



Working With the Stars

How building a high-achieving team can unlock success for employees, organizations, and you.

By Umesh Ramakrishnan

The ironic thing about star teams is that they are not necessarily filled with stars. An example of this is the NFL team the New England Patriots.

Yes, there are a few individual stars, but they are all just part of one star team that has been built on a single foundational principle—get the right people for the right positions. And actually, there is a danger in trying to form a star-filled team from top to bottom. Because while each star reaches individually for the limelight, the glue that holds the team together—a desire to help one another—disappears.

This sentiment has been echoed by numerous CEOs. Walt Bettinger of

Charles Schwab said that he likes to imagine his team sitting at a round table. His job is then to ensure that most of the problems can be solved there, as long as he makes certain that that table accommodates people with different functional strengths, cultural or geographic backgrounds, and varying life and business experiences.

Many problems cannot be solved by any single individual sitting at the table. I'm going to point to a few of the lessons I learned from these world-class CEOs regarding the art and science of building star teams.

Check your own reflection

The courage and will to build a star team begins at the top. The leader of an organization (regardless of its

size) has to be one who is self-confident and strives to hire people who are better than him at their jobs. The cliché that “A” players hire “A” players and that “B” players hire “C” players is absolutely true. Weak leaders provide excuses that prevent bringing in the best new hires.

Some of these excuses, such as the location of the headquarters vis-à-vis the availability of talent, are fast becoming archaic. Today, world-class leaders do not let geography become a hindrance in this process.

Bill Amelio of Lenovo told me that his executive team was a virtual United Nations. His chairman, a Chinese national, is in Raleigh, North Carolina; his chief marketing officer is in India; and other key leaders are distributed around

the world, while he, an American, lives in Singapore.

Lessons in leadership

While building the right team is important, it is equally important as a leader that you provide the guidance and direction the team requires. Joseph Lawler of CMGI told me that if you do not do this, all you have is a bunch of smart people either going off on their own or awaiting direction. Either way, it is not conducive to building a cohesive unit.

It is also important to monitor that cohesiveness. If you find that you have agreement on issues in a meeting, but then you start hearing noises around the organization about the very same issues, then it is possible that one of the leaders working for you is not a team player.

While it is extremely important to voice appropriate dissent inside the meeting room, it is equally crucial to be together on that decision when the doors open. Your disagreements or dissenting opinions prior to the decision are irrelevant to the team at that point.

In defense of the cheerleader

Build a team of people who will root for you. Importantly, this suggestion is a dangerous one if applied incorrectly. Russ Fradin of Hewitt cautioned me when he spoke of this issue.

He said that you do not garner support by being political, but by actually helping your team. They will support you because you support them. They will fall behind you because they know that you are leading from the front and not asking them to sacrifice any more than you would sacrifice yourself.

However, it is important to realize that if you ingratiate yourself with your team with mere political skill, you may get their support in the short term, but their backing will weaken with the passage of time.

Succession success and the skills factor

Confident leaders ensure that there is at least one successor on their team. This is an individual who a leader will nourish

and shape, and when they are ready to assume the mantle of leadership, the leader finds his next challenge. The only way you will rise to the top is if you have a strong foundation under you, and there is no better way to rise than to leave a legacy of success as you blaze your trail forward.

As a leader, you have to constantly work on the skill gaps that exist on your team. Assess them, and then find ways to fix them. The answer is not always to hire someone to fill the gap—you do that if you have a void in a function that just cannot be handled adequately by someone else on your team. Most of the time, the answer is in training and development.

Take the evaluation process seriously. While it may be routine for you, it is extremely important to the person on your team. You are not doing her any favors by giving her a plain vanilla review. Pat her on their back for contributions, and then focus on the skill gaps. Do not do this without providing a roadmap to solve the problem.

This sometimes takes work on your part. You have to not only know the shortcomings of your team member, but work with others within the organization and sometimes with outside professionals who can recommend ways to improve employee skills.

Reaching for the stars

When hiring members of your team, you will obviously test their qualifications for the job. Many teams fall apart because the soft skills of these individuals were not tested as rigorously.

Take reference calls seriously. Try to find people who worked with the potential hire who can provide candid, balanced views on him. Ask questions about their team orientation. Were there problems with working with other people? Did he work well with his peers? How did his subordinates view him as a person?

While you are not trying to hire team members who look and sound like each other, it is equally important to ensure that you have considered the underlying

chemistry between them. While what they bring to the table should be complementary, their character traits should be similar.

It is also important to remember not to play it safe. If you build a team with a group of people who are all “solid” players who are risk averse, you are going to miss out on untold opportunities. You have to have a few team members who sit on the other end of the spectrum—the bold risk takers. They are bound to make more mistakes than the others, and therefore will require a closer watch. However, they are also more likely to give you bigger rewards in the long term.

Essentially, you need to have a good balance on your team. Spend time early on when building your organization, thinking about not just the functional requirements you need to fill but also the various soft skills you need on your team. Leaders who spend time on this early and keep it in mind during the course of managing their teams, tend to be more successful than those who build teams purely through opportunistic events.

When writing my book, there was one question I asked every CEO—“What has been the most gratifying part of your job?” More than 90 percent of them said that it was the pride that they felt from building world-class teams. So a star team will not only make you more successful. It will also be the most fulfilling part of your career.

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