

Slip Slidin' Away

Stephen R Balzac

*"You know the nearer your destination
The more you're slip slidin' away"
-- Paul Simon*

Some twenty years ago, I had a rather odd experience while working for a Silicon Valley software company. As we came closer and closer to shipping the product, more and more problems would crop up. Not problems with the software, as one might expect, but interpersonal problems. There was an increase in argument, bad feeling, and ineffective conflict at exactly the point where it would seem the most likely and logical that people would be feeling the greatest sense of unity and triumph. I experienced the same phenomenon at other companies, both in and out of high tech. In more than one instance, the team would successfully snatch defeat from the very jaws of victory.

In each of these situations the problem was simple; unfortunately, the solution was not. The team in each circumstance had never truly learned to work together, to handle disagreement, or to tolerate variations in working style. The only thing the team had ever agreed upon was the necessity of getting the product out by a certain time. The strength of that agreement was enough to forge sufficient common ground for the team to work together. Unfortunately, as the

project drew nearer and nearer to completion, the glue holding the team together became weaker and weaker. Would the team hold together? Would everyone start fighting again? Would people leave

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the company? After all, working with people you don't always agree with is often easier than working with complete strangers: as the old saying goes, better the devil you know than the devil you don't. Ironically, then, people would engage in the very behaviors they were most afraid of in order to delay the completion of the project and keep the team intact.

Sounds ridiculous, does it not? Why would trained professionals make such a mistake? Managers and CEOs tell me over and over that this would never happen in *their*

teams. In a couple of cases, they've said this even as it *was* happening around them. Wishful thinking is not a good strategy.

The great benefit of teams is that they provide a variety of skills and perspectives. The great weakness of teams is that they provide a variety of skills and perspectives. In order to reap the benefits of having a team, the members of the team need to learn to work together. This involves more than just agreeing on a set of goals, especially since agreement on goals is difficult to get when team members cannot even agree on how to work together.

The solution is to recognize the importance of the early days of the team's existence. How many professional sports teams go into competition with a team that's just been assembled? Very few. Of those few, how many win? Even fewer. Basketball fans might well remember the Olympic Dream Team of a few years ago: some of the best basketball players in the United States all playing on the same team. While they were certainly competent, they did not demonstrate the level of brilliant basketball everyone expected: despite their individual excellence, they never really came together as a team.

In business, the only difference from the sports world is the belief that a team can be assembled and instantly jump to performing at a high level. It simply does not work, no matter how much we may want it to. A team in this situation is particularly vulnerable to cracking under stress at exactly the moment when it most needs to be working together.

So what can the manager or the leader do to build a strong team?

Start by fostering common ground and appreciation of one another amongst the team members.

What's the vision of the company? What are you trying to accomplish?

Get everyone excited by the outcome you're after and help each person understand how they and their colleagues fit into bringing that outcome to fruition. If you can't figure out how each person fits in, then perhaps your project is insufficiently well defined or your team is too big.

Create as much freedom for people to work according to their own styles. Think in terms of mechanisms that permit maximum autonomy while still enabling the team to communicate and be aware of one another's progress and needs. Allow for autonomy to increase as the team gets better at working together. Encourage the use of email as much as possible, minimize meetings, and have clear checkpoints where you can easily monitor progress.

Approach problems with the attitude of "evaluate and adjust" not "judge and punish." There will be false starts and mistakes made, especially in an early version of the

product. If people are afraid to be wrong or make mistakes, they will also be less willing to advance different ideas or experiment with novel solutions. Set aside time for brainstorming.

What roles do the members of the team take on? Are those roles truly taking advantage of each person's skills? As the project advances, are you prepared for roles to change or for team members to take on different roles in the project?

Frequently, the roles people start with are not the best ones for them; being able to change as the project develops helps build team cohesion and increases productivity.

How do you recognize status? Everyone on the team is good at something; otherwise, why did you hire them? It pays to find ways of building up the status of your team members and developing the strengths each person brings to the table. The more each person can demonstrate their competence and apply their expertise, the more motivated they will be and the stronger your team will become.

What's happening when you get nearer your destination?

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About 7 Steps Ahead



Stephen R. Balzac is a consultant, professional speaker and president of 7 Steps Ahead, specializing in helping businesses increase revenue and grow their client base.

Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City, CA.

He serves on the boards of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC). Steve is a member of the Operations Committee of the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. No stranger to the challenges of achieving peak performance under competitive and stressful conditions, he holds a fourth degree black belt in jujitsu and is a former nationally ranked competitive fencer. Steve is an adjunct professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology and has been a guest lecturer at MIT and WPI.

Building effective development organizations, improving team morale, focus, and enthusiasm, developing effective communications between team members, reducing employee turnover, helping businesses identify and attain strategic targets, and increasing delegation and motivation have been amongst his most successful projects..