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Recruiting and Retaining The Emerging Generation

BUILDING ORGANIZATIONS FOR SUCCESS

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Very few people really understand what makes organizations succeed. Successful organizations are a mosaic of small groups or teams. Whether it's a business enterprise, social group, or government entity, it all revolves around people working together as a team for a common goal. Recognizing the strengths and weaknesses in any team allows the leader to practice leadership and effective team building.

The fire service is lucky to have an environment that fosters teams from the very first day a person reports for work or training in most cases. It's a necessity for survival and effective operations. Everything connected with firefighting is team oriented. No single firefighter can ever be successful. Only when firefighters work as a team can multiple operations be completed in a timely fashion to save a life or a building. If one member of the team does not function at 100%, it costs everyone and can lead to failure. Each member contributes to the team in synergistic fashion; it's comparable to multiplication. In a four member team, how much does it hurt for one member to contribute half as much as the other three? Or, two members? It's the difference between this:

10 X 10 X 10 X 10 = 10,000 (All members contribute 100%)
And this:
10 X 10 X 10 X 5 = 5,000 (One member contributes 50%)
Or this:
10 X 10 X 5 X 5 = 2,500 (Two members contribute 50%)

One dysfunctional team member costs the entire team 50%. If two team members are working at 50% efficiency the team is only producing one quarter of its potential.

Successful teams build successful organizations. But so many managers and leaders are in the dark when it comes to identifying why a team is not performing as it should. Usually, the effort to correct such a situation begins at the top and is communicated down through the organization. Much like a sales meeting, employees are gathered together for a "pep talk" or the unveiling of a new company motto meant to inspire the corporate masses and get everyone working together. Within a few months any enthusiasm that was generated melts away into business as usual with the new motto relegated to the dumpster out back. Actually, team success begins not at the top, but at the bottom of an organization by building a solid foundation. This article will share with you some of the concepts that are embraced in the Salina Fire Department to build extraordinary public servants. The concepts are not new and are so easy to see when teams are in operation.

The Salina Fire Department is committed to employee involvement and team building. One of the best examples of success is the departments "Planning and Improvement Team." The PIT, as it is affectionately known, is comprised of members elected from all ranks of the department and tackles some of the most difficult subjects in the fire service and within the department. Through open discussion, trust, honesty, productive conflict, commitment, personal accountability, and attention to results, the PIT is transforming the Salina Fire Department into a premier organization. Any group, club, organization, or team can do the same thing it just starts at the bottom.

Trust

To be successful teams must have "trust." Team members who do not trust each other or anyone they interact with will never feel free to contribute really new ideas or be open and honest. Trusting in others makes a person vulnerable. Exposed would be a fair description, also. It is uncomfortable. There is always the thought of someone using the information against you. True team members compensate for each others weaknesses. What is a strength for one member may be a weakness for another and vice versa. For example, one team member may really have a gift for writing in a clear and concise way. Instead of recognizing their own weaknesses other team members may vie for the opportunity to write a draft for the group instead of empowering the one person who could really make them all shine. But, how do you recognize that person with the skills? The answer to that question is in the second building block.

A team must have productive or constructive conflict to really become successful. Only in a trusting environment that is grounded in honesty can a natural discourse take place that will identify the "best writer" in the group. This type of conflict does not involve open hostility, sarcasm, or anger; it's a civilized thought provoking environment of the expression of ideas. Supreme Court Justice

Louis Brandeis probably summed it up when he said, "In the frank expression of conflicting opinions lies the greatest promise of wisdom in governmental action." The quote applies to team work as well.

Conflict

So many people think that a good team operates in an atmosphere that is devoid of conflict. If team members are not allowed to be "heard" on a subject there is a very real possibility of "passive resistance" coming into play. No outward display of subversion to the team's goals, just giving it minimal effort will be enough to keep the team from obtaining the maximum. Conflict sorts out the best ideas and allows everyone to contribute. Honesty and frankness should be paramount. So, what do you do when the conflict is over and the best ideas are agreed on? Well, not so much agreed on at this stage, but identified as the best option or direction.

Commitment

In the context of a team, commitment is a function of two things: clarity and buy in. Great teams make clear and timely decisions and move forward with complete buy-in from each member of the team, even those who voted against the decision. Only total commitment should be accepted by any team or leader. Without it nothing can be accomplished. Vince Lombardi once said:

"Individual commitment to a group effort -- that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work."

The lack of commitment has derailed more careers, more plans, more products, and more hopes and dreams than any other failing. When a team trusts one another and engages in constructive conflict and one team member chooses not to commit to the agreed plan or direction the only word that will describe the effect on other team members is "betrayal." A brutal word for a brutal practice. If this situation is arises, quick and decisive action is necessary to salvage and save the team.

Personal Accountability

Personal accountability has two dimensions and is built upon commitment. It is the actual effort by team members in making the decisions of the team become a reality. First, is the obvious dimension of each team members taking personal responsibility for giving their best to the team. A minimal effort won't cut it and everyone on the team has a responsibility to confront it openly in the group. But, as a leader or manager how do you know when team members are not giving their best? Believe me, it's no secret. Just about every other team member knows when someone has not fulfilled their responsibility or delivered on their assignment. That is the second dimension to personal accountability, holding other team members accountable for their actions and efforts. Peers holding peers accountable. Again, in a atmosphere of trust and honesty and in a productive and constructive way failings or weak performances should be acknowledged and corrected so the team can succeed. All of this leads to the last building block.

Achievement

The achievement of results by the team is what the entire process is about. Without examining the collective results and determining whether, or not, the product, project, or idea was successful. Individual results don't matter. In basketball, there have been instances where a player may score 50 points or more and the team still loses. The goal was to win the game, not for one player to score the majority of points. Successful coaches continually promote balanced scoring among team members. No defense will ever stop a team with truly balanced scoring where every member contributes to the final score.

In addition to the Planning and Improvement Team the Salina Fire Department utilizes these concepts in the administration within the department.

The administration is comprised of a six chief officers. The titles are mixed between Division and Battalion Chiefs. However, in the context of operating as a administrative team titles don't exist. The administrative command team is really operated like a board of directors with the fire chief as the chairperson of the board. Issues of operations, budgeting, personnel, and administration are brought before the board. Open and frank discussion is not only encouraged, but it is required.

There is no shortage of conflicting ideas and positions. No one is allowed to remain silent and then promote the idea that they had reservations. There is one overarching principle for the discussion phase – Silence Is Consensus. However, once the team decides on a course of action, all of the chief officers are expected to fully commit. Tasks are assigned and timelines set. Follow up status reports by the officers involved are scheduled. Everyone is held personally accountable for their efforts and work product. Additionally, there is no hesitation from the group in addressing sub par performance. Sure, tempers flare, it's natural and desirable when the situation requires it. The peer pressure of the group can often have more of an impact than the admonishment of a supervisor. Lastly, the chief officers celebrate and evaluate the results. There is a great pride in accomplishment. But, it doesn't stop there. Outstanding performance is rewarded monetarily, also. The pay plan for the City of Salina rewards outstanding results with an increased merit pay percentage.

Conclusion

If a team fails you can almost always trace the problem to one of the reasons outlined above. If teams fail, the organization fails and success is never achieved. Some of the best ideas in our society have been individually inspired and collectively implemented through the team process.

However, not everyone is a good team member, some people for whatever reason do not play well with others. And, no one person is right for every team. When members fail to be trustworthy or trusting; when they cannot engage in constructive conflict without it becoming personal, when they fail to commit or are subversive to the decision of the team; when they are not personally accountable or hold other team members accountable for their actions; or finally, when the expected results of the team are not realized, changes have to be made. Making those changes is the practice of leadership.

References

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