

Teaming Up for Safety

It seems everyone is talking about teamwork. But not everyone is getting the best from their teams. Along with a focus on continuous quality improvement comes the realization that groups of individuals can often achieve greater performance than individuals working alone. This is especially the case when creativity or innovation is needed. When it comes to problem solving, two heads are usually better than one. And more than two heads can result in even greater performance, if the group works together as a team. But this is easier said than done.

In our country we are raised to be independent, and we strive to meet our own individual goals and aspirations. With slogans like "Nice guys finish last" and "I am the captain of my soul, captain of my fate" in our heads, we compete with other individuals to get ahead in our lives -- whether at work, at play, or on the road. Most of us live by the capitalistic motto: "The more I do the more I get." And many circumstances, from grades in school to performance appraisals and salary promotions at work, support a win/lose individual mindset rather than a win/win collective perspective. For this reason it often doesn't seem natural to work as a team member. And when we do join a team, a process of high-performance teamwork might not come naturally.

Teamwork is the theme of my next three contributions to *ISHN*. In this article, I review some critical shifts in perspective or mindset needed to develop and support a high-performance team. Next month I'll address the specific needs of these paradigm shifts and productive teamwork for industrial safety and health. Then, for my third teamwork article, I'll discuss the different stages teams go through on the way to

producing synergetic results -- or an outcome greater than that achievable by the team members working alone.

Paradigm Shifts for Teamwork

Learning to work effectively as a team takes patience. Membership on a team calls for different approaches to work than most of us are used to. By understanding these differences we can appreciate the various barriers to high-performance teamwork. Sometimes work situations or contingencies can be altered to remove a teamwork barrier. But, often the best we can do is change our perspective or expectancy regarding teamwork, and then adjust our behavior accordingly.

A paradigm is commonly considered to be a personal perception or mindset we use to interpret our experiences. In other words, our paradigm represents our attitude or expectancy in a particular situation and biases the way we view that situation. It also influences what we take from a situation. As a result, we often experience what we expect to experience, and we learn what we expect to learn. Thus, our particular paradigm is responsible for the self-fulfilling prophesy -- the tendency for people to act in a way consistent with their expectation or belief about an event or behavior, thereby increasing the likelihood the event or behavior will actually occur.

Before reviewing five paradigms conducive for productive teamwork, it's useful to consider the definition of "paradigm" given in *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1991). Here paradigm is defined as "an example or model" (p.900). Similarly, the research reports I wrote in graduate school over 30 years ago included a "Paradigm Section" in which I described the specific methods I followed to conduct an experiment.

There's a lesson in the shift in meaning of the word "paradigm" from example or method to perception or expectancy. Simply put, what we do -- our method -- influences our perspective or how we view the situation. In other words, our behavior influences our perceptions. We act ourselves into new ways of thinking. Consider this principle of human nature while reviewing the following paradigm shifts needed for high-performance teamwork. When we do things to support a teamwork paradigm, we'll likely adopt a similar teamwork perspective. We can literally act ourselves into becoming a better team player if we behave to support the following interconnected paradigm shifts.

1. From Individual to Team Performance

While traditional work holds people accountable for their own behavior, effective teamwork requires mutual accountability. It's not "what you do is what you get," but rather "how you collaborate with other team members is what the group gets." And if the teamwork is effective, the result will be greater than what the individuals could do by themselves. This is a synergistic outcome.

2. From Individual Job Assignments to Team Task Assignments

The synergy from teamwork occurs when each team member contributes individual talent and effort for the betterment of the team. Team members receive task assignments from other team members, and carry out their responsibilities to please the rest of the team. This is much different than traditional work wherein we complete individual job assignments to please a supervisor.

Teamwork requires a shift from working exclusively to achieve personal goals to working to achieve shared team goals. This takes a belief in the power of teamwork, a

commitment toward the team's mission, and trust that every team member will do his or her part to meet team objectives.

3. From Rewards for Competition to Rewards for Cooperation

It takes a special mindset to revel in the accomplishments of a team effort. When team members value their mutual purpose and believe their teammates will cooperate to achieve their shared goals, they will put forth their best efforts. And when they see their interpersonal cooperation pay off, they will develop a unique appreciation for teamwork. They will feel personally recognized when the team is rewarded. Then they will cooperate more to fulfill their team's next objectives.

Thus, when people see the synergistic results of team members working cooperatively, their own team behaviors are reinforced and they contribute more to the team. They change their mindset from "How can I do better for myself?" to "How can I do more for the team?" But experiencing the rewards of cooperation is benefited by the next paradigm shift.

4. From Dependence on Self to Dependence on Team Members

We come into this world dependent on others to take care of us. As children we depended on our family for all of our basic life needs. As adolescents, however, we looked for opportunities to be on our own. It seems, in fact, a primary mission of most teenagers is to resist dependency and assert independence. Such reliance on self rather than others is promoted and reinforced throughout our culture, from the high-school and college classrooms to the corporate boardroom. But high-performance teamwork requires a dependency perspective.

To some, a dependency mode seems like regression, but it's really progression. In fact, it's more appropriate to consider this a paradigm shift to interdependence rather than dependence. That's because the dependency between team members is reciprocal. While you depend on team members to complete their task assignments, others depend on you to do your part. Therefore, this paradigm shift can be seen as a change from independence to interdependency. The more you trust the ability and intentions of the other individuals on your team, the more you will depend on your teammates for their contributions -- and the more you will feel obligated to complete your own task assignments.

5. From One-to-One Communication to Group Interaction

Trust and interdependency are developed and supported through interpersonal communication. Some of this certainly happens through one-to-one interaction. But the synergistic power of teamwork is more readily realized through effective team meetings. For example, I can assess the individual talents and motives of my students and research associates during one-to-one conversation, but I learn much more about our team's potential to meet a challenge during group meetings. Through group interaction, individuals see how their diverse talents can combine to produce synergistic results. This leads to greater feelings of self-esteem and self-effectiveness, and increases personal commitment to meet team objectives. It also cultivates group cohesion and feelings of belonging, which in turn motivates high-performance teamwork.

Of course, the amount of beneficial impact from group interaction depends on how team meetings are run. I presented strategies for getting the most out of group interaction in my *ISHN* column last May. Actually, a productive group communication

can facilitate each of the paradigm shifts reviewed here. Effective group discussions build trust in the abilities and intentions of team members to complete their individual team assignments, thereby cooperating for team recognition rather than competing for individual rewards. This strengthens a paradigm of interdependency, and increases personal motivation to work harder for the team. As a result team members appreciate the real meaning of TEAM -- **T**ogether **E**veryone **A**chieves **M**ore.

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NOTE: Dr. Geller has recently authored a book on "Building Successful Safety Teams" published by J. J. Keller and Associates. For more information on this book and related videotapes, audiotapes, seminars, and industry-based consultation, please call Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) at (540) 951-7233 (SAFE).