Building a Thundering Team

Strong professional bonds aren't suddenly created during a 2−day team−building session in the woods. A culture that promotes stringent quality controls isn't produced just because the boss started screaming after a product recall.

If you haven't guessed by now, organizations don't suddenly become great because all at once someone decides to require excellence. Organizations become great because they foster excellence over time. It's the same with the teams within these organizations. It takes time to build good ones.

Nonetheless, many managers are frustrated by what they see as a corporate failure to provide them with the highly skilled workers and sharp, energetic executives that they believe they deserve. It's an easy out to say, "We don't have the right people." It's a lot tougher to look at the team today and decide how to build a stronger team for tomorrow.

Strong organizations are built or revised from the ground up, and then continually strengthened over time. If you want something strong in the future, start now. By the time you're finished, you may look around and realize that the great company you used to fantasize about working for is a reality.

Being good is tough. It means performing at a higher level than your competitors. It means constantly being on guard. And, of course, there is no free lunch. If you want a good team and a good organization, start providing heavily in terms of training, morale building, bonding, and discipline.

Your greatest problem will be raising the standards from what you have now. Enforcing a higher work ethic. Increasing morale through increased hardships. That means being the bad guy at first. That means getting rid of the people who don't fit in. That means demanding more than people are used to giving. And if you're doing this because you're looking for a group of lifelong friends, think again. That's a nice perk, not the objective. Are you sure you're up for the job? Or do you just enjoy talking about what should be done at your company while you hang out with your subordinates at the water cooler?

If you want a team that works, you need to do a lot more than just hire competent folks and then sit back while they automatically excel. You need to continuously work with your team to determine what they're capable of accomplishing. This entails finding their weak spots and fixing them until their goals are met, and then raising the bar to a new level. Then making that new bar the standard.

Setting a high standard is not about accomplishing a superior objective and then backing off. A large number of workers can occasionally produce fantastic results, with large dry spells in between. A large portion of the population can walk the distance of a marathon, and then not walk again for a long time. A lot of sailors and soldiers can occasionally hit a bull's eye, firing lots of stray bullets in between. When your team occasionally does produce a fantastic result, congratulations! It has done something extraordinary. The team members have done something that they couldn't do every day. The down side, of course, is that they perceive it as an unusual achievement, one that cannot be accomplished every day. You reinforce that perception every time you thank them for doing
something exceptional. *"Thanks for getting the project in on time, guys. That was really unusual."*

Setting a high standard means that your team will shine day after day, because it won't see it as shining. Team members will see it as what's expected of them. Every week, when SEALs go for a routine sand run or ocean swim, they don't finish up and think, "Wow! I just did what few Americans do!" Instead, they look around at how they did compared to their teammates. Simply running and swimming was the bare minimum.

When your team accepts what used to be superior as a routine standard, then you're on your way. Although your team members will regard their standards as ordinary, they'll know that they are far above the accepted standards of other teams. One SEAL captain used to call this the "golden key."

There are many valid reasons for bringing in outside people: Your current workers are not sufficiently competent. You need more of them. Or you need a breath of fresh air. Rarely can you deliver a solution to these problems by going in−house. But there is an enormous cost to going outside. If you have an opportunity to keep the woman who excels at her job, don't ignore the conditions that might make her jump ship.

The take−away here is that if you have good people, then you need to train them, improve them, and grow them. You need to listen to what they want and need and then deliver it. And if you can't deliver it, you need to explain why, and let them know what both of you need to do to work toward that goal. That's part of the deal. That's your responsibility. If you're not doing it, then you need to reconsider how badly you want your team to succeed. And if you decide you don't want the team members to succeed badly enough, then don't expect them to stay. In retention, you're either with them or you're against them. If you're not actively trying to keep and grow your people, then you're pushing them away. And that is a waste of your most valuable resource.

So realize this: The leading motivator for employees isn't cash. It's job satisfaction. It's feeling appreciated for their input and work. It's having their opinions count. It's having the opportunity to meet a challenge head on with the resources they need.

In a study that's been repeated too often to discount, managers felt that wages and job security were the most important factors in an employee's satisfaction, while employees felt that a full appreciation of their work and feeling "in" on things were the most important factors.

You don't have to study Maslow's hierarchy to understand the minimum requirements that people need if they are to keep going. You don't need to have a Ph.D. in human relations. You simply have to recognize that basic necessities have to be in place if people are going to concentrate on achieving superior goals.

Pay: - Ensure that they have enough.
Titles: - Ensure that the title corresponds to the amount of respect the employee needs in order to do the job.
Respect: - You earn respect by giving it. Let people know when you think highly of them, and don't even think of bullshitting them.
Recognition: - Ensure that people know that you know how they're doing—both when they do well and when they do poorly.
Loads: - Let everyone know that you'll protect the good performers from the poor performers.
Trust: - Ensure that they know you will be there for them.

If you're running your team well, there should always be something to do. If there isn't, then it's time to disband. If you don't give your team anything to do, then people who are worth their weight are going to find something to do. And that includes looking for another job, freelancing for someone else, working on a hobby, or just enjoying the time off. Whatever it is they do, we can guarantee you, it's not going to be adding to your bottom line.