The Four Foundations of a Great Team

Does your team have what it takes?

by *Jeannie Gunter, MA*

After working with thousands of people over the last 18 years, we have noticed that there are certain qualities that highly effective teams have mastered. When teams come to us with challenges, invariably they are in one of these four areas. These four pillars of team work, if mastered, create a stimulating, creative and productive work environment where people are excited and eager to contribute. They are represented here by the acronym **PACE which stands for Purpose, Acknowledgment, Communication and Engagement.**

Purpose

Let's take each quality in turn to see how they are related to greater team synergy. The first quality of Purpose is one that many organizations take for granted. New employees or team members are given the written mission statement of the company which may have been written by an executive committee long ago and may not have a lot of meaning for the employee. A great exercise to engage in with your team is to craft a **departmental or team mission statement** that supports the corporate mission statement, but that is also unique to who your team is.

By giving each member of the team input into the final statement of purpose, you will create a sense of ownership, pride and cohesiveness amongst your team. Be prepared that it may take some time for your team to come to agreement – great! Be sure to allow for differences of opinion and make sure that every voice gets heard. The best statements of purpose are succinct and inspire your team to be reminded of your group vision.

I recommend taking this exercise one step further so that each member of the team creates his/her own personal mission statement. This is a statement of a strength or quality that

that person brings to the team, regardless of his/her daily duties. The statement of purpose reminds each employee of their unique talents that they bring to the greater cause. For example, my personal mission statement is "I inspire others to grow to be their best." It is a simple statement, yet it can pervade everything I do from my interactions with my co-workers to how I treat my clients on the phone.

If every member of your team is in touch with his/her personal mission statement on a daily basis, think of the difference it could make in your organization. The truth is that as human beings we need to feel like we are contributing our gifts to a greater cause. Creating a personal and team statement of purpose can help us stay focused on our contributions and gain a greater sense of fulfillment in our work.

Acknowledgment

It is much easier to point the finger of blame at another and focus on what is going wrong than it is to find and acknowledge what is going right. In fact, people often use complaining as a way to bring them together! When people unite against a common "enemy," this builds a sense of unity, but often with negative consequences in the work environment!

The question is how to create a team culture that is focused on creating solutions rather than problems. Our recommendation is that you start with a basic SWOT analysis with your team. The success of this discussion will largely depend on how much trust there is in your team. Trust of course, is a prerequisite to any kind of real team building experience. You could break your team into smaller groups and have each subgroup come up with answers to the following questions:

What are the strengths of our team?
What are our team's weaknesses (we prefer the word challenges)? What opportunities are in front of us right now? What threats or obstacles are currently in our way?

Once you have allowed time for teams to brainstorm their answers, be sure to acknowledge and focus on what it is you are already doing well – your strengths and opportunities are what are going to give you an advantage – these are your foundation. Too many leaders focus the majority of their energy on the weaknesses, or what is not working. The interesting thing is that research in the field of Appreciative Inquiry shows that this approach often backfires, resulting in more focus and energy being put on what is not working which actually INCREASES what is not working!

The general rule of thumb is that human beings need at least 3 pieces of positive feedback for every piece of critical feedback they need. Think about the difference just focusing on giving more genuine positive feedback could have on your team. **Be accountable for creating a culture of acknowledgment in your team.**

One exercise we love finishing workshops with is an acknowledgment circle. Each person gets appreciated for some quality that they bring to the team in a way that is heartfelt, sincere and in a very short period of time brings the team together and reminds them of how important and appreciated they are.

Communication

Communication is easily the biggest obstacle or biggest asset to greater unity in your team. Given that we do one and two day workshops on the topic of communication alone, it is not possible to summarize in less than a page the breadth of this crucial topic. What we are choosing to focus on here is giving and receiving feedback.

It has come to our attention that most people shy away from feedback. Feedback is often seen as something negative to be avoided and resisted. If you get through the week without getting any feedback you are doing well! This perspective and attitude regarding feedback leaves many people working in a vacuum. The higher up you are on the totem pole, the more likely it is that you get less and less feedback.

What we suggest you do is to design and institute a **continual feedback process** and that you help people understand the gift that continual feedback is to their professional growth and development. In fact, continual feedback is such a powerful tool we call it – **Transformative Feedback.**

The system for setting up a Transformative Feedback session can be simple. It can be something you do at the end of the day with your team, at the end of the week, or at the end of a project. The feedback you give each person can be as simple as: What worked for you? What didn't work for you? What would you like to see done differently?

Again, having a foundation of trust is key to giving and receiving effective feedback. The giver of the feedback must be committed to giving honest, compassionate feedback to really serve the person they are communicating to and the receiver must be committed to being open, non-defensive and to truly listen. We recommend that if you have not setup a feedback system previously that you hire a competent facilitator to walk your team through the process.

With a bit of time and persistence your team will actually come to appreciate and value the feedback system as it will help the individuals, the team and the organization grow in leaps and bounds.

Engagement

If a sense of Purpose, Acknowledgment and Communication are in place, Engagement usually comes more easily. We could also substitute the word enthusiasm for engagement to illustrate this quality. The synonyms for enthusiasm are eagerness, warmth, fervor, zeal,

ardor, passion, devotion. Is it realistic to expect "zeal" in the workplace? How many employees are actually passionate about their work? Based on research from The Concours Institute, **only 20% of the U.S. workforce is currently significantly engaged in their work.** How many of your employees are truly engaged?

The primary factor to engagement is whether or not people are feeling fulfilled and finding meaning in the workplace. If people feel like they are contributing to the team, the workplace and the community, they will find deeper meaning at work. So, the task of creating an engaged team requires several factors; realizing and utilizing people's talents to the fullest, fostering creativity and fun, creating satisfying working relationships and giving people opportunities to contribute. Let's take a quick look at each of these in turn.

Realizing and utilizing people's talents: As people advance in leadership in an organization, often they are personally challenged to draw on more of their individual skills and talents to meet the expectations of their position. The question for leaders in an organization is how can you draw out the talents of those who are on middle management, or administrative assistants or the person at the IT help desk? Human being are naturally drawn toward actualizing their potential, which means they need opportunities to be challenged and to share their gifts and skills. A first step towards greater engagement could mean calling a team meeting, or doing one-on-one interviews, to find out how satisfied employees truly are. Ask the people you work with if they think they are using their talents effectively in their position and if the answer is no, brainstorm with them to come up with ways for them to be able to contribute more fully.

Fostering creativity and fun: It is fairly obvious that most people would prefer to work in a fun, upbeat environment where creativity and innovation are appreciated. What are you doing to create that in your team? Call a "Creativity Council" and brainstorm with your team new ideas to encourage fun and creativity at work. For example, perhaps you have a creativity board where people can post ideas to add more fun to the workplace throughout the week and at the end of the week you vote on the best idea which you implement as soon as possible. Or, perhaps you get some kind of "creativity grammy award" and the person who has contributed to the team in the most creative way that weeks gets to have the award for that week. Ask your team – chances are they will know exactly what is needed!

Creating satisfying working relationships: This is an in-depth subject that we can only touch on briefly here. Studies have shown that a large part of people's engagement and satisfaction in the workplace has to do with their satisfaction with the relationships they have with their colleagues and immediate supervisor. What this means for your organization depends on your current situation. A needs assessment conducted by a professional trainer can help you pinpoint your team building and training needs. It might be enough to engage in periodic fun, team building events or you might need a team retreat or conflict management session to work out some challenges. Whatever training

strategy you decide on, focusing on creating satisfying working relationships pays off in greater engagement, creativity and retention.

Giving people opportunities to contribute: One of the most common workplace complaints is that people don't feel like their ideas are heard and that decisions are handed down from higher up without input from the people that those decision effect. This is primarily a communication issue, but it has a huge impact on the level of people's engagement and satisfaction. Ask yourself these questions: what is our current system for obtaining input from employees? How are suggestions handled? How do employees contribute to decision making? Are they satisfied with that? Asking these questions will help you point the way to the solutions that will work for your team.

In summary, to make sure that you are setting a good PACE for your organization, ask yourself the following questions.

Is my team clear about our purpose?
What is each person's individual purpose?
What processes do we have set up for ongoing acknowledgement and appreciation?
What systems do we have for clear communication and ongoing feedback?
What can I do to make sure that every person on my team is fully engaged?

By asking these questions and moving towards the answers, you will create a more effective, energetic high-performance team.

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