
Of teams and teambuilding

*Michael F. Kipp and
Mary Ann Kipp*

The authors

Michael F. Kipp and Mary Ann Kipp are Partners at Kipp and Associates, Nashville, Tennessee, USA.
E-mail: mike@kipassoc.com

Keywords

Teams, Goals, Team building, Group dynamics

Abstract

In this article, the authors discuss the characteristics and dynamics of effective teams. They consider the factors influencing interpersonal interactions within a team and consequently propose that there is a variety of strategies which may be employed in any teambuilding initiative. The authors suggest a number of key points which they consider to be vital to any intervention to improve team effectiveness.

Electronic access

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.emerald-library.com>

All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way (Leo Tolstoy).

Much the same can be said of teams. Describing the characteristics of those that work always sounds trite – like platitudes from a *Reader's Digest* article on how to raise gifted children. Describing those that do not, however, is a more challenging task. Their profiles invariably contain qualities unlikely to be found in any other group. “We have some pretty unique personalities” or “you’ve got to understand our business to grasp how this group behaves”.

Team ailments

Dysfunctional teams groups often unwittingly bar the door to change, whether pursued in the guise of strategic planning, reengineering, work redesign or cultural transformation. They handle the inevitable conflicts badly (or not at all), conduct themselves according to unwritten rules that limit their effectiveness and waste time in “violent agreement”. Members bludgeon one another over differences in mindset and style. They tacitly consent not to learn from their collective experience for the sake of keeping peace in the family or “staying safe”. Alternately, everyone speaks his/her mind but no one ever changes it.

Checklist for effectiveness

The very nature of executive work depends upon the interaction among members. Authenticity is fundamental in this regard – a willingness to speak one’s mind clearly and to support others in doing the same. It also helps if team members agree to bring a whole person to work. One company president we greatly admire claims that the most valuable trait a team can develop is the capacity to be vulnerable with one another. Beyond that, we have found a six-point framework to be useful in examining the relative “health” of a team:

- (1) *Goals*. What constitutes “success” for us – in this situation and overall?
- (2) *Roles*. What is expected of us; what do we expect of each other?
- (3) *Rules*. What are our agreements on decision making, work ethic, follow-through. . . ?

- (4) *Relationships*. How do we handle conflict, ambiguity, rumor, secrecy, trust...?
- (5) *Results*. How do we determine performance day to day; what are our “dials”?
- (6) *Rewards*. What is in it for us – individually and collectively? Are we “OK” with that?

Teambuilding

Organizational performance can often be enhanced through teambuilding – a term that has come to mean everything from projective tests to hot tubs and folk songs. Without a doubt, groups can gain a great deal from a ropes course or an exchange of Myers-Briggs profiles – if they truly intersect with a particular team’s issues and the leader’s intent. Otherwise, they take on the aspect of a parlor game – entertaining, but unlikely to change anything.

Four classes

Our experience suggests that there are four good reasons for teambuilding – each of which calls for very different strategies:

- (1) *New group formation and improved relationships*. Self-disclosure exercises; team challenges; temperament or style profiles.
- (2) *Problems in group dynamics*. Conflict management; reflective listening; communication; community building.
- (3) *Barriers to goal attainment*. Role definition; decision protocols; systems thinking.
- (4) *Resolution of goals and game plan*. Business strategy; management philosophy; team charter development.

The choice and design of an intervention must be driven by the reason for thinking teambuilding might be a good idea. A “Desert Survival Challenge” might be appropriate to the first of these, but would do little to address the last.

Lessons learned

While there are no absolutes where organizational behavior is concerned, a few lessons from our own experience might be useful when trying to enhance the effectiveness of your team:

- Teams are not well served by “psychotherapizing” individual members – publicly or one by one. Serial executive coaching is not teambuilding.
- Removing “bad actors”, while sometimes long overdue, seldom alters group dynamics. It just creates a vacancy.
- Time together in and of itself changes nothing. Teams that have been together for years are no more effective than when they started unless they have worked on how they work.
- Nothing gets better without follow-up – behavioral contracts; periodic interventions; process checks and the like.
- There is no substitute for emotional maturity.

The purpose of teambuilding interventions is to enhance performance by improving the processes that characterize the work of the group. While program specifics vary with the needs of the client, all sessions should target communication styles, problem solving, decision making, conflict management and the appropriate use of power as key processes meriting attention.

Teambuilding sessions invariably draw upon the following elements:

- style/temperament tests;
- structured experiences;
- lecturettes;
- case studies;
- group discussions;
- individual feedback;
- tool/skill workshops;
- dialog and community building.

Selection of design elements, time frame, and issue emphasis should be made during a pre-session analysis involving interviews with the group as well as its individual members.