Use Values to Pull Your Team Together

by JoAnna Brandi

No doubt today's leaner organizations can benefit from the power and synergy of teamwork but all too often it's become fashionable to call every group a team. Organizations rush to anoint departments and committees alike, "teams", and then sit back to wait for the results, which, without the right kind of training, are disappointing. Fact is, few people really know the difference between a group and a team, or, for that matter the difference between a team, and an effective, high performance team, which takes full advantage of the combined intelligence, energy and enthusiasm of its members to reach their agreed upon goals.

A real understanding of how a high performance team operates is still often misunderstood. I've seen many companies make teamwork analogous to football. Although some of the classical team elements are present: a coach, a common vision and goal, and commitment, today's teams have different needs. A sports team gets to "practice", a business team has few chances to practice, hardly any opportunity to call "time out", a sports team is geared towards stellar performance during "season", an organizational team is "on" always and requires a different sense of flexibility in roles and responsibilities.

Today's organizational teams need a grounded understanding of the nature of interdependence of team members. Our old, hierarchical, industrial age models foster independence (with associates competing on the way to the top) maverick behavior, and ego battles, and are all antithetical to real teamwork.

Effective, high performance teams operate best in a climate of trust where members are encouraged to express diverse opinions and, in a non-judgmental space, explore the differences in those opinions, and the information inherent in them. Effective teams create an environment where learning (and therefore some failing) is encouraged as well as rewarded. Effective teams have a clear, shared purpose and a vision of the future, they share a set or code of values.

Ask any large group of people what makes an effective team and several will say "a common set of values", a code by which they live. And while most teams have values, few have taken the time to define them and articulate in a way that is useful to all members.

The more I work with relationship management issues the more I find it important to define what words mean rather then assuming all parties operate with the same definition. In helping companies develop teams there is an exercise I find very useful: defining and articulating values.

Here's one way you can adapt the methodology to your soon-to-be-team. Schedule a meeting to discuss values. Have each person bring to the meeting, in written form, a list of five values that they feel are important to them professionally. Ask them to define each of those values and list several ways those values are demonstrated in their day-to-day lives. This pre-meeting work is important for two reasons, one, it begins a reflective, self-referencing process which becomes an important team skill, and secondly it prepares the individuals for the participative nature of teamwork.

Let's look at two values as examples: self-responsibility and resourcefulness. The first I would define as: being accountable for my actions, being self-aware and self-correcting and motivated from within. Resourcefulness might be defined as thinking creatively, not accepting "no" as the answer, taking one step more then others would, looking "under rocks" for what others miss.

After choosing my definitions, I would list the way those values show up in my life. For instance, keep a journal, write down lessons learned, keep an up-to-date to-do list, do what I say I'm going to do. For resourcefulness the list might look like this: look at each problem from at least three points of view, read and study become more knowledgeable, keep a file as a resource on various topics, ask "How come?" a lot, search for interesting questions.

Each person having done this valuable work, the meeting begins with a discussion of at least one of everyone's values. After the person articulates how they demonstrate the values in their lives, the group helps them brainstorm several other ways they might demonstrate them.

The next step is to start listing on a flipchart or board, values the team feels they should live by. Using many of the values people brought to the meeting, and adding to them, the group begins their list. Then they begin defining some of these values to their satisfaction. (An impartial, objective facilitator is useful at a meeting like this, to keep the conversation flowing and to keep one or two people from monopolizing the meeting.) The length of the meeting will determine how many values get worked through to completion.

For the first values meeting it is okay if only one or two get finished. After the value to work on is selected and sufficiently defined (so all agree to definition) make a list of how that value is demonstrated now in the organization, and then make another list of what happens when that value isn't demonstrated. This reverse thinking technique will help with the next list, "ten other ways we could be demonstrating this value in our team".

Repeat this process until the list of critical values for the team is completed. Then create a team values statement. Value statements become very useful when the team reaches a deadlock or can't make a decision. The decisions a team makes should be aligned with what their values are and how they live them. This value "screen" provides a useful way of seeing the tasks at hand and the behavior of the members.

Living the values works when the team is committed to having them work. By attaching people to team values, initially through the articulation of personal values, it's easier for them to make a personal connection. By defining their values together, and agreeing to the definition, a connection to the group is made.

When the values are honored by all, they prove a powerful binding force during times of conflict. They serve as a reminder of the common ground shared by the team.

Defining values is one way to create the common ground and the common language that an effective, high performance team needs to excel. Try this process with your team, at the very least it will force a self awareness and reflection that will be useful in your service quality process and a discipline that will get people thinking about what is really important.