PULLING YOUR GROUP TOGETHER?
BE SURE TO LAY YOUR GROUNDWORK BEFOREHAND . . .

THE HIDDEN BARRIERS TO TEAM BUILDING

BY PATRICIA PALLESCHI AND PATRICIA HEIM

The room could have been any conference room. There were stark walls, no carpets and from the window a delightful view of an industrial park. The leader had arranged the chairs in an arc around the slide projector. As participants filed in, each left an empty spot as a buffer against the strangers already seated. Several had on business suits, some had on jeans and sneakers. One or two had on leisure suits. The purpose of the meeting was to engage in long-range planning, but even as the meeting began, problems arose. Mr. Hart, who had pulled his seat back from the group, began to add his own critical commentary to the leader's opening dialogue. Several of his colleagues took exception to his commentary. Two hours later, what had begun as an exercise in building a team through participation in goal setting had ended up as a free-for-all!

There are hidden barriers to team building in this scene. Unless we address these hidden barriers before we try to pull a group together, our efforts will be sabotaged from the outset. These barriers may be thought of as a lack of groundwork; the groundwork beneath a cohesive group. This groundwork consists of: (1) shared knowledge, (2) shared territory, (3) same stature, and (4) same communication availability. Without each of these, a team won't make it because a group must have this shared information.

Think about all the groups which you think are characterized by "team spirit." Chances are that the individual members of those teams are very much like one another. Sure, you can pinpoint differences in some areas, but the similarities are more astounding. For instance, think about your management group. Most likely you share the way you treat your spouse, the way you spend your money and your time, as well as sharing a general philosophy about work life. The ultimate team, a sports team, has individual members who share such minutiae as the color of the socks they wear, the food they eat for breakfast, and even how they will act at parties.

The "sameness" of group members does not occur haphazardly. Operating within a group whose members exhibit commitment to group goals are a set of unwritten rules called "norms." Schein defined a norm as an assumption or expectation concerning what kind of behavior is right or wrong, good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate, allowed or not allowed.[1] Being the same as other group members, following the norms of the group, is one way an individual communicates commitment to a group's goals.

There are many obvious norms such as the unwritten dress code in the business world, the sexual codes, the code concerning the proper place to eat lunch. There are also many subtle norms which are equally powerful in groups. We recently observed a staff meeting in which one group member began to verbally attack the others. Gradually, as a heated discussion ensued, all the arms and legs of the other group members were crossed away from the offending member. Through this dis-

play of body orientation, the group communicated, albeit unconsciously, that this group member was violating the norm that group members never attack other group members.

Just as a group member is punished for violating norms, a group member may also be rewarded for a contribution to group cohesion via adherence to norms. Such rewards can be verbal or nonverbal. A smile, a pat, a playful shove can all be rewards.

Awareness of norms in four key areas can help you build effective teams. For team spirit to emerge, individual group members must feel that they all have the same level and type of knowledge, the same territory, the same status, and the same ability to communicate with one another. Lack of any one of these erects a hidden team building barrier.

Shared Knowledge

Taking a few liberties with an old aphorism, "What you see is what you know," is a good way of describing a rather complex process. What we "see" or perceive does have a sneaky way of becoming what we "know" *and* what we believe to be true. In an employee relations office, the staff member who comes in with a gripe against a malicious boss is often perceived as the "victim." If the next week the "malicious" boss tells the employee relations director about a lazy staff member, a new "truth" emerges.

But, before we dismiss the process too simply, what we perceive is often predicated on the labels or names we have readily available for the thing within our perceptual field. If the last bicycle you rode was your old Schwinn, you may look in the bicycle shop and see nothing but a bunch of bikes. The enthusiast, who has ridden a Colnago and has the names of 40 foreign brands at his or her fingertips, may look in the bicycle shop and see several touring bikes, several childrens' bikes, one or two good racing bikes and a bicycle shop owner who doesn't know what he's doing because a beloved Italian brand is nowhere in sight. The more words we have to describe our world, the more sophisticated we become and the more we will "see."

It is important, therefore, for a group to have the same vocabulary and level of sophistication. The person who is given knowledge about management will become a manager. The institution of management cannot exist without that particular vocabulary which has been designated "managerial." What is usually called "orientation" is actually schooling in how to *label* the organizational environment.

Knowledge — or lack thereof — builds an "out-group" as well as an "in-group."

Making it difficult to gain knowledge, by holding secret meetings or sending confidential memos makes those with that knowledge value their group membership even more. Such secret knowledge builds greater group cohesion in much the same ways that secret pledges and codes of adolescent groups work. You may have observed people returning from a semimar joking with one another about "being in a parent state" or exhibiting "control needs." This sokunds like so much jibberish to the outsider — and it is supposed to. This group has acquired common intellectual property which reinforces that these individuals belong together as a group.

Jargon may include derogatory labels for competitive groups within or outside the organization. The "other" advertising agency may be called "the Huns." The "other" sales force may be "the thugs." The language creates an "Us vs. Them" world, where no such separation may actually exist.

Jargon may be formally accepted by groups in a written "manifesto" or "statement of philosophy." An organization may state its philosophy in the employee handbook or via a column in a newsletter. Such formally accepted jargon also may indicate something of the shared world view of the group. If the newsletter is replete with "game" metaphors, there is a likelihood that the organization will be seen as participating in a high-stakes game. If the mani-

festo exhibits military metaphors, one may make some assumptions about the way the group is run or their common past experiences. Once the individual begins to use those metaphors, he or she is buying into that perception of the world. And on a more subtle level is saying "I buy into this group."

Shared Territory

In the same way that we don't feel as comfortable in the home of another as we do in our own homes, we don't feel as comfortable in other people's offices. We tend to be on "better behavior," to not challenge, disagree or argue because we are not in our own territory. Jack Anderson pointed out Chief Justice Burger's use of territoriality to gain an edge: "He has now annexed to his personal offices, the courts conference room, the inner sanctum where the justices meet in secret to thrash out their decisions. He has even installed a desk so there can be no mistaking that the court convenes in Burger's lair."[2]

The implications for building a team are myriad. Groups need to carefully consider where their meetings are held. A free exchange of information may be inhibited by the sense of being in another's territory. On the flip-side, one member may be exerting an inappropriate amount of power because the meetings are always held in his or her territory.

Indeed, rather than assigning individual territory, areas may be designated formally or informally as "belonging" to that group. For instance, an executive dining room tells outsiders that those inside are members of an established elite group. To the executive, the dining room serves as a constant hidden reminder of membership in that elite group. The people in the dining room meet frequently on an informal basis. This dining room says, "We are a group," and a special group at that.

Informal territories may also involve a table in the cafeteria, a seldom-used conference room or the chairs by the water cooler which may gradually become a place where a group gathers. A strong sense of "ours" develops concerning these locations. As a group differentiates more between "ours" and "not ours," cohesion within the group grows.

A team-building effort may falter because a group has not found a neutral area in which it can meet and call its own. Also, consciously seeking out a territory for a "homeless group" may contribute significantly to a team-building effort.

Same Stature

Whether John sits around a table with the group or behind his desk effects the group social structure. One director in a large manufacturing company held his staff meetings in his office. The director sat behind his desk with his four direct-reports sitting in chairs facing him. As a result, the director easily dominated the meetings and communication among his staff was kept at a minimum both in the meeting and out. Also, by distancing himself physically from the group, the director was able to maintain a psychological distance. His people rarely came to him for help. This failure at team building could have been drastically changed if only the director had moved to the other side of his office where there was a round table.

The historical value of a round table goes back to the era of King Arthur. A cultural norm also seems to accompany the position at the head of a rectangular table. If someone is the elected group leader, the most likely position to assume is at the head of the table. Strodtbeck & Hook created experimental jury deliberations and found that the person sitting at the head of the table was chosen significantly more often as the leader, especially if perceived as a person from a high economic class.[3] In addition to the quality of leadership, dominance and status also tend to be associated with the end position.[4] Because of the perceived importance afforded the position at the head of a table, a group needs to consider who tends to sit in that position and what effect it has on the group structure. That seat may afford one member the de facto leadership of the group or it may allow that person to dominate and sway group decisions — solely because of the seating arrangement.

In addition to the arrangement and shape of furniture in an office, the comfort of furnishings may affect group interactions. A spartan office with hard wooden chairs may make for short and to-the-point meetings. Both the atmosphere and the physical discomfort preclude the kind of nontask communication which allows group members to get to know and like each other. Physical comfort and aesthetically pleasing surroundings may cause people to spend more time together expanding the necessary social dimension of process that fosters cohesion.

Much has been written about the communication of status through office furnishings. Many companies delineate quite clearly the acquisitions one is entitled to on each of the management levels: size of office, carpeting, windows, desk (size and materials), chair (arms and height of back), etc. While

there is a tendency to laugh at these antics, employees are fiercely aware of the furnishings of others and when they are being slighted in this fashion. In the company in which one of us works, a manager complained because another manager had wood paneling and he didn't. (One is only eligible for wood paneling at the director level.) Maintenance promptly came out and painted the wood paneling, to maintain "equality."

Groups are also very cognizant of the status that is communicated by their physical surroundings. As cited earlier, the plush executive dining room tells those both outside and inside the group that these people are different and unique; an elite. Uncomfortable, unpleasant surroundings may also tell all that this group really isn't too important, powerful or desirable. In the same way that the executive dining room fosters cohesion, the unpleasant surroundings make group cohesion more difficult to attain and maintain. A dumpy lounge may be a large but hidden barrier to group cohesiveness. Who wants to commit themselves to such a low status group?

Group networks also affect team interaction, cohesiveness and productivity. For instance, if a member of a five-person team has an office on a different floor than the other team members, that lone member may not really feel like a team member. Or, if all the group's internal communication is required to go through one member for that person's secretary to type before distribution to other group members, an inordinate amount of power and control is placed on one group member. The remaining team is at his or her mercy for communication.

Other factors that can affect communication networks are, as suggested earlier, proximity and gathering places. We tend to talk more frequently with those who are physically near us. Also, places that create physical proximity, such as the water cooler, foster communication. The problem with these tendencies is that one may frequently be near and therefore talk with some members of the team and not others. This lopsidedness tends to make some of the members feel excluded, thereby destroying group cohesiveness.

The importance of team building is rapidly growing as our companies grow larger and the employees demand more personal satisfaction on the job. Belonging to a team not only facilitates getting the work done faster and better, but it also allows one to feel "connected" in what may be an impersonal atmosphere.

Many team-building techniques may be employed, but first the groundwork must be assessed. Is there a common base of knowledge from which to draw? What about some common territory? Are there significant status differences? And does everyone have the same access to communication? Not until you've answered all these questions can you really start building your team.

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