

WORKING AS ONE



Team success is based on timeless principles that ultimately rest on spiritual truth: connection with something larger than the individual.

We live in a networked age, where outcomes depend upon processes and customers demand value and quality. Increasingly, companies are seeing teams as the organizing construct that best responds to these demands. This means that almost all of us are members of teams or perhaps even work for companies that use teamwork as their principal organizational model.

But the promise of teamwork to deliver high productivity, graceful execution, and a supportive and satisfying work life is the exception, not the rule. Too often people criticize teams for taking time away from their real jobs, for obscuring their individual accomplishments, or for being nothing more than management's obsession with the latest fad. When was the last time your heart leapt when someone tapped you to be on his or her team?

Might this be less the fault of the team concept and more a shortcoming of our understanding of how successful teams work?

There are certainly enough books on team dynamics. A couple of management gurus have touched on the importance of commitment, accountability, and competencies (The Wisdom of Teams, Katzenbach and Smith). Others have sketched the steps for forming a team, the process of learning to work together, and the importance of structuring the work (The Team Handbook, Peter Scholtes). And some have pointed to the critical role of the leader (Leading Teams, John Zenger et al).

These authors, and a few others, have done a wonderful job of teaching team basics. However, there is something missing, something deeper that touches on the heart of the matter and provides a common denominator for anyone who wants to learn the basic truth about the power of teams. Team success is based on timeless principles that ultimately rest on the spiritual truth of the oneness of life.

Whenever people connect with something larger than themselves, they subordinate their self-interest to greater good. This is fundamentally a spiritual act because it recognizes the strength of oneness as opposed to the power of one person.

Surely you have felt this, perhaps even at work. It is often expressed as "being in it together" or "helping each other out." It can be most obvious when times are toughest and the organization has nowhere to go but up. Whether the circumstances are those of a turnaround or pursuit of market leadership, the sense of accomplishment can be joyous and the friendships that develop can last a lifetime.

Unfortunately, most people experience teamwork as pure drudgery. They know that they could accomplish so much more if they were only free to work by themselves. The meetings are too numerous to count and seem to go on forever. The same people insist on making the same point over and over and over. The leader spouts team mantras and then makes decisions unilaterally. When an outsider asks how things are going, team members say, "Fine, thank you" through clenched teeth.

One important reason why teams are unable to transcend the limits of the individual imaginations of their members is that the members spend most of their time immersed in self-centered thinking. Their heads are filled with such brooding thoughts as: "What if the team does well, and my contribution isn't rewarded?" "How come I'm always getting stuck with the hardest jobs?" or "Why doesn't the leader appreciate me?" Such self-centered thinking isolates us from our teammates and causes a great deal of personal anguish.

It is not that such thoughts are bad in themselves but rather that our desperate need to keep the focus on "ME" distances us from others and diminishes our own contributions.

Everyone's performance rises whenever they remember, or recognize, that it is their thinking that creates their reality. In other words, whatever they are experiencing moment-to-moment is coming from their thoughts, experienced as feelings and expressed as actions.

So, when people become aware of just how ephemeral thought can be, their egocentric thinking loses its hold on their behavior. They realize that they can change their thoughts and, by so doing, change their behavior. In an instant their minds clear, and they experience an inner calm. What seemed so vital, a matter of life and death, suddenly becomes insignificant. Worries about the future or concerns about the past evaporate, freeing the mind to trust in the moment.

To quote Phil Jackson (former coach of the Chicago Bulls and now coach of the Los Angeles Lakers), "Good teams become great when the members trust enough to surrender the 'me' for the 'we'."

It takes a quiet mind to achieve peak performance, as any great athlete knows. The key is seeing things clearly and then acting on those insights. This is our natural state and is accessible whenever we let go of the mind's chatter and do not consciously "think."

When the members of a team begin functioning with this higher state of awareness, they achieve new levels of accomplishment and do so easily and gracefully. Because they are able to see things from the right perspective, they overcome obstacles quickly or anticipate them before they arise. Since participants stay on task without disruptive thoughts, meetings become effective ways to get things done. Even the most difficult problems do not frighten the team because they know from experience that a calm mental state will enable them to discover the solutions. And everyone begins to lead by contributing his or her unique skill when it is called for.

When the team understands the power of being mindful, of being fully focused on the moment, the group's wisdom can transcend the individual intelligence of its members. It

can be awe-inspiring to see the group "take off" before our very eyes and go about its work with grace, beauty, and humility.

But the power of "working as one" is truly magnified when team members open their hearts to one another. Love is the force that releases the spirit's wisdom and rekindles its energy. It makes the "we-ness" of being involved with others the point. And its warmth, understanding, and kindness bring out the best in each person.

For too long we've followed a model that says that work is difficult, that leaders need to be hard-hearted, and that peers should keep their distance from one another. People are tired of playing this game, and the results prove it. So why not state the obvious, that there is no separation between any of us. Acknowledging this interconnectedness of life takes courage only the first time you state it. Everyone already knows it anyway. And it is instantly recognizable as the source of all power and freedom.

Freedom, not as we customarily define it as the pursuit of individual happiness but rather the liberty to use your own creative powers to shape a role that works in concert with others.

Power, not to control the behavior of others but rather to allow people to express their talents in ways that complement one another and further the team's purpose. In other words, by working as one, we lose our own ego in the dance - and thereby achieve something transcendent, even if it endures only until the job is completed or the championship won.

Why is it that team members think they must storm before they form? Why can't we just relax and let our feelings of love for our fellow man, a sense of innocence, and a willingness to suspend judgment erase fear and misery?

In fact, does "working as one" require us to emphasize teams? Is it possible that teams are simply a particularly constructive way for us to express our Oneness - like perfect waves, continually forming, expending their energy to shape the shoreline, and then flowing back to the ocean to reform again?

Certainly teamwork can be messy and unpredictable, even frustrating at times. Teams are, after all, just an aspect of life. But where the ocean meets the shore is where the open heart and the clear mind come together, allowing us to know that each moment will take care of itself because our talents are as one.

Now this is the Law of the Jungle -
 As old and true as the sky;
 And the wolf that shall keep it may prosper,
 But the wolf that shall break it must die.
 As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk,
 The Law runneth forward and back -
 For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf,
 And the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.

~ Rudyard Kipling

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