

Smells Like Team Spirit

By Mel Silberman

The 1980s were all about the Me Generation. But the 1990s brought a change. Life stopped being so much about *me* and started being more about *we*. Now, collaboration is in and teams are hot. But not everyone knows how to play the game. Here are some tips for building team spirit. Observe what's going on in the team. Many people on teams are oblivious to what's happening around them. They focus on themselves and fail to pick up cues about other people or the team as a whole. Perhaps someone had a good idea but failed to express it well. Or perhaps the team got caught up in a debate when it should have been brainstorming.

Here are some things to watch for:

- Do all members have the same understanding of the team's goals? Does everyone support them?
- Are people free to express themselves?
- Do all team members have equal opportunity for participation?
- Do people listen to each other?
- Is the team focused and energetic?
- Do members of the team build on each other's ideas?
- Is conflict within the team accepted and handled effectively?
- Are team members conscious of each other's needs?

Make contributions where needed. Imagine a basketball team in which each player tries to shoot instead of passing the ball to an open player, setting screens for teammates, or getting into position for the rebound. Many people who are not attuned to the team concept focus on their own needs and ignore the needs of others.

If you've accurately observed the team situation, however, you will have uncovered many opportunities to contribute to the total team effort. In basketball terms, with good "court awareness" you can sense ways to help the team succeed.

Some ideas:

- Offer to take minutes at a meeting or facilitate a discussion.
- Ask quiet members for their opinion.
- Describe the different viewpoints of the team objectively.



Imagine a basketball team in which each player tries to shoot instead of passing the ball to an open player, setting screens for teammates, or getting into position for the rebound.

- Express appreciation for the efforts of others.
 - Share credit you receive for a job well done by the team.
 - Summarize team discussions.
 - Suggest problem-solving techniques.
 - Relieve tension by telling a joke.
 - Check decisions you're about to make for their effect on others.
 - Include everyone on the team in the information loop.
 - Communicate your own activity so that it is public knowledge.
 - Seek information and expertise outside of the group.
 - Tell others what they can do to support your team building efforts.
- Foster a climate of dialogue. We say that everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion, but there are limits to that in team situations. Too often, team discussion can become a debate of my

idea versus yours. People tend to advocate causes dear to their hearts, hoping to gain support from others, and the climate becomes politicized. In contrast, when a climate of dialogue exists, team members listen to each other, react to and build on each other's ideas, and look for and acknowledge real differences of opinion.

Dialogue means two minds together. The purpose of dialogue is to enlarge ideas, not diminish them. Here are some ways to help build a climate of dialogue:

- Ask questions to clarify what people are saying. Invite others to seek clarification from you.
- Share what's behind your ideas.

Reveal your assumptions and goals, and invite team members to do the same.

- Ask for feedback on your ideas. Give constructive feedback on other people's ideas.
- Make suggestions that build on the ideas of others. Incorporate others' ideas into your proposals.
- Find common ground among the ideas expressed in the team.
- Encourage team members to generate additional ideas.

Expect obstacles. It's not always going to be easy. Great teamwork takes, well, work. But there are some simple things you can do to minimize problems and maximize solutions.

Problem: I don't think anything can be done to save the team I work with. It's too late.

Solution: Established teams develop habits that are difficult to break. But it's never too late. Don't overload the team with complaints. Instead, ask members to evaluate the team with questions such as,

- How well is our team meeting your expectations?
- What are you taking away from interaction with this team?
- How have we worked together? What has been helpful? Not helpful?
- If we were to start over, what would you do differently?

Problem: I don't have the power to change things.

Solution: Just one suggestion might turn things around. Look for those oppor-

tunities. Also consider giving your superiors recommendations to act on.

Problem: We're a team, but we hardly ever see each other. People travel a lot or have other reasons to be away from the office.

Solution: That phenomenon is becoming more prevalent. Explore how to increase email communication or use meeting software that team members can access from anywhere. (See "A (Fast) Week in a Digital Collaboration Space," January).

Problem: I'd like to partner with some of my colleagues, but they seem busy doing their own things.

Solution: Develop a small project you'd like to work on with someone else. Make your invitation irresistible; greater collegiality may grow from there.

Problem: I wind up doing all of the work.

Solution: The team is used to you rescuing it from disaster, but you can insist that others contribute. Stay positive by saying something like, "I'd like your help here. When I do the gut work myself, I start to feel resentful. I want to feel good about our working relationship."

Play ball! Each of us brings to a team our own talents. Good team players bring something else as well: the ability to blend their talents with those of other team members. Each of us brings to a team our own ideas and preferences. Good team players balance interest in what they advocate with interest in what other people say. In short, team players see themselves and others as resources, part of the team's pool of knowledge, skills, and ideas. The whole is truly greater than the sum of the parts. Working together, your team is sure to win!

Mel Silberman is professor of adult and organizational development at Temple University and president of Active Training, www.activetraining.com.

This article is adapted from People Smart: Developing Your Interpersonal Intelligence (Berrett-Koehler, 2000).

Send submissions to cc:You, Training & Development, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043; cyou@astd.org.