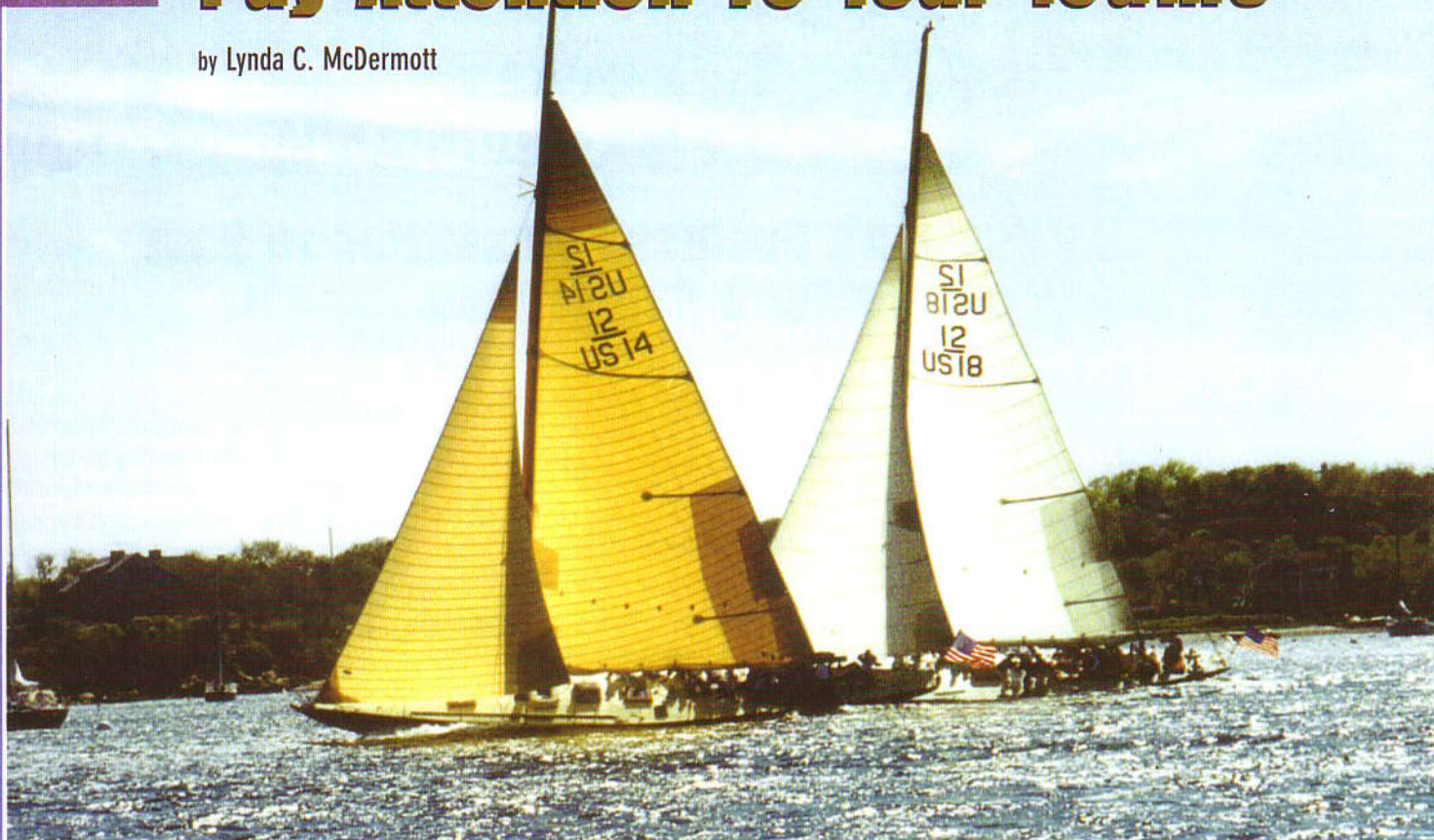# Pay Attention To Your Teams

by Lynda C. McDermott

There are some good reasons why teams have become a standard feature of organizational life. Teams can be one of the best ways for organizations to focus the competencies of a diverse group of employees on a specific business or performance challenge. They can fuel a high level of involvement and accountability and encourage collaborative behaviors and values. They can empower team members to do meaningful work and fully leverage individual skills and talents. When they work well, they can even add fun to the workplace.

Unfortunately, none of the above is likely to happen unless the people doing the work of the team receive proper support and development. Borrowing from the words of playwright Arthur Miller: attention must be paid.

Successful teams—those that provide maximum benefit for both the organization and individual team members—are characterized by a commitment to high performance. Team members are aligned around a common mission and working to achieve explicit goals. They know that each team

Top: EquiPro International believes in taking teams off site and involving them in a collaborative activity that is also recreational.

member serves a specific purpose and they operate from the vantage point that what they can achieve together is more than they could achieve on their own.

Not surprisingly, high performance teams happen neither by accident nor overnight. The fact is, they do require hard work and frequently do bring exactly what team members fear—more work, more

Team members are taught to work together to achieve a common goal through a variety of creative activities.

meetings and more people to please. That being the case, once organizations commit to high performance teamwork, it becomes even more important to help team members maintain a balance between work and personal life. That means paying attention to how teams are both set up initially and how they work over time; and continuing to assess how satisfied individual team members are and what it will take for them to stay productive and motivated.

At EquiPro International, we've worked in over 40 countries and with multiple industries helping organizations

build high performance teams. We've seen all sorts of teams—executive teams, cross-functional teams, virtual teams, global teams, etc.—thrive in their work and celebrate the breakthrough results they were able to achieve. Following are specific steps organizations can take to pay attention and cultivate teams capable of breakthrough results, along with some of our "lessons learned" over the years about certain characteristics shared by successful teams.

Choose Team Leaders and Team Members Wisely

Successful teams are structured around the unique abilities and strengths of individual team members, including team leaders. When staffing a team, organizations need to consider what competencies (knowledge, skills, expertise, etc.) the team needs relative to the particular work they will be doing and results they are expected to achieve. Simply put, each chosen member should have the chance to shine. Acknowledging and utilizing people's competencies can foster a tremendous sense of personal value and worth which, in turn, almost invariably will show up in their level of effort, commitment and satisfaction.

Conversely, taking the "whoever's available" approach to team leader and team member selection can be fatal. Each team member must embody specific competencies at (a) a baseline level of effectiveness and (b) to the degree strategically required for the team to meet their goals. Otherwise, both individual team members and the team as a whole will suffer in terms of motivation and productivity.

Capitalizing on diversity is another key element of team member selection. Obviously, some teams are inherently more diverse than others. Members of global teams, for example, may hail from myriad countries, speak several languages and embrace a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Then, too, an assortment of personalities and working styles is a given with any team. But there are other elements of diversity that should be brought consciously into the mix. High performance teams need people with different perspectives, different functional or technical expertise, even different age groups, to encourage divergent thinking and inspire innovative results.

Give Teams a Reason to Exist

Successful teams have an alignment of purpose and a perceived need to work together. A team's charter—their reason for existence—is the cause around which they unite and the means to build mutual accountability and commitment. To that end, organizations must ensure that a team's charter and goals are clearly defined.

Setting tangible goals is a crucial part of a team's launch. In our work at EquiPro, we take teams through a Team Goal Development & Alignment Process which provides a framework for sorting out their goals and arriving at a common purpose and direction. Not all team decisions require consensus, but goal-setting relies on definite agreement on every goal from every team member. Getting buy-in from the entire team encourages a sense of ownership and accountability, thereby motivating their full commitment.

The goal-setting process can be a powerful force toward unifying a team. As an example, we worked with a product team formed as the result of an alliance between two companies looking to merge resources for a new product launch. The team members came from two vastly different organizational cultures and, in their early interactions, felt doubtful they could ever get past their differences. Driven by an urgency around certain calendar deadlines that had to be met for the product launch to succeed, the team delved into the goal-setting process. That's when a shift occurred. As they began to focus on precisely why the team had been established and what they were there to accomplish, both sets of team members realized that they were aiming for the same target and were able to really come together as a team.

Get Specific about Roles and Responsibilities

Successful teams understand their individual team roles and responsibilities. To achieve high levels of team performance, team members must be clear about the particular functions they are to perform within the team and how those functions relate to achieving the team's goals. Confusion over roles and responsibilities can lead to cynicism and disengagement from the team's work. By contrast, role

clarification typically has an energizing effect. Team members know their purpose on a team and tend to feel more confident and trusting in their interactions with each other.

In our work with high performance teams, we use an assessment process called Team Role Analysis™, developed by the Management Research Group, to define and clarify team members' various roles on a team. The process can help team members learn how well they are performing their roles and identify certain strengths and weaknesses. Armed with this information, teams can develop strategies to cultivate their strengths and put focus toward the roles they believe will enhance their effectiveness as a team.
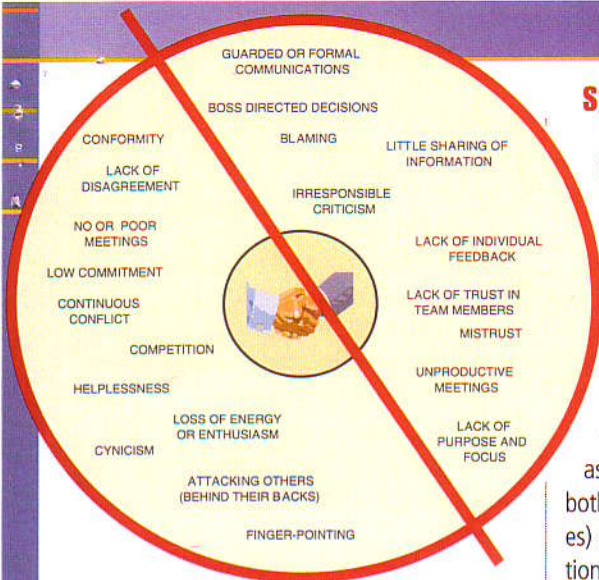
People have a natural inclination to slide into some roles with ease. For example, extroverts may migrate to roles that involve interpersonal skills, while analytical types may lean toward roles requiring an attention to task details. However, even if team members do not characteristically use or play certain roles on a team, they can learn and develop the necessary skills and behaviors associated with those roles.

Remember That Time Is of the Essence

Successful teams establish time requirements for team participation. Sometimes, a team is made up entirely of full-time members who will devote all their work time to the team. More often, teams include part-time members who take on team responsibilities while also handling all or part of their regular job. In either case, organizations—more specifically, senior management and/or the managers to whom team members report—need to spell out and agree to the expected time commitment, whether 100 percent or any percentage thereof.

Time allocation helps team members clarify their performance expectations and individual accountabilities. Without clear boundaries of "team time" and a delegation of their usual job duties sufficient to offset that time, people can face serious problems trying to handle their new team role and meet the demands of multiple masters. They may struggle to resolve conflicting priorities and requirements. They may find themselves putting in extra hours to make sure each set of responsibilities gets met, quickly shifting an already delicate work/life balance. If the balancing act doesn't go well, they also may face the dis-

The diagram shows a circle with a red "prohibited" slash through it, containing the following labels:

GUARDED OR FORMAL COMMUNICATIONS
BOSS DIRECTED DECISIONS
CONFORMITY
BLAMING
LITTLE SHARING OF INFORMATION
LACK OF DISAGREEMENT
IRRESPONSIBLE CRITICISM
NO OR POOR MEETINGS
LACK OF INDIVIDUAL FEEDBACK
LOW COMMITMENT
LACK OF TRUST IN TEAM MEMBERS
CONTINUOUS CONFLICT
MISTRUST
COMPETITION
HELPLESSNESS
UNPRODUCTIVE MEETINGS
LOSS OF ENERGY OR ENTHUSIASM
LACK OF PURPOSE AND FOCUS
CYNICISM
ATTACKING OTHERS (BEHIND THEIR BACKS)
FINGER-POINTING

pleasure of fellow team members or colleagues (not to mention family and friends!) and wind up resentful, burnt-out and demotivated themselves.

Setting time commitments for team participation also sends a message that the team's work is important. Abiding by agreed-to time commitments is then critical to reinforce that message. For example, in our work with a major pharmaceutical company building its global teams, members of one cross-functional team met with their functional managers early on and reached agreements on time allocation. As the team progressed, however, the managers repeatedly violated the agreements—removing team members without notice, not allowing members to attend team meetings, etc. Their actions left team members skeptical of management's support for the team and torn between competing loyalties. In this situation, verbal agreements did not suffice. For ongoing or long-term teams in particular, we suggest drawing up some form of written contract to be signed by the team members, the team leader and the managers involved. Besides serving as hard evidence of their pact, the contract can be useful for periodically reviewing whether the original time allocations remain reasonable and workable.

Don t Forget the Carrots

Successful teams expect their commitment, efforts and results to be recognized.

Organizations that rely on teams to carry out key aspects of their overall business strategy need to determine how best to evaluate and reward teams for the work they accomplish. Traditional compensation systems center on individual rewards for individual output. When individuals serve on teams, they require incentives and rewards oriented to achieving team-based goals and producing team-based results.

The ways of motivating and rewarding team members are as complex and diverse as the many types of teams that exist. As a general rule, incentives and rewards should be matched to the weight of the business challenge a team is asked to address. Consider a combination of both formal rewards (e.g., cash, stock, bonuses) and informal rewards (e.g., family vacations, social/cultural events, home office equipment). If team participation entails taking on additional and/or significantly different roles and responsibilities, reflect that in the team members' rewards.

It is important to highlight some of the less tangible benefits of serving on teams, such as increasing team members' visibility in the organization or opportunities to learn new skills and knowledge. From our experience, a major incentive for people to commit and contribute to teams is the prospect of enhancing their individual competencies. Developmental opportunities and experiences are not only a key motivator for team members, but are also valuable to cultivate certain skill sets and formal practices that enable teams to work together more productively. When EquiPro launches a new team or conducts team member or team leader training, we often take teams off-site to a different setting to encourage their open dialogue and "loosen up" their interactions. We've even taken teams to the high seas with our OnBoard™ program, which teaches the art of teamwork through the art of sailing a top-flight racing yacht.

Teamwork Takes Work and Care

Successful teams are backed by organizations that are willing to invest in them, nurture them and stick with them. Too many organizations think that just setting up teams is enough to elicit high performance results, leaving too many teams feeling abandoned from the start. If teams are ignored, that's when they exhibit "symptoms of unproductive teams" (see diagram). When management calls for high performance teamwork, they must be prepared to back that requirement with ongoing support and involvement at each stage of a team's evolution.

One of our clients in the financial services industry provides an excellent example of the impact when an organization fully engages in a team development process. We worked with the organization to design a training and development initiative aimed at creating a more collaborative and team-oriented culture. The initiative began with a Team at the Top© program that brought senior management together to evaluate their own leadership and teamwork effectiveness, both in terms of how they interact with each other and throughout the organization. A series of Team Fitness Programs© followed in which all employees in the organization were introduced to various team-based competencies and practical tools for improving communication, decision-making and conflict resolution. In a separate series of Team Leader Workshops, managers and supervisors examined and learned ways to strengthen their team leadership competencies.

For this organization, the investment paid off—a before-and-after assessment survey showed improvement in every performance area rated. Their teambuilding work, however, did not end with the formal training. As the president of the organization noted in a memo he sent to all employees, "This is not a one-time initiative. We must work to strengthen teamwork and to maintain the changes that we are about to make."

Ultimately, that brand of unwavering support from the very top of the organization is a make-or-break factor in generating high performance teamwork. Senior management must be an integral part of the team development process and be willing to devote the time, resources and training necessary for their teams to succeed. There's no doubt that teams are here to stay. But to avoid having those so-called teams that bring to mind the old jokes about needing committees to change a light bulb, then we have to get smarter about—and pay attention to—what it takes to ensure that our teams really work. ●

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