To become a team is the quintessential “rite of passage” in today’s business world. A classic book defines a team appropriately as “a small number of people with complimentary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable”[1, p. 45]. The definition is treacherously simple, often allowing potential teambuilders to skirt over critical elements without a clue to their importance.

Quinn et al.[2], approaching teambuilding from the leader’s role, emphasize that success dictates that one person becomes competent at the facilitator role of building teams, using participative management, and managing conflict. Unfortunately some managers view teams as a magical overlay that permeates groups’ thinking. They believe that teams are developed by managerial edict, merely admonishing groups to change their attitudes.

Many of management’s teambuilding failures are from self-inflicted wounds, often arising from attempts to use teams for the wrong purpose or to establish them by authoritarian relationships. Some errors are so serious that we might even refer to them as deadly sins of teambuilding. They include malselection of teams, impatience, deception, aimlessness, powerlessness, promotion of inhibited communications systems, and competitive-mania.

The seven deadly sins

1. Malselection – selection of team members based on personalities, rather than needed skill

One of the most important outcomes from having persons work as a team is the integration of diverse skills, knowledge, and ideas, and to allow members to interact in closer proximity than is usually the case with functional specialists.

A frightening example of malselection occurred in a mid-size chemical plant where environmental safety was critical. A top engineering manager built a team composed of his personal acquaintances. Team membership depended on total agreement with him, often in things that had nothing to do with company goals. Using this team he created a competitive, even adversarial relationship with the environmental safety officer, overpowered the human resource management director, and generally focused the
strength of the company on what he viewed as productivity output and efficiency at all cost. Chemical spills went unreported and sexual harassment episodes were shrugged off. The CEO seemed impervious to this situation, but a management audit indicated that he, being a financial expert with no engineering experience, was frightened of responsibility in this dangerous chemical engineering environment, and had simply placed unwarranted trust in the engineering manager.

A lack of teambuilding at the top, with almost no utilization of critical skills other than engineering and operations, led to several major environmental crises and ultimately the closure of the plant by a government inspection agency. What the CEO did not realize was that his weakness in the chemical engineering area dictated a need for a strong top management team. Such a team could have ensured balance between operations, safety, human resource management and other key areas.

Caminiti relates a more positive teambuilder’s experience: “When Eric Doremus, who had spent seven years in marketing at Honeywell, was asked to lead a team developing data storage systems for a B2 bomber, he realized that ‘he would never have the technical skills of the engineers on the team’”[3, p. 2]. But he knew that he could motivate people and communicate well with the customers and ensure that the project was completed on time and within budget. Most especially he recognized that not everyone needs to know how to do all of the jobs for a team, not even the team leader[3, p. 2]. What they do need, however, are diverse skills, clear roles interdependent activities and responsibilities, and mutual respect for one another.

Teambuilding is advantageous in building in the diverse viewpoints and the needed widespread contacts for anticipatory learning – learning that anticipates needed change. Maintenance learning can be done reasonably well with functional groups of similarly skilled people – departments of accounting, engineering or marketing, machinists, electricians, or other skilled people, all comfortably clustered in their own areas.

But organizations are relying more heavily on team learning to solve problems. Cross-functional teams are needed in R&D and product development. Building diverse functional teams ensures that information from broad spectrums of the organization will be utilized, which is just the thing most likely to produce a solution in areas where answers do not presently exist. However, combining teams of diversely skilled people, especially those from different levels and functions of an organization tends to complicate the organization – not simplify it. For this reason some managers are uncomfortable with teams and teambuilding[2].

(2) Impatience – failure to allow time for teams to develop
Some teambuilding managers seem unwilling to allocate sufficient time to the task of developing a mature team. Katzenbach and Smith in their landmark book The Wisdom of Teams[1] have developed the concept of the “team performance curve” to depict the stages of team development. Often a working group exists, and may be erroneously called a team. This simply relies on the sum of individual bests for performance; they produce no synergy. Next a team may become a pseudo-team, perhaps with even
poorer performance during the transition because of some additional conflict. Joint work and collective action must be encouraged. Eventually teamwork begins and a team becomes a “potential team” by overcoming some obstacles. If the initial successes are correctly built upon the team will move on to becoming what these two experts call a “real team”, and finally a “hi-performance team”. The latter stages are quite dependent on the emergence or appointment of an effective team leader – “one who realizes they neither know all the answers, nor can they succeed without the other members of the team”[1, p. 86].

To illustrate let us consider the general manager who was told by the corporate level that he had to reduce his next quarter’s operating costs by a sizeable amount. He was threatened by headquarters and displeased with lack of progress of his and his supervisors’ teams. His solution was to set a deadline for them by saying that “anyone who hasn’t got his team fully developed, cross-trained, and able to function without much supervision in three months will be dismissed as part of our cost reduction”.

“Explicit threats” designed to motivate foremen to do better jobs of teambuilding produce fear, demoralize rather than cement relationships, and destroy team development. This manager’s obligation was to stave off upper management while he gave his people time to develop as a team. But his actions prevented his team from ever proceeding beyond the pseudo-team level.

In another case within a hospital, the administrator turned teambuilder requested training in a similar fashion. However, in this case he was adamant about not wanting break-out groups, discussion among participants or unstructured dialogue. Essentially he wished to have the trainer “tell everyone how to be more team oriented”. Then he preferred that everyone resume work and become a team! In other words, he wanted “lipservice teamwork”. He was probably anticipating, as a result, a working group in which members were highly motivated and no complaints were voiced. Such unrealistic expectations are frequently expressed by those seeking training for teamwork.

(3) Deception – using teams for pseudo teamwork purposes
Some managers actually seek teambuilding for pseudo-team purposes, purposes totally inappropriate for teambuilding. This appeared to be the case when a teamwork retreat was held for a mental health treatment facility organization. On the second day of the workshop activity two participants finally “admitted” that the real reason for the session was a dispute between the director of treatment and the business manager. Apparently the business manager had knowledge but failed to reveal that another staff member, who worked for the treatment director, was quitting the organization. The treatment director felt the business manager had an obligation to inform him of the staff member’s plans immediately. However, the business manager, a personal friend with the resigning staff member, felt that to do so would betray a friendship. A deterioration in the working relationship between the two directors resulted. Teambuilding was stifled during the workshop because the treatment director would not suspend the problem.
Using a teambuilding programme to mask difficulty or conflict between individuals, or among various teams, is an inappropriate use of the process. Conflict issues should be faced with the aid of a mediator, not a teambuilder. The added pressure from group exposure usually creates too much “pressure” to allow them to be resolved objectively. In the example at hand the presence of the others probably solidified the resistance felt by the treatment director.

(4) Aimlessness – failure to set performance goals for the team
This sin is often the demonstration of the mistaken belief that teams really perform no better than individuals. Some experts propose, as the most important element of teambuilding, the establishment of a demanding performance challenge[1]. Accordingly team basics such as size, purpose, goals, skills, approach, and accountability, that will lead to performance are critical.

A young general manager, new in his position, sinned greatly in this area when he chose to build a teamwork environment. After consulting for three months with a teambuilding expert he decided to start team training between himself and his direct reports. This level of teambuilding was successful, therefore the team builder agreed to begin work at the next two levels below him.

The flurry of activity raised expectations among subordinates that more team training would occur and additional team progress would occur. But alas, the new general manager wavered in his confidence and began to procrastinate. Consequently, activity and interest began to slip and eventually “died”. The lack of persistence with team training not only destroyed opportunities for teamwork but prompted employees to see teambuilding as just another “management flash in the pan”. The general manager committed a serious teambuilding sin by pausing at the “potential team” level and failing to establish performance goals for the team. He appeared to lose faith that the team could actually perform at a high level.

Heightened expectations about teamwork without a strong performance orientation, and without real follow-up spells doom for teambuilding. Frequently this problem is precipitated by a lack of real commitment by senior management. Top management commitment, demonstrated at startup should have been continuously demonstrated throughout the programme. Teambuilding initiatives, once begun, must be extended to all levels, and must be vigorously sustained until a team reaches “hi-performance”.

(5) Powerlessness – failure to empower employees, build confidence and ensure mutual accountability
Some managers hope to build teams with a pep talk, perhaps envisioning themselves capable of success similar to well known US coaching figures such as Vince Lombardi or a Bear Bryant. Accordingly, managers often set out to create teams without first formulating a purpose for them.

A general manager of a 1,200 employee plant called his supervisors together for such a purpose, but instead committed the sin of imparting
“powerlessness”. First he announced the start of training classes for teamwork. Then, in front of 47 foremen, he stated “those jobs out there are so simple that trained monkeys could do them”. The foremen were deeply offended by his comments. Most had started at the factory in their early 20’s and had worked many years at these jobs. While the hourly jobs included high paced repetitions they were quite difficult to master and perform well.

As the general manager proceeded to tell all supervisors to “empower” their employees, use more of a team orientation, and get employees to take more initiative, his advice sounded more like irony than wisdom. While the supervisors knew that the task before them was a significant one, they felt powerless to accomplish it, and doubted that management would recognize adequately their accomplishment if successful.

(6) Inhibited communication systems – failure to establish open communications

Many managers contemplating teambuilding seem to have the mistaken notion that teamwork is simply encouraging a workgroup to work harmoniously, stifle complaints, and avoid conflict. Glenn Parker in his book *Cross-Functional Teams*, dramatizes this naïve sin when he subtitles his work appropriately Working with Allies, Enemies, and Other Strangers[4]. Effective teambuilding demands an environment that values differing opinions and open solution of conflict. Accordingly some teambuilding experts begin sessions with three questions:

(1) What do we do well?

(2) What needs improvement?

(3) What are the barriers to improvement? (See for example[2].)

The second and third questions can be threatening to managers accustomed to stifling negative communications.

Never was such a sin exhibited so well than at a major metropolitan hospital teambuilding setting. A Vice President of Nursing Administration invited a teambuilder to assist in developing “teamwork” in the surgical/operating room environment. She then delegated the design and administration of training to the Assistant VP of Nursing and assigned her to work with the seminar leader. The principal contact of the seminar leader became the clinical co-ordinator, the nurse manager of the operating rooms. She was in charge of scheduling personnel and other preparation for the programme. As the training programme began the nurse manager asked to videotape the first training session so that anyone missing could watch it at a later date. The seminar leader cautiously asked the group if they objected to taping and found no objections. Several problem areas in the operating rooms were identified and discussed in the first teambuilding session.

At the next follow-up training session there was a noticeable element of “tension” in the room and the group remained speechless. The seminar leader asked “what’s going on here?”. Reluctantly one of the nurses proceeded to tell him that the nurse manager and her assistant objected to some of the comments observed on the videotape. Participants who made
the comments were summoned and criticized for talking about the subjects which the nurse manager considered taboo! The participants felt betrayed and though innocent, the seminar leader lost credibility. He complained to the leaders involved but the “damage” had been done.

Teams can only exist within a communication structure that fosters sharing of information[2]. Members must be willing to listen carefully to others and to share the unique knowledge and skills for which they were selected. Five characteristics of an effective communication system for teams[2,5] include:

(1) the information must be easily accessible;
(2) the information available must be viewed as stemming from credible sources;
(3) in meetings, people must be allowed to raise issues of concern not on the formal agenda;
(4) there must be a system for documenting issues discussed and decisions that have been made; and
(5) the communication structure must operate in a climate of trust so that people feel safe to raise controversial and difficult issues.

(7) Competitive mania – creating an overemphasis on competitiveness that thwarts teamwork
The destructive nature of the competitive mania sin was demonstrated by a teambuilding workshop held for the regional office of a “Big Six” CPA firm. The firm requested leadership in a teambuilding workshop retreat held for junior partners. The company expected entry level accountants to be team oriented and come to the aid of their colleagues while working on joint projects. The dilemma proved to be the fact that not everyone progressed within the firm. The pressure of promotion based on “billable hours” and “new business obtained” was so high that vigorous competition developed among the accountants. This competition tended to destroy teamwork, even among colleagues. If competent at a skill and generous in assisting a junior person to learn that skill or solve a problem, the helper merely created more competition. The firm reinforced this reward for non-teamwork by hiring more newcomers than they intended to retain, creating an even greater threat of job-insecurity. This combination of job-insecurity, zero sum career competition, and constant threats from juniors moving up, assured non-supportiveness among personnel. The “culture, norms and reward system” were at odds with the stated goal of a teamwork orientation.

An overemphasis on competition and a lack of trust in an organization is usually precipitated by top management. This attitude was present and was confirmed in the CPA organization. Early in the process the seminar leader was told not to use material and handouts on “Trust and Openness”. In particular the senior managers objected to a feedback questionnaire designed to assess “How Open Does Your Boss Permit You To Be?”. These sessions confirmed the suspicions which the seminar leader possessed. Competitiveness among co-workers was made more destructive by the lack of an “open-trusting” organizational climate. In this case the would-be management teambuilders were provided information about

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Sharing of information

Overemphasis on compensation
effective teambuilding requisites but were not encouraged to engage in authentic teambuilding processes.

Teamwork must lead to shared team rewards. Competition within a team is destructive and can thwart attempts at teambuilding. Even competition outside of a team must be used with caution. Often companies today are finding more success in building network relationships across teams, allowing upstream employees to view themselves as serving internal clients – more like suppliers; and downstream persons to view themselves as critical role players in ensuring that quality products and services are being sent outside.

The seven deadly sins of teambuilding must be staunchly resisted at every stage in the teambuilding process, but opportunities are most prevalent in the early stages. Contrast the sinful experiences above with the actions of Colonel Randy Geyer, newly appointed head of the US Army planning unit responsible for the safe return home of soldiers and equipment of the Gulf War. He began his first day by signing in, “I am not John Carr”. Geyer, a reservist, had been marketing furniture five months earlier. Now he found himself replacing the career logistician John Carr, who had performed brilliantly at his planning task during the war. The war was now over and Geyer had to lead the less exciting but no less difficult task of moving all the soldiers and equipment back home, which was according to him, the equivalent of moving the entire state of Wyoming to a new location. By defining himself in the negative from the beginning Geyer made it clear that he needed and wanted the help of everyone of his people. He put team performance first and made participation welcome[1, p. 130].

Summary
Teams are created and sustained largely as learning and sharing systems for organizations. They operate like the study group that meets to help and encourage each other in college, but they include much more. When selected for their diverse skills, knowledge and contacts, they allow a manager immediately to focus needed expertise on complex problems. Because real teams gain satisfaction from trading expertise and from sharing in teamwork, teams are exceedingly good learners.

Being interdependent means that no one person can accomplish very much without the input of the others, and it ensures a true team relationship – far beyond that of a work group. Since the team is so largely dependent on learning and communication for success, anything that stifles communication, or that inhibits learning, can be a deadly sin of teambuilding.

Members must be selected with the requisite skills for the team in mind. Teambuilders must not be impatient; moving from a work group to real teamwork at a high performance level takes time. Openness and trust must be promoted, never deception. Performance goals should be established and confidence shown that performance will be forthcoming. Team members must be empowered, confidence must be built and mutual accountability established. Open communications and participative leadership are critical. Teambuilding must never be used as a substitute for
conflict resolution among individuals, or to solve problems that should have been solved by individuals. Finally, competition within teams must be avoided in favour of collaboration on common purposes, the path to a hi-performance team.

References


Further reading


J. Michael McDonald and J. Bernard Keys

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