Team Building Without Time Wasting

by Marshall Goldsmith and Howard Morgan

Teams are becoming more and more common and important. As the traditional, hierarchical school of leadership diminishes in significance, a new focus on networked team leadership is emerging to take its place. Leaders are finding themselves members of all kinds of teams, including virtual teams, autonomous teams, cross-functional teams, and action-learning teams.

Many of today's leaders face a dilemma: as the need to build effective teams is increasing, the time available to build these teams is often decreasing. A common challenge faced by today's leaders is the necessity of building teams in an environment of rapid change with limited resources. The process of re-engineering and streamlining, when coupled with increased demand for services, has led to a situation in which most leaders have more work to do and fewer staff members to help them do it.

Research involving thousands of participants has shown how focused feedback and follow-up can increase leadership and customer service effectiveness (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, and Beckhard, 1996). A parallel approach to team building has been shown to help leaders build teamwork without wasting time. While the approach described sounds simple, it will not be easy. It will require that team members have the courage to ask for input and suggestions regularly and the discipline to develop a behavioral change strategy to follow up, and to "stick with it."

To implement the following team-building process successfully, the leader (or external coach) will need to assume the role of coach or facilitator and fight the urge to be the "boss" of the project. Greater improvement in teamwork will generally occur if the team members develop their own behavioral change strategy rather than if the leader develops the strategy and imposes it on the team. This process should not be implemented if the leader has the present intention of firing or removing a team member.

Steps in the Process

Stage I; Identify Who Needs to Change What

Step One. Begin by asking all members of the team to confidentially record their individual answers to two questions: (1) "On a 1 to 10 scale (with 10 being ideal), how well are we doing in terms of working together as a team?" and (2) "On a 1 to 10 scale, how well do we need to be doing in terms of working together as a team?"

Before beginning a team-building process, it is important to determine whether the team feels that team building is both important and needed. Some people may report to the same manager, but legitimately have little reason to work interactively as a team. Other groups may believe that teamwork is important, but feel that the team is already functioning smoothly and that a team-building activity would be a waste of time.

Step Two. Have a team member calculate the results. Discuss the results with the team. If the team members believe that the gap between current effectiveness and needed effectiveness indicates the need for team building, proceed to the next step in the process.

In most cases team members believe that improved teamwork is both important and needed. Recent

interviews involving members from several hundred teams (in multinational corporations) showed that the "average" team member believed that his or her team was currently at a 5.8 level of effectiveness but needed to be at an 8.7 level.

Step Three. Ask the team members, "If every team member could change two key behaviors that would help us close the gap between where we are and where we want to be, which two behaviors should we all try to change?" Have each team member record his or her selected behaviors on flip charts.

Step Four. Help team members prioritize all the behaviors on the charts (many will be the same or similar) and (using consensus) determine the two most important behaviors to change (for all team members).

Step Five. Have each team member hold a one-on-one dialogue with all other team members. During the dialogues each member will request that his or her colleague suggest two areas for personal behavioral change (other than the two already agreed on above) that will help the team close the gap between where we are and where we want to be.

These dialogues occur simultaneously and take about five minutes each. For example, if there are seven team members, each team member will participate in six brief one-on-one dialogues.

Stage II; Make the Changes

Step Six. Let each team member review his or her list of suggested behavioral changes and choose the two that seem to be the most important. Have all team members then announce their two key behaviors for personal change to the team.

Step Seven. Encourage all team members to ask for brief (five-minute), monthly "progress reports" from all other team members on their effectiveness in demonstrating the two key behaviors common to all team members and the two key personal behaviors. Specific suggestions for improvement can be solicited in areas in which behavior does not match desired expectations.

Step Eight. Conduct a mini-survey, follow-up process in approximately four months. From the mini-survey each team member will receive confidential feedback from all other team members on his or her perceived change in effectiveness. This survey will include the two common items, the two personal items, and an item that assesses how much the individual has been following up with the other team members. The mini-surveys are simple enough to be put on a postcard and might look like the sample in Figure 9.1.

FIGURE 9.1. SAMPLE MINI-SURVEY

Do you believe this person had become more (or less) effective *in the past six months* in regard to the following items? (Please circle the number that best matches your estimate of any change in effectiveness.)

	Less Effective			No Perceptible Change			More Effective	No Change Needed	Not Enough Information
Team Items:									
1. Clarifies roles and expectations with fellow team members	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	NCN	NI
2. Supports the final decision of the team (even if it was not his or her original idea)	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	NCN	NI
Individual Items:									
1. Genuinely listens to others	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	NCN	NI
2. Strives to see the value of differing opinions	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	NCN	NI

How has this person followed up with you on areas that he or she has been trying to improve? (Check one)

_____ No Perceptible Follow-Up
_____ Little Follow-Up
_____ Some Follow-Up
_____ Frequent Follow-Up
_____ Consistent (Periodic) Follow-Up

What can this individual do to become a more effective team member?

_____

_____

_____

Step Nine. Have an outside supplier calculate the results for each individual (on all items) and calculate the summary results for all team members (on the common team items). Each team member can then receive a confidential summary report indicating the degree to which colleagues see his or her increased effectiveness in demonstrating the desired behaviors. Each member can also receive a summary report on the team's progress on the items selected for all team members.

"Before and after" studies have clearly shown that if team members have regularly followed up with their colleagues they will almost invariably be seen as increasing their effectiveness in their selected individual "areas for improvement." The group summary will also tend to show that (overall) team members will have increased in effectiveness on the common team items. The mini-survey summary report will give team members a chance to receive positive reinforcement for improvement (and to learn what has not improved) after a reasonably short period of time. The mini-survey will also help to validate the importance of "sticking with it" and "following up."

Step Ten. In a team meeting have each team member discuss key learnings from their mini-survey results, and ask for further suggestions in a brief one-on-one dialogue with each other team member.

Step Eleven. Review the summary results with the team. Facilitate a discussion on how the team (as a whole) is doing in terms of increasing its effectiveness in the two key behaviors that were

selected for all team members. Provide the team with positive recognition for increased effectiveness in teamwork. Encourage team members to keep focused on demonstrating the behaviors that they are trying to improve.

Step Twelve. Have every team member continue to conduct brief, monthly, "progress report" sessions with all other team members. Re-administer the mini-survey eight months after the beginning of the process and again after one year.

Step Thirteen. Conduct a summary session with the team one year after the process has started. Review the results of the final mini-survey, and ask the team members to rate the team's effectiveness on where we are versus where we need to be in terms of working together as a team. Compare these ratings with the original ratings that were calculated one year earlier. (If team members followed the process in a reasonably disciplined fashion, the team will almost always see a dramatic improvement in teamwork.) Give the team positive recognition for improvement in teamwork, and have each team member (in a brief one-on-one dialogue) recognize each of his or her colleagues for improvements in behavior that have occurred over the past twelve months.

Step Fourteen. Ask the team members if they believe that more work on team building will be needed in the upcoming year. If the team believes that more work would be beneficial, continue the process. If the team believes that more work is not needed, declare victory and work on something else!

Why This Process Works

The process described above works because it is highly focused, includes disciplined feedback and follow-up, does not waste time, and causes participants to focus on self-improvement. Most survey feedback processes ask respondents to complete too many items. In such surveys most of the items do not result in any behavioral change and participants feel they are wasting time. Participants almost never object to completing four-item mini-surveys that are specifically designed to fit each team member's unique needs. The process also works because it provides ongoing feedback and reinforcement. Most survey processes provide participants with feedback every twelve to twenty-four months. Any research on behavioral change will show that feedback and reinforcement for new behavior needs to occur much more frequently than yearly or bi-yearly.

A final reason that the process works is because it encourages participants to focus on self-improvement. Many team-building processes degenerate because team members are primarily focused on solving someone else's problems. This process works because it encourages team members to focus primarily on solving their own problems!

Let us close with a challenge to you (the reader) as a team leader. Try it! The "downside" is very low. The process takes little time and the first mini-survey will quickly show whether progress is being made. The "upside" can be very high. As effective teamwork becomes more and more important, the brief amount of time that you invest in this process may produce a great return for your team and an even greater return for you organization.