

EXPERT SERIES

The “Expert Series” is a collection of articles, papers and writings by PM Solutions’ associates and other industry experts that provides insight into the practice and value of project management.

Teams: What’s New?

Never mind icebreakers and games: change the organizational culture

by Jeannette Cabanis-Brewin

If there is a single unifying theme that runs through all management books, solutions, and theories these days, it is: *Change, and then change some more*. In the last decade, many organizations have gotten frustrated with the so-called management “fads” that have come into fashion one after the other, each promising success unparalleled, only to fail to deliver on that promise. Yet most of these “fads” were good ideas, based on worthwhile principles. And as the management literature analyzing why initiatives such as TQM, project management, CRM, or team-based structure falter, again and again the same conclusion surfaces: Change initiatives fail because the change doesn’t go deep enough. You can’t implement project management like a Band-Aid on top of the same old organizational structure and culture. You can’t expect individuals to relate (to each other or to the customer) in radical ways within the same old management hierarchy.

Teams provide a perfect example of the way these new ideas erode old structures from the bottom up. A couple decades ago, when American business noticed that Japan was using team-based management to competitive advantage, suddenly rounding people up into “teams” became the thing. But as Brad Humphrey and Jeff Stokes say in their book *The 21st Century Supervisor* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), “in most instances, when organizations say they want teams, what they really want is teamwork.” And while it’s easy to create teams, creating an environment that encourages and rewards teamwork is much, much harder.

Teamwork building. So never mind teambuilding. Throw out that book full of dopey icebreakers and think about what you really need: project teams made up of people who cooperate with one another, make decisions together, and work harmoniously together toward a common goal or objective. You want the performance results that are the often undelivered promise of teams. Here are some ideas:

In *The Wisdom of Teams*, Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith (Harvard Business School Press, 1993) suggest the following eight best practices: Establish urgency and direction; elect members based on skills and skill potential; pay particular attention to first meetings and actions; set clear rules of behavior; set and seize upon a few immediate performance-oriented tasks and goals; challenge the group regularly with fresh facts and information; spend lots of time together; and exploit the power of feedback.

In *The New Team Ethic: Putting Emotional Intelligence to Work*, David Ryback (Butterworth-Heinemann, 1998) identifies the following five managerial principles of “the New Team Ethic”:

1. Build trusting relationships and effective communication through risk-taking openness, effective listening skills, and learning to respect differences of opinion while building on a consensus that proves worthwhile.
2. Promote innovation through group discussions that foster openness and playful opposition.
3. Foster a sense of self-appreciation and team pride through group discussion focused on patterns of successful decision making and appropriate actions based on emotional insights.
4. Learn to distinguish between decisions based on fact and those based on emotion, as well as the most effective balance between the two for each particular individual.
5. Reduce stress through the encouragement of healthy fitness habits and relaxation techniques.

WHAT A CONTRAST to the title of an article I saw today (in the team-building area of a popular project management portal): “Please come to the project status meeting and rip someone’s throat out.” Granted, the author was being ironic, but he knew this kind of “team” meeting atmosphere would feel sadly familiar to

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many of us. While teamwork requires mutual supportiveness, many organizations still operate on the dogeat-dog model. Whether you as a project manager are able to achieve optimum team performance will depend in part on the organization's will to support your efforts through policies and rewards that support the vision of teams described in this article. But grassroots efforts often "trickle up" the org chart. When teams model true teamwork, the positive energy they generate can be contagious.

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