


Building Teams: Why You Need Trust, Conflict, Commitment, Accountability, and Attention to Detail

Mary Herrmann, Capital H Group

October 30, 2007 | [COMMENTS](#) 

"Team spirit has the potential to increase the productivity of your organization exponentially: Your team becomes greater than the sum of its players; the organization greater than the number of employees on its payroll. Each individual revels in the glory of the group rather than the glory of the individual. "What can I do to help our team today?" replaces "How can I get ahead?"

—Coach John Wooden

To step back and reflect on how they view themselves as a leader, executives may rely on a coach. As part of the coaching engagement, the coach reaches out to key stakeholders in the organization to learn how the executive is perceived by others in his/her leadership capacity. Presented with the opportunity to reflect and listen to unfettered feedback, the executive is often powerfully moved to create an action plan for change.

While individual executive coaching is key, the process we often embark on with clients *after* the individual engagement comes to a close is just as critical. At that point, we frequently partner with organizational sponsors to bring executives together to examine how they function as a team . And that's where the most significant opportunity lies for change in many organizations. Think about your own experiences and the companies you've worked within. When you reached the leadership level in those organizations, did you join a true team?

Building a successful team is surely one of the great mysteries of our time—whether in sports, business, or other endeavors that brings people together. Why are some teams successful and others not? Why do some teams outperform others, even when they don't have as much individual talent? What is the secret to building a strong team?

A great model (and a tool we often use on team assignments) is Patrick Lencioni's book [The Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#). Lencioni provides a new model for building a team that we've seen bring excellent results for our clients.

The five factors that prevent genuine teamwork, according to Lencioni, are:

- Absence of trust
- Fear of conflict
- Lack of commitment
- Avoidance of accountability
- Inattention to results

You can't buy a great team. You can invest in talented people and the best equipment, but an effective team can only be created through the courage and discipline of the team members.

Whether you are on a team or leading a team, you've most likely had one or more of these issues prevent peak performance at one time or another. If one of these dysfunctions is allowed to flourish, team work deteriorates. Lencioni turns these dysfunctions upside down to create a model for building a truly cohesive team.

Factor 1: Build Trust.

Without trust, teamwork is all but impossible. To build a team, trust means that each member is confident that their peers' intentions are good and that there's no reason to be overly-protective around the group and that teammates should be comfortable in being vulnerable with one another.

Yes, *vulnerable*. A word not often used in a business context. Vulnerability-based trust allows others to see your weaknesses. This may run counter to everything you believe. In the course of career advancement and education, most of us in a corporate environment learn to be competitive and overly-protective of our reputations. We're used to covering up deficiencies and mistakes. Even asking for help is something to be avoided. It is a challenge to turn these self-centered behaviors into team-oriented behaviors, but Lencioni's model teaches that understanding and respecting each of our vulnerabilities, and trusting that they won't be used against us, is really the first step to building a great team.

Factor 2: Embrace Conflict.

Productive conflict is necessary to produce the best possible solution in the shortest time. Ironically, if you hold back conflicting thoughts, you're actually creating tension which becomes the proverbial "elephant in the room" that nobody mentions. When team members do not openly debate and disagree about important ideas, they often turn to hallway conversations and back-channel personal attacks which are more harmful than any heated argument over legitimate issues. The bottom line is that a great team requires productive conflict in order to deal with issues and continue to grow.

Factor 3: Create Commitment.

Once individuals on a team work through the conflict, great teams make clear and timely decisions and move forward with complete buy-in from every member of the team (even those who may have initially opposed the decision). Team members leave meetings confident that no one on the team is quietly harboring doubts about whether to support agreed upon actions.

Factor 4: Establish Accountability.

Accountability is a buzzword that is used frequently in business today. In the context of team work, however, accountability refers specifically to the willingness of team members to call their peers on performance or behaviors that might be harmful to the team.

The most effective and efficient way to maintain high standards of performance on a team is to establish agreed upon standards, and then allow team members to hold each other accountable. More than any policy or system, there is nothing like the anxiety of letting down respected teammates that motivates people to follow through, and to improve their performance.

Factor 5: Attention to Details.

This sounds obvious, but what we're talking about here is team results, not individual results. An unrelenting focus on specific team objectives and clearly defined outcomes is a requirement for high-performing teams. For many teams, results can be measured in financial terms—profit, or revenue, or shareholder return. But for many others, the results are often measured by other terms, like outcome-based performance against predetermined standards.

Fortune's October 2007 cover story focuses on developing leaders. After studying companies like General Electric, Procter & Gamble, McDonald's, and American Express, author Geoff Colvin provides a list of nine best practices that seemingly work to develop talent in any environment. One of the nine best practices is to “develop teams, not individuals.” Our experience guides us in supporting this practice and Lencioni's point of view that “teamwork remains the one sustainable competitive advantage that has been largely untapped.”

Capital H Group is a consulting firm that takes a value-based approach to helping companies manage, and invest in, their human capital. To contact, visit www.capitalhgroup.com or e-mail info@capitalhgroup.com.