

Teambuilding: Lessons From the Theatre

BY MARK S. CARLEY

What does a successful theatrical production have to do with a great work team? A lot says someone who has played both scenes.

AS A TRAINER I've never been comfortable with the notion of teams in the workplace. What's the difference between a team and any other competent work group? Isn't *team* just another management buzzword? An abstract idea that is supposed to improve morale?

The play within the play

A few months ago, I was sitting on a stage where I had directed "Noises Off," a funny but difficult English farce. The audience had given us a standing ovation. In a state of serenity and excitement, I found myself asking "Why can't work be like this?" Suddenly, I knew what a team is and why it is so different from an ordinary work group. I had just led a successful team effort without realizing it. I thought about why a great theatrical production is a model of teamwork, and this is what I came up with.

A clear focus on task. When we announced auditions for "Noises Off," we told everyone that we expected it to be the funniest comedy that Birmingham Village Players had ever produced. The goal was daunting but simple. It didn't go into specifics on how it was to be accomplished. Put too much detail into a goal up front and you limit creativity later on.

Firm deadlines with no excuses. Nothing focuses effort like a deadline. If your team doesn't know what it wants to accomplish and when, it will never complete its task. When we committed to producing this play, there was great

concern about the project's magnitude. The set was far more complicated and costly than normal. It had to rotate 360 degrees. It had two full working floors and two staircases. The blocking (movement of the actors) was also a nightmare, with most of the second act done in pantomime coordinated with offstage dialogue. Had we been given a choice we probably would have asked for about four months to mount such a production. A committed team is not afraid of tight deadlines.

Distinct and unique contributions. Corporate managers often think of their team's task as their own, divided among many people. If someone fails to perform, the manager steps in and does the job him- or herself. A play's director is usually unqualified to perform most theatrical jobs. He or she must delegate and trust. A team leader must ask not "How can I accomplish the task?" but "How can I help my team accomplish the task?" I could not have built our set had the carpenter failed. I could not have sewn pants had our costumer quit. I certainly couldn't have worn the lace teddy in which our ingenue spent most of the show. You don't have a real team unless each team member has a unique job, vital to the project's outcome.

Mutual trust, reliance, and admiration. A theatrical production team is lean. Everyone has a job and each job is vital to the success of the production. Good teams don't carry deadweight. If anyone lets the team down, the production suffers noticeably. I've found that this

commitment to one another motivates excellent performance far more than the promise of applause, good reviews, and material rewards. If everyone isn't committed to the success of their teammates individually and collectively, then you don't have a real team.

Actors are notoriously self-deprecating when they are around each other. They generally struggle to downplay their own contributions and laud those of their teammates. Part of this is false modesty, but part is a legitimate (and often humbling) recognition that the job cannot be accomplished alone and that each contribution is integral to the success of the production. When jealousies between actors creep in, they ruin a play. The audience may not know why the play doesn't work, they just know it doesn't. Sincere pride in the work of teammates boosts everyone's enthusiasm.

Well-defined roles. Each play starts with a competition called an audition. But once the show is cast competition ends and job focus begins. Everyone's role is clear and each actor works to make one particular character the best it can be. No one, regardless of how large or small that person's part, is looking to take over someone else's job. All teams need this commitment to succeed. If anyone covets another's role, then the focus moves to that role and away from the good of the team. A jealous team member doesn't do his own job well and he diminishes the efforts of the

rest of the team through the distractions he causes.

Frequent, sincere, positive feedback. Praise needs to be focused and given whenever merited. It's not enough to say, "Gee, you're really doing great" or "I think you're wonderful for that part." Feedback needs to be more specific, as in "I really like the way you got humor out of that scene" or "Your reliability has made directing this show easier for me." Actors are used to hearing general, empty praise; it goes with the territory. To really reach good actors you have to let them know what you liked and why. This is true of any work team. General praise may feel good or it may seem condescending or insincere. In either case, it won't improve the teammate's performance. Only focused, positive feedback will do that.

Unambiguous and constructive criticism. Actors are notoriously sensitive. If criticism is not specific and targeted directly at improved performance, it may do more harm than good. Suggest improvements but allow team members to structure the changes themselves when possible. Never try to humiliate or shame a team member into better performance. It won't work. Our team included one actor who had a terrible problem learning lines. He compounded the problem by getting very angry with himself. It was tempting for the rest of us to blow up at him—tell him to grow up and get his act together. This would have been humiliating and counter-productive. Instead we used encouragement, emphasizing the many things he was doing well and letting him know that no one was more upset than he was. He responded in a selfless way that brought the cast together as it had not been before.

Maximum freedom of self expression. A director's job is to give actors a broad framework within which to explore their own creativity. No direction results in chaos. Over-direction results in listless performance. Some boundaries must be set. One way we do this is called blocking—giving actors basic direction so that they don't run into each other or find themselves on the wrong side of the stage without a prop. A successful director is a manager who allows the actors, set designers, and costumers to be the artists—just as it should

be with all team leaders. Let the team take credit for the brilliance. You take quiet pride in making it possible. Give direction when team members need it or ask for it. Let team members make mistakes and coach them when they do, but make it clear their role is their role and it is their creativity and energy that will make their contribution great.

Ability to solve problems directly. Actually, this is one area in which theatre companies could use some improvement. In order to avoid the "too many cooks" syndrome, directors usually tell actors to bring problems with other cast members to them rather than to handle the problems directly. This policy makes sense when there is a question of artistic interpretation ("I don't like the way Bob is saying that line. It would be funnier if he did it this way..."). The policy keeps actors from wondering just how many directors the show has. But for most interpersonal problems a direct approach is best. Everyone should understand they are expected to solve such problems between themselves, and that only if a first attempt at reconciliation fails should they go to the team leader.

For example, we had one actor whose backstage behavior was becoming a major distraction to several cast members. They all asked me to talk to the actor, which I did, but I don't think my approach was very effective. While he knew I was concerned, my talk didn't convey the trouble he was causing the rest of the cast. It's always best to confront things directly. It makes team members more honest with each other, fosters heightened respect, and doesn't waste the team leader's time.

Flexible leadership. A director relies on the creativity of his actors. If actors aren't allowed input, they perform in an uninspired way and often end up embarrassing themselves and the director. So it is with team members. While they need enough leadership to maintain order and focus, too much direction will stifle their ability to solve problems. During one rehearsal I gave our lead actress a piece of direction that I thought was hysterically funny. She didn't agree but she struggled with the bit for several rehearsals. Finally, I asked her what was wrong and she told me she wasn't comfortable with my direction. I explained that I thought the situation called for a

funny response from her and asked her to come up with something on her own. She did and it worked much better than my original idea.

Innovation and improvisation. In a football game, if the running back drops the ball his teammates don't stand there staring at him saying: "You pick it up. You dropped it." They all scramble to retrieve the ball. Once a problem occurs, it's everybody's responsibility to fix it. Good actors know this. If somebody messes up by giving a wrong cue or forgetting a line, the other actors feel a rush of adrenaline as their minds race to figure out ways to fix the problem. After the play is over, no one scolds the offender (so long as the problem isn't chronic). We all know when we've blown it and we feel bad enough on our own. As a colleague once said to me after I had botched some lines, "There are only two kinds of actors. Those who have screwed up and those who will."

On a good team, everyone feels comfortable enough to be creative—to constantly find ways to innovate. The team leader's job is to watch the creative process and provide feedback. Occasionally you do have to say, "Sorry, but that won't work here." Usually you find yourself saying, "That's great! It makes your performance stronger." All teams need this latitude for creativity if they are going to achieve all that they are capable of.

Going "above and beyond". The passion to excel is great in the theatre. Actors take all sorts of risks in order to win an audience over. Sometimes they put their bodily well-being on the line. One actor in our play had to fall down a flight of stairs each night. He was so enthusiastic during rehearsals that on several occasions he fell right off the stage. We had to hold him back for fear that he would injure himself and not be able to perform.

Backstage people toil long and hard for very little recognition. Our properties crew was at every rehearsal even though they didn't need to be. It paid off on opening night when a very complicated props show went off without a hitch. Our set decorator, who was also in the cast, stayed up all night and took time away from his regular job to finish the set. That paid off when the set got a round of ap-

plause as soon as the curtain opened.

Teammates don't work for paychecks. They work for the satisfaction of accomplishment and for the respect of their peers. Extrinsic work issues (pay, work hours, vacations) take a backseat to the needs of the team. On a really good team, one of the leader's jobs will be to keep the team in perspective so that (like our stair-tumbling actor) team members don't crash and burn, losing perspective on the other aspects of their lives.

Mutual respect. Team leaders don't have to fret about how much people like each other as long as team members are able to work together peacefully and effectively. Our set decorator and the coordinator of our set building crew couldn't stand one another. Fortunately, both did most of their cursing and griping while the other was not present. When they did have to work together they were able to put aside their personal dislikes and focus on their primary goal (creating a beautiful, functional set). These two guys still don't like each other, but they

do have great respect for each other's abilities, and I know that they will work together many times in the future (though they will never exchange Christmas cards).

Closure, reflection, reformation. A team needs to know when its job is done. Energy will dissipate and morale will fall apart if a team lingers beyond the completion of its task or (worse yet) if it is unsure when the task is complete. Fortunately this is easy to determine in the theatre. On closing night we have a party, we congratulate each other, we say our goodbyes and talk of upcoming challenges. The next day we tear down the set.

With a work team, closure may be difficult to define, especially when the team is working on an ongoing process rather than a specific task. In such cases, goals and deadlines within a process can take the place of task completion. For example, I work for a bank and train mortgage processors. The processing team might set up a goal of a 15-day turnaround on loan files with a 50 per-

cent reduction in the current level of mistakes. The goal is to be accomplished within two months. Note that the goal includes both a measurable outcome and a deadline. At the end of two months it is critical that the team stop, assess its success, and set a new goal. If the goal has been achieved, the team should reward itself.

Of course, some teams don't disburse after meeting their goals, but it's important at such times to reassess the duties of team members, giving everyone the opportunity to redefine their role for the next goal.

The famous psychologist Abraham Maslow said that two of our fundamental needs are for belonging and self-fulfillment. Successful team members have both needs satisfied every time they complete a project or exceed a goal. ■

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The screenshot shows a software window titled 'KnowDev' with a menu bar (File, Edit, View, Options, Review, Help) and a toolbar. Below the toolbar is a grid of topic buttons: Strategic Planning, Key Business Indicators, Favorites, Recent, Search Results, Street-Smart Business, Sales and Negotiation, Total Quality, Project Management, ISO Procedures, Leadership, Etiquette and Ethics, Power Words, HR Policies, Grammar and Communication, Global Business Analysis, and Wall Said. The 'Choosing Your Benefits Options' module is selected and expanded, showing a flowchart on the left and a text box on the right that reads: 'Familiarize yourself with the Benefits Registration process by using your mouse to enlarge the process flow chart to the left. In November of each year, the Benefits Administrations office kicks off its annual Benefits Registration effort. Your understanding of the process will improve'.

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