

By Lee Smith



Team Lessons

You'll be surprised at what experts say about what makes a good team

THERE are three essential elements of successful teams that, when completely understood and in the forefront of all leadership actions, can almost guarantee highly efficient, accomplished teams – and results.

Becky Blalock, CIO of Atlanta-based Southern Co., says: "I've worked on many teams during my 27 years with Southern. Some of the teams had brilliant people who didn't trust one another. Those teams accomplished very little. In contrast, I've been on high-performing teams with people who were less gifted in intellect, but who trusted one another and worked together toward a common goal. These teams consistently delivered better results and left a legacy of great relationships. A trusting team is what I set out to build when I became CIO of Southern in 2002."

As an executive coach, I am often asked to help build strong teams. The process begins and ends with the following three critical components.

CREATE TRUST

To create trust within your team you must know – really know – each team member and allow them to know you. Learn individual styles of communication, what motivates each one, personal and professional performance development areas (challenges), unique talents each brings to the team and personal and organizational values. The team leader must model being a great listener and learner, helping

members learn about each other. You must truly value each team member and encourage them to value each other.

A strong team begins with strong relationships, which foster the trust needed to achieve goals. Seasoned management consultants, Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith, have stated that strong commitment to one another is the greatest distinction of great teams.

DIRECTION AND PURPOSE

We've heard it so many times before – "without vision, the people perish." And so does the team. You must establish, and clearly and consistently promote the purpose of the team, and the vision and values that reflect the organization. Team members want to know how they can uniquely contribute to achieving goals and need clarity about roles and responsibilities. You must also be a great facilitator for best group thinking, encouraging complete team participation. You will listen, ask the tough questions, learn from them and consistently ground all actions in direction and purpose. Your leadership unerringly points to the "X" on the treasure map, guiding actions to reach goals.

ESTABLISH ACCOUNTABILITY

There's that word we all hate. However, mutual accountability enhances team performance. Team members must know how they fit in with team purpose and goals and have clear understanding of responsibilities and accountabilities. Accountabilities and results are enhanced by a process that explores possibilities for innovative answers, captures final decisions, action items and responsibilities, target times for completion and reporting and accountability for execution and performance. Shared accountability means YOUR accountability as well.

The best executives develop their ability to build people and teams just as much as their strategic and economic abilities. Without high performance teams, strategic and financial prowess is ultimately strained.

The battle of business success is won not by single competencies, but by the combined strength of shared trust, direction and accountability. An old Japanese proverb says, "None of us is as smart as all of us." Use these steps to take the mystery out of building successful teams.

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