The Missing I

By Stephen Balzac

“There is no me. I had it surgically removed.” — Peter Sellers

At one high tech company I worked with, I watched an interesting scenario unfold: after completing a major milestone, the engineers were high-fiving and taking some time to brag about their accomplishments. Enthusiasm and excitement were running high when a member of senior management decided to interrupt the gathering with the reminder that, “There is no ‘I’ in team.”

This utterance had an effect not dissimilar to that of a skunk wandering into a fancy dinner party. On the scale of wet blankets, this was one that had been left out in the rain for a week. Within a few seconds, all that enthusiasm was gone, vanished into the ether. Properly harnessed, that enthusiasm could have catapulted the team into its next milestone. Instead, the team approached its next milestone with a shocking lack of energy, especially given the successes they’d had to that point.

The problem is that while there may not be an “I” in team, a team is made up of individuals. There are three “I’s” in individual. What does a team do? Well, in most situations we hope the team will work. There’s an “I” right there in the middle of win. Oddly enough, you can’t win if you take out the “I.”

While it’s critical for a team to be able to work together and for members of the team not to be competing with one another, that’s only a piece of the puzzle. It’s equally important that each member of the team feel they are an integral part of the team’s success. Without that personal connection, it’s extremely difficult to get people excited about the work.

Unfortunately, I see companies far too often treating team members as interchangeable parts, not as unique individuals. Not only does this undermine the team, it is also a tremendous waste of resources: a major advantage of having a team is that you have access to multiple eyes, ears, hands, and brains. Each person brings unique skills, knowledge, and perspective to the problems the team is facing. When a company fails to take advantage of those people, then they are spending a great deal of money for very little return.

In the Mann Gulch disaster, Wagner Dodge failed to appreciate the perspectives and opinions his team brought to the table. He relied solely on his own eyes, ears, and brains. Had he bothered to obtain information from the rest of his team, it is highly likely that most of them would not have perished under Dodge’s command. When the team has no “I,” the team cannot see.

So how do you make sure you have the right “I?”

— Peter Sellers

Start by creating something worth seeing. Paint a vivid picture of the company’s future, and show each person how they, as individuals, matter. Remind employees of the skills, knowledge, perspectives, and abilities that led to them being part of the team. Show each person how they fit into the overall picture, and how their colleagues fit in as well. Make sure each person has a clue about what the others are doing. Ignorance breeds contempt.

Strength in individual autonomy: find opportunities to allow people to decide how they’ll get their jobs done. Don’t regulate anything that isn’t absolutely necessary to getting the product out the door.

Always praise successes. Highlight significant contributions, remind people of their strengths.

Encourage and provide opportunities for team members to continuously develop their strengths. Improving individual skills dramatically improves team performance.

For a team to win, it needs to see where it’s going. That requires the team to have “I’s” and something to look at. How can you provide both to your team?

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NVTHS Culinary Arts students treat local veterans to lunch

Jessica Feddersen of Townsend, a sophomore in Nashoba Valley Technical High School’s Culinary Arts program, serves veterans and their agents during a luncheon for local veterans held at the Westford technical school. The luncheon was sponsored by Roderick Urquhart and Custom Chemical Co., a disabled veteran-owned small business based in North Billerica.