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The Crucial Element of High Performing Teams

I'm currently working with a senior leadership team on an organizational change project. The team has lots of challenges ahead but I've witnessed one aspect of their team interactions that is foundational to their ability to succeed in their change efforts: **They trust each other**. These eleven members have built their team on a foundation of trust and a willingness to be "vulnerable" to each other. And that trust is the crucial first step in creating a team that is effective, focused and capable of achieving outstanding results.

The concept sounds so simple and some would say "soft." But in my experience as a coach and organizational change consultant, finding a team with real trust among team members is not always a given. I've witnessed teams who waste vast amounts of time and energy "managing" all the political ins and outs of the team, undermining the effectiveness of their fellow team members and some actually sabotaging the results of their colleagues.

A Trusting Team

So what does trust among team members look like? My client, the eleven member senior leadership team, displays the following characteristics:

- They appreciate the perspectives of each member and capitalize on the diverse range of views of fellow team members.
- They welcome input and questions from other team members about their areas of responsibility.
- They are focused on the project and organizational purpose and goals, not getting sidetracked by organization and team politics.
- They admit when they make a mistake and offer sincere apologies to their members.
- They show respect for team members and feel committed to their team goals and aspirations.

These characteristics are consistent with the features of a trusting team that Patrick Lencioni identifies in his classic fable, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*.



The energy created by the trust of fellow team members impacts all aspects of team effectiveness. Because they trust each other, team members are not afraid to confront each other with honest feedback that moves the team forward. They are committed to each other and the organization, knowing they have clear roles and buy-in to the stated purpose of the team. They hold each other accountable to their goals and are concerned with not letting each other down. And finally, the foundation of trust allows the team to be singularly focused on getting results, the primary reason for the team in the first place.

Team Leader and Building Trust

The role of the team leader is critical in fostering this culture of trust. Being a role model for “doing what you say you will do” and “walking the talk” are first steps. By establishing a level of their own vulnerability, the leader models for the team a willingness to set the bar high to achieve team trust. The leader creates an environment that is safe, where honest opinions are not punished or belittled.

What can you do to influence or change the level of trust on your team? First begin by examining your own behavior. Ask yourself what you contribute to the trust level of your team. Are you a role model for being open and “vulnerable,” willing to admit your mistakes and welcoming the input of others? Do you firmly discourage the negative or destructive behavior of individuals on your team? Do you make a stand and “do what you say you will do?”

There are numerous assessments available that provide leaders and organizations with valuable information on the level of trust of among team members. One instrument, ***The Leadership Culture Survey***, allows an organization to diagnose its leadership culture with trust as one component. 360 interviews are effective in uncovering, in a confidential format, areas where lack of trust among team members is impeding progress. Of course, team building with personality type assessments such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, attempt to build trust through understanding each other through personality preferences. But trust can also be built by team members connecting with each other through shared history, daily follow through on commitments and modeling behavior that focuses on team results not on individual competition.



Call to Action

Trust is not new territory. Trust has always been a foundational characteristic for effective and successful teams and fostering trust is a fundamental requirement of a leader. But we all need continual reminders of the true cost to the organization of a lack of trust among team members. The financial costs, including wasted time playing politics, are evident. But the human side of a lack of trust includes decreased motivation, lack of commitment and team misalignment. These are the intangible costs to consider.

There are enough challenges facing our teams and organizations. Fostering true trust among team members is the crucial foundation for effective performance and ultimately team and organization success. My client has utilized this foundation as a lever for making the organization changes required by this current economy. The work and effort it took to build the trust level among their members is generating the rewards today.

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