Leading and Managing an Effective Team–Healthy Team Dynamic

Last week Debra Sabatini Hennelly introduced this series that discusses leading and managing an effective team. She's covered the case for focusing on team dynamics and has zeroed in on what managers can do to facilitate a cohesive functional group. Today she closes the series with steps to take to nurture a healthy team dynamic.

Key Highlights of this Article

1. If the team's working dynamic is not collaborative, there can be a powerful undertow that can take the team off course or even cause it to fail. While there are many political snags that could trip up the team, some can be isolated and addressed directly if the manager remains aware of the team's interactions.
2. There is no place on a high-performing team for a player who is willing to succeed personally at the expense of the team's success. When assembling a team—or hiring into an existing one—the leader must think not only of the expertise or skills required, but also whether the team has a healthy mix of styles and strengths to foster teamwork and collaboration.
3. The effective operation of the compliance and ethics function requires a very interactive team. Just as the elements of the compliance and ethics program must interrelate in order to be effective, so must the members of the team who are responsible for building and driving those elements.

NURTURING A HEALTHY TEAM DYNAMIC: AVOIDING EROSION BY POLITICAL UNDERCURRENTS

As we discussed in the last article, clarity of mission and roles is critical to the team having a good chance of being productive and successful. But the team will deliver results most effectively if it also has a healthy dynamic—an equilibrium—in the way the team members relate to one another. If the working dynamic is not collaborative, there can be a powerful undertow that can take the team off course or even cause it to fail.

One of the truly remarkable things about workgroups is that they can make 2+2 = 5. Of course, they also have the capability of making 2+2 = 3.[1]

While there are many political snags that could trip up the team, some can be isolated and addressed directly if the manager remains aware of the team's interactions. Here are a couple of examples:

- **The "Slacker"** – someone who does not have the work ethic or commitment to quality work that the rest of the team has; they are happy to let others carry a heavier load; perhaps seen as a

"bad apple" or "freeloader."

- **The "Lone Ranger"** – slightly different, though similarly toxic – someone who is a "solo player" or "spotlight seeker;" more focused on their own advancement or more comfortable in their office (or silo) than collaborating with the team.

Either of these characters might have a reputation for taking credit for the work of others, for "checking out" or pointing the finger of blame at someone else on the team. Each can contaminate the team's momentum and productivity single-handedly. If the manager can identify these issues early on, they should be able to step in and provide the necessary course correction.

There is a great deal of research into the power of team dynamics. More than ten years ago, the widely referenced book, *12 – The Elements of Great Managing* (based on Gallup's employee engagement study through their tens of millions of workplace interviews), helped us connect employee engagement to performance, retention and productivity.

With specific regard to engagement and the team dynamic, the authors note, "Few factors are more corrosive to teamwork than the employee who skates through life taking advantage of the much harder work of others."[2] They include several verbatim comments from their interviews, for example, "We need to do a better job of filtering out those individuals who bring down what others work hard to achieve."[3]

They share research illustrating that the typical team has a "bell curve" of behaviors—on one extreme are the "dedicated cooperators," and on the other end, the "dedicated free-riders;" but in between, the majority of people will "meet cooperation with cooperation and selfishness with selfishness.

"*Therefore, in the beginning, every team is poised to go into one of two vicious circles,* ***one spirals downward into 'every man for himself,' the other spirals upward into 'all for one and one for all.'*** "***[4]***

Their advice: the manager has to check in and address the individual behavior that can derail the team and spiral it downward. "One of the worst one-two punches to a team's *esprit de corps* and productivity is having a slacker in their midst and a manager who lacks the spine to do anything about it."[5]

No member of a crew is praised for the rugged individuality of his rowing.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

There is no place on a high-performing team for a player who is willing to succeed personally at the expense of the team's success. When assembling a team—or hiring into an existing one—the leader must think not only of the expertise or skills required, but also whether the team has a healthy mix of styles and strengths to foster teamwork and collaboration.

Recently, in an interview for *The New York Times'* "Corner Office" column, Dominic Orr, president and CEO of Aruba Networks, articulated this point in reflecting on his own priorities:

The big thing that has changed from 25 years ago is how much I think about the power of the team. I used to, for example, look for two things in people: one is whether I clicked with somebody, and then I would look for best-in-class competence and star performance in a certain discipline, regardless of

how they work with others. Now, whenever I'm interviewing for a new executive in any discipline, I look at how they might enhance the capability of the team. Can the dynamics work? And can this person rotate to do some other things? So I would say as I mature, I focus more and more on the performance of the team versus the performance of the individuals.[6]

Ultimately, it is the leader's responsibility to address style issues to ensure the necessary team equilibrium.

The effective operation of the compliance and ethics function requires a very interactive team. Just as the elements of the compliance and ethics program must interrelate in order to be effective, so must the members of the team who are responsible for building and driving those elements. This is not like a game of singles tennis; it is more like running a relay—being in sync to focus the collective power and ability on the getting the hand-offs right and bringing the whole team across the finish line.

A compliance and ethics department or team cannot function well as a bundle of little silos or one-on-one relationships between individual performers and their manager. Perhaps that works in some law firms or consulting environments, with individual players serving distinct clients. By contrast, our teams are managing overlapping activities in an overall compliance and ethics program. We are trying to apply standards and metrics consistently across the organization and coordinate the management of risks arising from a complex business and regulatory environment. Siloed behavior merely wastes time, energy and resources.

Ideally, the collaboration and information-sharing among team members can help bring inspiration and lessons learned from one part of the organization to another, working together to proliferate critical and consistent messages, optimizing shared resources and reaching creative solutions.

Addressing the potential obstacles to effective teamwork takes some focused, active leadership and investment in activities that are not directly related to program development. The return on that investment is likely to be well worth the effort, though, if it energizes and inspires our team to collaborate on the innovative approaches we need to address our complex compliance and ethics challenges.

Opportunities for Action

1. Be on the lookout for the "slacker" or the "lone ranger" and deal with them directly; this will avoid the team dynamic spiraling downward into an "every man for himself" mindset.
2. In order to foster a "one for all and all for one" dynamic, remember this opportunity for action from the previous article: Measure (and compensate) the performance of the team members, not just by their individual performance, but by their contribution to getting the whole team across the finish line. "What gets measured (and compensated) gets managed."
3. Encourage collaboration and information-sharing among team members—breaking down "silos"—in order to bring inspiration and lessons learned from one part of the organization to another. Emphasize your interest in working together to proliferate critical and consistent messages about the compliance and ethics program, optimizing shared resources and reaching creative solutions.

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[1] Wagner, Rodd, and Harter, James K., Ph.D., *12—The Elements of Great Managing*, (Gallup Press, 2006), p. 129, citing Robbins, S.P., *Organizational Behavior: Concepts, Controversies, Applications* (7th ed.)(Prentice-Hall, 1996).

[2] Wagner and Harter, p. 128.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., pp. 130-131.

[5] Ibid., p. 134.