and continued deployment of highly functional teams adds to a company not only by making the work environment more pleasant, but also by adding efficiencies that reduce costs and improve profitability. The combined enhancements to your business and your people make team building a compelling proposition that deserves your energy and attention.

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