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Go Team Go!

We've all heard or used the term team player when describing ourselves, another staff member, or co-worker. Job applicants will commonly blurt out "Oh I'm definitely a team player!" - employers will routinely state they're only interested in team players when hiring. Yet often very little thought is given to what this term actually means or entails beyond its time-worn, sports-oriented, clichéd interpretation. To be fair, that is because the cliché is to a large degree accurate. We all know that a team player is someone who places the success of the team first and is willing to commit personal sacrifice. And who wouldn't want that quality in an employee?

Of course there is more to being an effective team player than simply a desire or willingness to be one. What attributes or qualities constitute an effective team player? Are there different types of team players?

The answer to the latter question is a simple one ... there are as many different types of team players as there are people. People bring their own unique personality, set of abilities, perceptions and quirks to a team situation. The former question is a little more difficult to answer; however, there are traits that are common to individuals who work well in group situations, such as the following:

▷ Conscientious
▷ Committed
▷ Communicates effectively
▷ High self-esteem
▷ Open-minded
▷ Non-judgmental
▷ Creative thinker

Conversely, the following traits tend to inhibit one's performance within a group.

▷ Lazy
▷ Unable to express oneself
▷ Defensive
▷ Judgmental
▷ Inflexible
▷ Unwilling to share credit

For managers, the issue does not end here however; in fact, it only begins. Once you have determined who among your staff has the requisite abilities to function well in a team, you must determine how to go about assembling the best team possible. As any professional sports coach will tell you, there is more to this task then simply choosing the most talented people and throwing them together (in fact this can be a recipe for

disaster). You must assemble your team according to the required goals you set out for the team and the projected collective ability of the team to achieve these goals in a timely fashion. The process can be a difficult, and sometimes, even a mysterious one, yet there is more to it than simply rolling the dice and hoping for the best.

To simplify matters, we may think of teams being divided into two distinct types: homogenous teams (teams comprised of similar or like-minded individuals) and heterogeneous teams (teams comprised of dissimilar personalities with decidedly varied perspectives).

Many managers almost instinctively opt for forming homogenous teams based on the simple underlying theory that similar types who get along well will yield good results. This view does have merit. Individuals of similar backgrounds, interests and viewpoints do tend to work easily and well together. Friction resulting from personality conflicts is usually minimal and a consensus is often quickly formed allowing for rapid progress and completion of a project. Thus, this type of team is ideal for tasks where a speedy resolution is priority. Unfortunately, there is a down side to the homogenously assembled team. Because its members are on the same page, homogenous groups may tend to ignore alternative solutions, so that while their decisions or approaches might be adequate and sound, they will not necessarily be the best choices possible. Managers must determine before establishing the team and assigning the task just how important a quick solution is. There may be little point in implementing an *adequate* solution if it is only to be replaced with a more creative approach.

This is not to say that homogenous groups cannot achieve optimal results (as they often do), only that to ensure a wider variety of viewpoints and potential resolutions, heterogeneously formed teams often outperform homogenous ones. Complex and difficult problems sometimes require complex and difficult solutions for which this type of team is better suited. Conflict, in the sense of civilized disagreement, is not necessarily a bad thing, and, like necessity, is frequently the mother of invention.

Still, one must be aware of the potential pitfalls of the heterogeneous team as well. Reaching a consensus is commonly a longer process for such a team, and without good leadership these groups may become bogged down by an overwhelming amount of ideas and options. Also, there is the potential for personal conflicts, which can take the focus away from the common goal, cause the group to get entangled in petty politics, and at worst, contribute to disintegration of the team.

Frequently the idea of the heterogeneous team is misinterpreted as merely being a matter of throwing together a combative group of talented personalities and letting them fight it out. This approach will seldom yield positive results, especially not in the long term. The key aspect of the heterogeneous team is the varied viewpoints and perspectives of its members, not the disharmony created by incompatible personalities.

A well-balanced team should consist of members who possess the key competencies (communication and conflict resolution skills, knowledge about goal-setting, planning and organizational abilities) necessary for teamwork, and whose teamwork styles complement each other. If the members of the group possess a variety of styles, they can capitalize on the strengths of each style and compensate for any limitations. In addition, strong team members will possess the ability assume different or multiple roles as the need for multi-tasking in a group situation is often at a premium.

So which model should you use for your team? This will be determined in part by the kind of goals being set, the skill sets required, and of course, the people available. Also bear in mind that to favor one model exclusively over the other is probably a mistake. In all likelihood, your team will be a combination of the two, of varying ratios, depending on the task at hand. Whether you are building a heterogeneous or homogeneous team, evaluating team roles is not only beneficial, it is essential. The process is in many ways similar to that of a director casting a film. By carefully selecting a *cast* that offers a diverse range of talents and approaches you can ensure that your team always has a *cast member* who is just right for the role.

And as with successful films, because there is still no definitive formula for a successful team, remember to add healthy doses of your own experience and intuition to your production.