

What The Leader Needs To Know: Make Your Top Team More Effective

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The Opportunity

Your enterprise is too complex and the opportunities too significant for individuals to drive its success. Teams are critical for executing successful business strategies. Each and every day, money is left on the table in the form of unrealized innovations, customer loyalty, revenues, profits, and share price because leaders don't apply what is known about teams.

For example, most "team building" is a one-shot activity from building a model airplane to climbing ropes. Think of any team outside of business and answer one simple question: Would you have any confidence in that team's performance, if the team invested only one or two days in building their skills at working together? I can't think of any situation where the answer wouldn't be a resounding "No!"

But in corporate organizations, where performance isn't about a game, we often hear: "We can't invest the time in team building. We're under too much pressure to worry about the *soft stuff*." Again, whatever team you enjoy watching - hockey, ballet or symphony orchestra - you know at the professional level that it's not the technical skill and talent that make the difference. The critical elements for peak performance are commitment and pride in a team that has figured out how to work well together -- under tremendous pressure, flawlessly and smoothly. To the extent that when a dancer misses a step, the entire team "automatically" decides how to improvise without interrupting the performance - or even letting audience or customer see it.

You operate in a much tougher arena than most artistic or athletic performers. If you miss a major opportunity or have a few bad quarters, you can be headed for a downward spiral - from which it may be difficult to recover.

Assume you see the logic in investing in real team building. You get the importance of your team being able to work together - particularly under significant stress. You realize that, with the level of uncertainty you're facing, your team needs to be able to assess quickly any situation, consider alternatives, make a decision, and execute. That won't happen unless the team knows how to work together. You still have one significant problem: There are almost no established processes for building teams over the long term.

Enter Martin Mittag. A successful international banker for decades, Martin recently founded [The Wooden Boat Workshop](#). Working with leadership development professionals, Martin has created the ideal process for building executive and professional teams. Oh, and Martin's a banker; so - of course -- the process is partially to fully self-funding.

How To Leverage It

Here is what you need to successfully build your team over time.

1. Size Your Team To Fit Your Objective

Your formal team has a set size. That size doesn't fit with all your objectives. If you are in a creative process, such as developing a new concept, you need a group of 8 - 10 people. If you're focused on execution then the ideal size is four. No doubt your team doesn't fit either size perfectly. The key is to manage the group as an integrated collection of smaller or larger teams, depending upon specific objectives. Basically, the key lies in effective, thoughtful use of sub-committees.

2. Define clear expectations of how your team must perform

The rules of teamwork *are not a given*. Not only do different types of teams need different rules to be successful - to be competitive, a specific team needs to follow its own rules. To make your team really effective, you have to determine exactly what kind of behaviors will lead to the most competitive outcomes. Depending on your style and the expectations you want to set for your team, you can either determine these expectations yourself or involve the team. But be crystal clear about how the rules will be identified and adopted. Make sure everybody knows the rules. Most importantly, make sure the rules are not seen as optional. Again, look at any successful team: The rules are clear and they are compulsory.

3. Articulate a goal that is important and which will create pride in its achievement

"This is taking too much time. But as long as I'm here, I might as well look like a team player and go along with it." How many of your team members begin any team building session with an attitude similar to this? However, the skepticism usually is short-lived and is abandoned once the exercise begins and people become engaged. If you're going to stick to the classical one shot - or less elegantly put "sheep dipping" approach, lack of clarity at the front end doesn't cost too much. But to ask your team to engage in team performance practice over time, you need a specific, worthwhile objective. The process that Mittag and his colleagues have developed provides this incentive. Here's how it works.

The executive team's goal is to build a wooden boat; it might be a four-person sailboat or one of a variety of canoes and kayaks. The boat not only will be seaworthy; it truly becomes a piece

of craftsmanship. Read “The Benefits” section below to see how this can promote your company, support a charity and be self-funding.

4. Embed a process that incorporates the key principles and behaviors of high performing teams.

Here are a few of the principles and behaviors inherent in the process that Mittag has developed:

- Don't focus on mistakes; focus on the lessons the team can learn from them.
- Perfection isn't important: success is – commitment and momentum are the keys.
- Think ahead and do all you can to control and anticipate challenges.
- Time spent planning saves time.
- Stretch the team to a challenge it can meet.

5. Provide the means to reflect on and coach to both individual and team performance

The project can be accomplished in 2 – 4 hour sessions over a two to four month period. This typically involves from 20 – 40 hours and might include from 4 to 16 sessions. The length and frequency is determined by the team's specific business goals and expectations of team behavior. During the first, last and alternate sessions in between, the team is observed and may be videotaped by a facilitator. At defined intervals, a debriefing is held. The team's behavior is assessed against required rules or expectations. Team members are asked to compare their own behavior in the practice environment to that in the performance environment. Most importantly, at the end of each facilitated session team members make a specific, observable commitment to apply the lessons learned in practice to their business, or performance, behavior.

6. Create an environment where the focus is on achievement through teamwork – but also is buffered from day-to-day business pressures.

The pressures on your team vary from quarter to quarter and day to day. The amount and type of pressure has a very strong influence on behavior. Mittag's process ensures that the team receives:

- **A circuit breaker.** During intense periods, taking the team to the practice field breaks the cycle of the day to day team dynamics. Until a team is highly accomplished at team behavior, high pressure over a period of time usually leads to diminished effectiveness. Often distrust and destructive competitiveness arises among team members. Taking the team out of the performance environment into the practice environment, allows members to look at their behavior and interaction – without having to simultaneously solve major business challenges.
- **Increased adaptation.** Because the team-building process extends over a period of several months, the team is supported under different conditions. This reinforces their mandate to learn how to meet expectations even when the focus shifts to a variety of

different business challenges, e.g. how a team engages in planning is usually quite different from how it decides to make the quarterly numbers.

7. Incorporate recognition and rewards.

Throughout the process developed by Mittag and his colleagues, there exist a wide range of opportunities to recognize and reward team members for meeting the behavioral expectations of a high performing team.

The Benefits

When the boat is completed one of two things can be done: It can be donated or auctioned off for a charitable organization such as a camp for children with special needs.

The benefits of these approaches:

- The goal – contributing to a charity – is clearly worthwhile – more so if the team has a role in selecting the charity. Research has shown that executives and professionals who have worthwhile commitments outside of their work roles are better able to perform in high stress environments. This work provides such a commitment.
- Unlike most of the work that executives and professionals do, this work is tangible. It provides an immediate sense of accomplishment and reward.
- Boat building provides public relations opportunities for your team and your company. In today's environment – particularly with the most influential of your customers – it is particularly important to demonstrate your corporate values in action. Here is a chance to do that as you also build your team's performance.
- This work can be partially to fully self-funding. Donating the finished boat to charity has tax benefits. Auctioning off the finished boat can increase this benefit, generating cash to continue funding the process -- to the point where the entire team building process could become self funding. Of course, the value of the public relations impact is pure bonus.

About The Author

Leo F. Flanagan, Jr., Ph.D. is President of Flanagan Consultants, LLC. The Firm partners with leading companies to formulate and execute their business, marketing, and human resources strategies. Clients are leaders in consumer products, financial services, government, healthcare, hospitality, pharmaceuticals and retailing. Leo welcomes your questions, thoughts and reactions. He can be reached directly at 203-321-8423 or Leo@FlanaganConsultants.com.