

Hoe teamcoaching de performance van uw organisatie kan verbeteren

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Sommige teams of besturen ontwikkelen zich tot een hecht samenwerkingsverband dat topprestaties neerzet, andere groepen vallen ruziënd uiteen voordat de eindstreep - het teamresultaat - zelfs maar in zicht is. Teamcoaching is dan vaak een goede interventie.

Hoe teamcoaching conflicten kan reduceren, samenwerking kan verbeteren en bijdraagt aan de productiviteit van het team.

Teams are the workhorses of today's businesses, but they're workhorses prone to many ailments, from open bickering and sabotage on one end of the spectrum to resolute conflict avoidance on the other. And even teams that generally plow ahead productively can be improved.

One method more managers today are using is team coaching, says Joseph Weintraub, codirector of the Coaching for Leadership and Teamwork Program at Babson College (Wellesley, Mass.).

This article looks at three companies in which team coaching ramped up performance and offers expert advice on helping squabbling groups manage conflict constructively, encouraging reticent team members to speak up, and deepening a group's understanding of the dynamics that may be limiting its effectiveness. Keep in mind that coaching a team doesn't always require hiring outside help; an insider who has received some training can play the role of a coach, and individual managers can apply many of these techniques themselves.

A TEAM IN CRISIS

One true believer in team coaching's value is Tom Posey, the senior VP of organizational capability at Wells' Dairy, a privately held ice cream maker in LeMars, Iowa. Family run since its founding in 1913, the 3,000-employee company now sells its Blue Bunny ice cream worldwide.

Recent industry consolidation has posed significant challenges to the firm. By 2002, many of its biggest retail customers said they would carry products only from the largest manufacturers in the industry. Company executives had already recognized that "to be viable long-term, we needed to be one of the big three in the business," says Posey, which meant increasing sales, developing a more efficient supply chain, and getting tighter control of the financials. Doing all this, realized CEO Gary Wells, required bringing in new expertise, as difficult as that would be for the family firm. The company soon hired seven newcomers, including a CFO, a senior VP of logistics, and a VP of sales.

One of the biggest challenges the newly reconstituted executive team faced was conflict avoidance. Posey says that family executives weren't used to openly airing conflicts. "They knew they would see each other at the next Thanksgiving dinner," he says. As a result, the executive team had difficulty fully resolving issues. For example, in an effort to make the supply chain more efficient, the company introduced a new warehouse-management system and redesigned the procedures for storing and loading product. But the executive team's avoidance of conflict meant that critical details never got hammered out, such as how to train personnel. The end result was that drivers couldn't find the products they needed and often had to make multiple trips to load their trucks.

Realizing the team needed professional help, Posey brought in a coach from the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, N.C. Over six months, the coach helped team members learn to manage conflict effectively, leading to better and faster decision making. Today, Posey says, sales are up, the company has gained market share, and team members challenge one another's ideas forthrightly.

GAIN AN UNDERSTANDING OF GROUP DYNAMICS

As the Wells' Dairy team learned firsthand, team coaching emphasizes behaviors and communication patterns within the team, says Candice Frankovelgia, coaching practice leader at the Center for Creative Leadership. "The focus of team coaching is on interactions more than individual development—using ongoing work challenges as grist for the learning mill."

Often people don't understand why their colleagues react the way they do. To close that knowledge gap, coaches typically give team members several assessments, such as the Team Development Survey, a 360-degree-style evaluation designed specifically for teams, and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Then, with every member's consent, the coach shares the findings with the group, highlighting how each person's natural approach to conflict or change can both help and hinder the group process. "You introduce them to each other through a lens they aren't used to looking through," says Frankovelgia. "It helps them to reinterpret behaviour that may have been causing them difficulty and to see benefits they may not have seen before."

This is exactly what happened at Wells' Dairy. After everyone on the executive team took several assessments and the results were shared, the team coach facilitated a discussion about the day-to-day impact of different personality styles. The team learned, for instance, that one manager's natural reaction to stress was to withdraw when interactions grew too heated, while another typically went on the attack. If the two dealt directly with each other, the results could be disastrous. "We could clearly see how differently we all viewed conflict and the problems that that created," Posey says.

With this understanding came greater trust and cohesiveness. The insights the team members gained through this exercise allowed them to interact with one another more empathetically and productively. Healthy debate now informed their decisions.

ESTABLISH GROUND RULES FOR BEHAVIOR

Soon after Michael Detlefsen became EVP of Maple Leaf Foods (MLF), a Toronto-based food processing company, he was determined to change how the members of his executive team interacted with one another. The group, which consisted of 14 managers of shared services, such as finance and HR, tended to bicker during meetings and snipe at one another afterward.

To help him get their behaviour in line, he hired a coach. One of the coach's first suggestions was that Detlefsen lay out his expectations for the group: Detlefsen clarified their goals, laid down the law about uncooperative behaviour, and insisted that everyone speak up. Then, he and the team developed a list of nine ground rules for behaviour, among them: "We always treat each other and our MLF colleagues with complete respect" and "We celebrate our successes."

Having these explicit guidelines put a stop to the most problematic behaviors among the team, such as outright sabotage and an almost tribal cliquishness. For instance, one executive instructed his staff not to help anyone on another executive's team, to the point where he actually told them to withhold information that was critical to that team's success. And buddies would support buddies regardless of an issue's merit and refuse to recognize the validity of initiatives proposed by someone they personally disliked. The guidelines reminded team members that they were a team and needed to focus their energies where they belonged: on solving problems and creating value for the organization.

Setting ground rules is especially important when team members hail from different cultures. A few years after his first team coaching experience, Detlefsen—now president of MLF—went through a similar effort with a multicultural team from the company's global division.

Each team member ran operations in a different country. Once per quarter, the team members traveled to corporate headquarters and spent a week working intensively on issues that affected them all. Because of the different cultural norms governing communication, especially around sensitive topics, some team members had trouble working effectively with their team counterparts, and vice versa. For the Western members of the team, their Eastern colleagues were too reticent in expressing their honest opinions. For the Eastern team members, the bluntness of their Western counterparts was confrontational and disrespectful.

To facilitate communication that would inform and illuminate yet not offend, the group created a communications template that invited people to describe three things they liked about a proposal as well as three weaknesses they saw in it. The idea behind the template, says Detlefsen, was to allow team members to point out potential flaws in a way that would not be perceived by anyone on the team as harshly critical.

SUPPLEMENT TEAM WORK WITH ONE-ON-ONE COACHING

Team coaching may need to be complemented by one-on-one coaching, especially where particularly intimidating or abrasive personalities are concerned. Babson's Weintraub once worked with a team of eight senior managers at a large manufacturing firm charged with developing growth strategies. Two members dominated the discussions, insulting people they disagreed with and fighting with each other.

In individual conversations, Weintraub asked each team member: "What do you and each member of this team need to (1) 'start doing' to be more effective? (2) 'stop doing' to be more effective? and (3) 'continue doing' to be more effective?" Not surprisingly, the destructive behaviour of the two bullies emerged as a major theme.

Although Weintraub reviewed his findings with each member individually, he spent considerably more time in one-on-one discussions with the problem executives, highlighting how their behaviour was holding the team back from achieving its goal. To drive this message home, Weintraub brought the company president into some of the discussions. His message to the problem executives: "Work together—or else."

DO THE TEAM'S PROBLEMS ORIGINATE OUTSIDE?

Not every problem evident in a team's interactions originates within the team. Organizational issues such as fierce competition between two business units or misguided compensation and rewards programs can play out in the micro environment of a team.

Weintraub, for instance, discovered during his one on-one discussions with the members of the eight-person senior management team that the company's performancemanagement system had the unintended effect of pitting departments—and hence department heads—against one another. "The two executives were at each other's throats partly because they were rewarded for how much money they could make on their own and how big of an empire they could build," he says.

The company decided to alter its performancemanagement system so that individuals and business units were assessed on how well they collaborated. By rewarding cooperation, the change not only improved the performance of the executive team but also produced a valuable side benefit: it increased collaboration throughout the larger team—the enterprise as a whole.

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