

Title:

To Team or Not To Team

Word Count:

784

Summary:

This article helps you think about the question - to team or not to team... and provides you with some illuminating, and perhaps surprising answers.

Keywords:

professional development, team building, leadership, forming teams, building teams, team development, interdependence

Article Body:

Everyone thinks teams are a good thing. Leaders like to form teams. People, for the most part believe in the value and purpose of teams . . .

All of us are smarter than each of us.

1 + 1 = 3

. . . are just two common phrases that reinforce and prove how pervasive our belief in teams is.

And that belief is justified.

Sometimes.

There are many times in our civic or church groups, and in our businesses and professional associations that we need teams of people to work on an issue or a project. And sometimes we would be better off without a team - with individuals contributing as individuals.

What?

No team?

You got it.

At least not the type of team you probably think of, when you think of a team.

Two Basic Types of Teams

To keep things simple, I believe there are two basic types of teams. There are basketball teams and there are track and field teams.

Basketball Teams

Basketball teams (or soccer or hockey) are teams that require, by the nature of their task, that everyone play as one unit. On teams in these sports the players are interdependent. At any moment of any game, in order to be successful, the entire team needs to be working in harmony. The role of each player is designated by their position (which takes into account their innate strengths and acquired skills). However, the situation at any moment during the flow of the game, may require any player to take any role.

And on good teams of this sort, all players are willing to be flexible, to assist, to change roles, to "do what it takes". Because they know that without working together, they can't achieve their team goals of victory. The nature of the game forces interdependency among the team members.

Track and Field Teams

Players on track and field teams on the other hand (except in a few relay events) are not interdependent, they are independent. Shot putters have a skill set that is largely unrelated to the sprinters. And the high jumpers can be personally skilled and successful without any tangible help or support from the distance runners.

At the end of the day (or meet), the team can win if enough of the individuals do well. In other words if enough individuals win, the team will win. The most successful of these teams will have highly talented individual contributors, supporting each other to reach their common goal of winning. In this way they are definitely a team. They may feel allegiance to the group. They certainly can have pride in being a part of the group. They want each other to be successful. They know that they can all be more successful when each individual is more successful. They can have a common goal (to win the meet or championship). But the fundamental relationship between the players isn't the same as it is on a basketball team.

What This Means to Us

In our organizations we most likely have both sorts of teams. We have teams

that work in a process flow or project where the outputs of one person directly affect the work of the next - where the work and the people are highly interdependent.

We also have teams that look more like the track and field team. In these situations people are working toward a common mission and goal, but their work doesn't intersect in nearly the same ways as for the highly interdependent teams.

Fair enough you say.

But in my experience, we tend to want all teams to think they are basketball teams. If the work or project dictates that focus, great. But if you have a track and field (independent) team, you don't need the same focus on interdependence and traditional "team building" activities.

What Do We Do Now?

If you lead a team or form teams or are just a member of a team, you need to think about and talk about this distinction. Determine across the team (or future team) what type of team you are. Once there is agreement on the type of team you are, you can begin to set the right kinds of expectations for each other and for yourself. You can build more appropriate plans for training, development and team building.

Knowing which type of team your work or project dictates is the first step towards helping that group of people be more successful and the work being done successfully.

So maybe it isn't really, "to team or not to team?", but "which type of team?"

. . . that is the question.

Answer that one first. And, using the answer as a guide, watch all of your teams be more successful.