



Teamwork in Business

In our working lives, it may seem that teamwork is something everybody talks about and nobody does anything about. But teamwork can and does exist. Here we try to separate the rhetoric and the reality. In business, teams are made, not born . . .

□ As recently as the early part of this century, the word "team" was associated primarily with beasts of burden. Only as an afterthought would people then have taken it to mean an aggregation of athletes pooling their energies and abilities in a common pursuit. They certainly would never have visualized a team as a group of people working together within an organization. The concept of teamwork on the job had not yet been hatched.

In fact, many workers in those days were driven in much the same way as draught animals. The head of an organization could run it more or less single-handedly through the medium of overseers who kept employees in an invisible harness enforced by the fear of losing their jobs. The overseers used their authority as a whip to press the pace of activity. There could be no deviation from the course they steered.

This horse and buggy style of management lingers on in some quarters even now, and it is likely to bring horse and buggy productivity. The age of one-owner, one-product, one-market companies in which it flourished has long since passed. In a new age of diverse and complex organizations, egalitarian attitudes and occupational mobility, teamwork in business is modelled on teamwork in modern sports, not old-fashioned agriculture. Workers today cannot be driven to optimum performance. They must be led.

Study after study has shown that the best business results are obtained when people work to-

gether with a sense of commitment to one another as well as to the organization. Researchers have found that "unity of purpose" is the chief distinguishing feature of an outstanding managerial group. To do a really exceptional job, then, a work unit should have the same characteristics as a competitive sports team. Among these are:

— A team is organic. It is made up of components in the persons of its players, but these come together to form a cohesive whole which is greater than the sum of its parts.

— A team is interdependent. Each player supports the others. If the team succeeds, they all succeed; if it fails, they all fail.

— A team is stimulating. The actions and attitudes of the players spur their teammates on to greater efforts and achievements — achievements which they might have thought beyond their own personal abilities.

— A team is enjoyable. People get a thrill from being on one. They like the camaraderie, the sense of belonging, the sheer fun of being with a group.

Above all, perhaps, a team is civilized. Though they may have their personality clashes and differences of opinion, the players have learned to interact and to share. They submerge their individual aspirations in a greater objective. And yet when the common goal is reached, they find that their individual goals are satisfied too.

Speaking of the game he played for years with the New York Knicks, Bill Bradley once said:

"Basketball can serve as a metaphor for ultimate co-operation. It is a sport where success, as symbolized by the championship, requires that the dictates of the community prevail over selfish personal impulses."

Bradley was a star, but he realized that he could not have shone so brightly without the back-up he received from players of lesser ability. Team sports do not demand equal skill or strength or attainment, but they do demand equal effort. Each player is expected to perform to the limit of what ability he has.

It is not inexcusable on a team to have an off day or to make mistakes; it *is* inexcusable to let the side down by not trying hard enough. A chronic shirker may be ostracized by his colleagues, because by not pulling his weight, he has hurt everyone concerned.

Recognition may be lacking when people work in groups

Teams demand a certain conformity. A player must attend to his position and must follow the game plan and the rules of the sport. This does not, however, lead to uniformity. Individuals are expected to take their own initiative within the pre-determined limits, but when an individual makes a brilliant play to score, it is on behalf of the team as an entity. Every member of it can take pride in what that one player has achieved.

In most respects, a team is like a well-ordered family. It is in the give and take and mutual support of the family circle that most of us learn how to conduct ourselves as members of a team. People in western nations take up team play at an early age, whether in organized childrens' leagues or in their neighbourhoods. This continues into adult life in school, college, and sports clubs. Team play is an extension of the familial and social instincts that are part of a normal, well-adjusted personality.

From this we might jump to the conclusion that teamwork in business comes naturally. It would seem like a simple transfer to a different milieu of a mode of behaviour which we have practised all along. There are, however, strong built-in

obstacles to it. For while teamwork in sports and business have much in common, there are crucial differences between the two which make the ideal of organizational teamwork harder to realize than it would appear.

One of these concerns identity. With their uniforms, their supporters, a league to compete in and a championship at stake, athletes can identify wholeheartedly with their team because they know what they represent and where they stand. Things are seldom so clear-cut for a work unit. Its opposition is out of sight and its ultimate objectives are often vague. Members may not know how well or poorly they are doing because it is difficult to measure accurately how a work unit in one organization compares with its counterpart in another.

To muddy the waters further, managers and supervisors may be members of two or more teams — teams of their peers concerned with planning, administration or project development, and a team of subordinates. The interests of these groups may clash when, for instance, one wants to save money and the other to spend it to improve working conditions. Unionized workers may also be caught between conflicting forces in cases where unions and management see each other as adversaries. They are subject to pressure to choose between "them and us."

The identity problem is compounded by a lack of recognition. Athletes have their fans to cheer them, but members of a work team rarely have a chance to taste the glory that is such a powerful incentive for competing in sports. Unless corporate policy makes a deliberate point of giving the credit that is due to employees, most of them labour in obscurity. When credit *is* forthcoming, it all too often goes to an individual (mainly the boss) rather than to the whole group.

The traditional system of career development does little to encourage teamwork. By concentrating on personal advancement, it has more in common with training people to compete in solo sports such as boxing or tennis than with training them to play on a team. Their competitive instincts are channelled into dominating rivals, including rivals

among their own colleagues. As Douglas McGregor observed in his classic work, *The Human Side of Enterprise*: "Most so-called managerial teams are not teams at all, but collections of individual relationships with the boss in which each individual is vying with every other for power, prestige, recognition and personal autonomy... Many executives who talk about their 'teams' of subordinates would be appalled to discover how low is the actual level of collaboration among them, and how high is the mutual suspicion and antagonism."

Co-ordination minus co-operation will take any team only so far

The assumption that people are working together as a team when they are in fact doing the very opposite is not uncommon. It prevails even among the worst offenders. D. L. Landen, an organizational director with General Motors Corp., recently wrote: "People engage in tugs-of-war, have territorial disputes, play one-upmanship, sabotage one another's programs, cut one another's throats, while all the time proclaiming what a great team they are."

The rhetoric of management is studded with references to teamwork which take its existence for granted. This is somewhat understandable, since it is so easy to mistake the illusion of teamwork for the real thing. A group may function like clockwork and yet be nothing like a team. "One can rather readily manage people so that the work proceeds in a co-ordinated way, as for example in a concentration camp," writes New York management professor James J. Cribben. "It is a far cry from this to managing them so that they are stimulated to co-operate willingly with each other, to offer mutual help spontaneously when needed, and to have pride in their work force — to think of themselves as damned good."

Co-ordination without co-operation can take any team only so far. In business this is almost always the result of managers trying to control every aspect of the operation. When people are ordered about without consultation, they are unlikely to volunteer their efforts or ideas. And they are unlikely to take on any more responsibility than the minimum expected of them, because by making all the decisions, the boss has taken all the responsibility upon himself.

At a time when workers are more individualistic and better-educated than ever before, it is counter-productive not to afford them a reasonable measure of independence. In a situation where the boss insists on running a one-man (or one-woman) show, the contributions their subordinates are capable of making go to waste. It might be thought that independence detracts from teamwork, but as consulting psychologist Bruce Sanders argues, "it's an important part of it." The independence of action in team sports — the hockey player on a break-away, the football player running back a punt for a touchdown — is what makes the game worthwhile.

Confronted with the desirability of giving their subordinates a freer rein, some managers may protest that this means abandoning their authority. Not necessarily: the head of a work unit occupies much the same position as a coach in sports, and coaches have a good deal of disciplinary power. They can reprimand players, "bench" them, suspend them, fine them, demote them, banish them or fire them. A winning coach, however, uses sanctions only as a last resort.

In his book *Team Building: Issues and Alternatives*, William G. Dyer introduces a fictional character named Jim Thomas, an industrial plant manager who's an avid supporter of the Dallas Cowboys of the National Football League. If Jim could only talk to the Cowboys' coach, he could tell him exactly where the team was going wrong. "What raises Jim's boiling point higher than anything," Dyer writes, "is to watch his team fail to play together. He can spot in an instant when somebody misses a block, loafs on the job, fails to pass on obvious information to the quarterback, or tries to 'shine' at the expense of the team."

It never occurs to Jim to draw a parallel between his own job and coaching the Cowboys. As Dyer says, "A football team practises over and over again how it will execute its plays. The team has 'skull' practice — they talk over plans and strategies. They review films of past games, identify mistakes, set up goals for next week. Unfortunately, Jim Thomas's management group does not engage in any similar type of activities."

A professor of organizational behaviour at Brigham Young University, Dyer is an advocate of "team building," a practice which concentrates on training an entire group and not just its leader in "management" methods. Team building calls for employee participation in decision-making, working arrangements, setting targets, and quality control. It emphasizes task specialization to make the most of the unique personal traits and skills of members of a team.

More and more work will be done in a team environment

Team building takes into account a growing phenomenon in organizational affairs, namely what Alvin Toffler in his *Future Shock* called "adhocracy." Toffler noted that an ever-increasing proportion of work is being done by task forces and other *ad hoc* groups that are peeled off from the conventional organizational structure. A number of organizations lately have lent "adhocracy" a kind of permanence by adopting the matrix system of management. Under this, special task managers are appointed outside of functional departments to head up teams devoted to particular projects or product lines.

Matrix management is designed to stimulate innovation and the development of new and better products. As its application spreads, more and more people will be working in a team environment. "The typical operational unit is coming to be the small group — several people working together on some large problem," says organizational expert Harold J. Leavitt. "Work, these days, is moving much more toward working with rather than for others, more toward co-operation than toward competition."

In view of this, it only makes sense to teach people to work together, and to develop managers who are more interested in coaching a team than in climbing to individual stardom. The team building concept strives to do this by training work groups, with the help of an outside consultant more often than not. Teams can also be developed less formally through sensitive management and steps to bolster an employee's sense of participation and personal worth.

In recent years western businessmen have been casting an envious eye on Japan, whose highly productive work force and flair for innovation have made it such a powerful trading nation. So imbued are Japanese workers with corporate team spirit that they start their shifts by singing the company song. Family and other groups play a central role in Japanese culture, so they may be more amenable to working in groups than individualistic westerners. But while they appear regimented, Japanese workers do much more original thinking on the job than their western counterparts. One survey showed that employees of large Japanese concerns make an average of 22 suggestions per employee per year.

Management Japanese-style: Teamwork from bottom to top

The Japanese style of management puts a premium on policy consultation at every level of the corporation. Many Japanese enterprises deploy small "business teams" in plants and offices which are responsible for their own output, quality control, objectives and rewards.

When Nissan Motor Manufacturing Co. U.S.A. recently opened a truck plant in Tennessee, its president, Marvin T. Runyon, remarked that management practices in Japan are mainly responsible for that country's industrial prowess. An executive of Ford Motor Co. before becoming associated with the Japanese firm, Runyon said: "Perhaps some of these practices cannot be transferred successfully to the American operation, but my staff and I are determined that we're going to apply the Japanese principle that underlies all of them — teamwork and interaction from bottom to top."

"From bottom to top" — that is an illuminating way of putting it. Teamwork will remain confined to management pep-talks as long as anyone from the shop floor up is made to feel like a cog in an inhuman machine. The spirit and practice of teamwork must be manifest throughout an organization if the stubborn institutional barriers to it are to be eliminated. Only then can it become more than just a word.