When is a Team Not a Team?

Why many teams are not really teams and three things you can do about it.

Most companies announce "teamwork" as a corporate value, though many do not have true teams. Their teams are really more like groups of individuals.

To understand the difference, think of a group like a track and field sports team; the performance of individuals within the group is paramount and the focus is on individual performance. There is no need to share information. A high jumper, for example, does not need to know the techniques of a sprinter, and the diverse skills present in the group are not shared across the whole team.

A true team is more like a soccer team; while individual performance is still important, the best results are only achieved through cooperation, coordination and communication between the team members.

In the business world, a group of individuals rely on a strong, directive leader, which can be a good solution on a tight deadline and is a leadership style often seen in China-based teams. However, this limits the maximum results to the summation of each individual effort.

A real business team shares leadership roles, is bound together by a common purpose and shared values, and demonstrates high levels of collaboration and synergy. Unlike a group, a team has the potential to outperform its individuals' strengths. A strong team can absorb the absence of a team member much better than a group.

Case Study

A world leader in the fast moving consumer goods business has a diverse and multi-functional "team." However, in reality the "team" functions more as a group of individuals.

Expatriates and local Chinese have very different working styles; expats prefer to direct, rather than mentor, their Chinese colleagues. Therefore, cooperation at the company is low and the work atmosphere is "serious." Successes are never celebrated, thus contributing to low morale and increasing staff turnover. Team members often feel disconnected from the company's vision and values.

The result is familiar. The team felt lost, missing project deadlines and costing the company hundreds of thousands of dollars in the face of competitive market pressures.

Solution: How to form a cohesive team

The company adopted a "two-track" approach to address these issues. The first track is a more traditional approach demanding a continued focus on business results, while the second focused on team development by leveraging the skills, knowledge and wisdom of the whole team. The dual-track approach was completed over 18 months.

Three of the interventions were:
1. Build social connections

The first step was to break the ice. Social occasions, like company dinners and monthly birthday celebrations, were held so people could get to know each other in an informal setting. However, while everyone enjoyed these events, cooperation was not carried back as expats and Chinese colleagues still ate and socialized separately.

To overcome this, regular events were held to build team spirit and to instill the company's values in team members.

2. Success Sessions

Work successes were celebrated in monthly meetings and the public recognition set a powerful incentive for repeated good performance. Over time, the team's focus shifted more to positive achievements and away from complaints.

In order to build deeper ties and understanding, the team tackled business issues at the same time.

3. Retreats

Getting a team together off-site is a major investment in time and money. Previously, opportunities to facilitate business results at away days were wasted. Now, effective quarterly retreats are planned around a company theme.

During these retreats, the whole team discussed strategy, targets and their connection to the big picture. Community activities were used to deepen team bonds while working together on a worthwhile project.

Improved business results were seen through faster turnaround of projects, fewer missed deadlines and higher retention rates. Team results included higher motivation and increased commitment to the company's direction.

Conclusion

While there is no quick fix to building a productive team, the price of inaction is clear. High turnover, missed project deadlines and lower morale all impact the bottom line. As productivity replaces cost as the main competitive driver in China, the ability to build and maintain high performing teams will be a strong advantage for companies that can harness the real potential of their teams.

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