



The Effective Organization

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Who Needs Team Building?

When the Red Sox put a new player on the team, they're ready to compete the next day. Well, okay, maybe not. In fact, they may be ready to go out and start practicing, but they do everything they can to avoid going into competition with a new player on the team. No matter how good that player is, that individual excellence is not sufficient to win games. Instead, they spend time training until they can perform as a cohesive unit: every member of the team needs to understand at an almost intuitive level how each of the others plays.

Lance Armstrong is an amazing cyclist: the only person to ever win seven (as of the time of this writing) Tours de France. Armstrong doesn't ride along; he rides as part of a team. His team functions like a well-oiled machine, adjusting to one another and to the riders around them almost instinctively.

Ed Schein, at MIT Sloan, discusses a study of surgical teams learning new techniques. Some teams focused on finding a top-notch surgeon, training him in the technique, and having the rest of the team act as support staff. Others found competent surgeons who were willing to train with their team mates. Those teams that took the first approach were unable to master the new techniques, much to the

disgruntlement of their patients. Those that took the second approach were highly successful at mastering the new techniques and applying them in the operating theater. The first group never really learned to work well together. The second, like the Red Sox, learned to work together and understand one another at an almost intuitive level.

American businesses are full of teams. Projects are sufficiently large and complex that it's virtually impossible to not have teams. When new members are added to a team, the team doesn't hesitate: it just leaps right back into action. When members leave a team, the team doesn't hesitate, it just keeps going. When new teams are formed, the members don't hesitate; they immediately buckle down to work. It's fortunate that none of these teams are playing professional sports or conducting surgery; the results would not be pretty.

There's a reason why major league baseball teams, cycling teams, and surgical teams all practice together. Even in a more individual sport such as fencing, changing team members changes the team dynamics and strategy. Team members need time to adjust for the team to perform at its peak.

It takes a great deal of effort for people to learn to work together

Publications

Reality from Fantasy: Using Predictive Scenarios to Explore Ethical Dilemmas in "Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play."

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[Communicating With Retention in Mind](#), in the Journal of Corporate Recruiting Leadership

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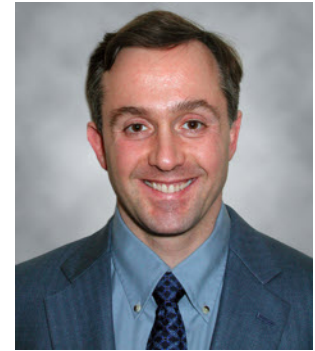
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effectively. If that effort isn't put in up front, such as during Spring Training, then it becomes an ongoing demand on employees' concentration and attention. In sports, a team that hasn't prepared

About 7 Steps Ahead



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He serves on the board of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and is the president of 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.

well will crack under the stress of competition: people will make careless errors, become distracted at critical moments, and start arguing or pointing fingers. In business, the same thing occurs; the frequency of mistakes goes up, communication between employees decreases, people find it harder to concentrate on work, and there is a greater incidence of argument, one-upmanship, and jockeying for position on the team.

So what does it take to build a team in a business environment until they are the functional equivalent of the Red Sox? Well, one thing that doesn't work is team building exercises such as Ropes Courses and the like. While those activities can certainly be fun and might make a pleasant break from the daily routine, all they do is build teams that are good at doing ropes courses. Neither professional nor Olympic sport teams spend their time on such activities. Rather, they spend their time practicing their skills under conditions that simulate how they'll actually use those skills under pressure.

In a business setting, the key is to focus on the right things:

- Management and employees must both be aware of and comfortable with the idea that building trust takes time. It's not easy to develop that intuitive understanding of other people's work style.
- Mistakes are not personal, they're inevitable. An environ-

ment that does not allow mistakes, does not allow learning.

- Managers need to act as coaches: focusing on successes and helping employees appreciate the skills each person brings to the table.
- Recognize that there is often tension between building affiliation with the team and the company and providing each person with as much autonomy as possible. Don't let autonomy destroy affiliation or affiliation destroy autonomy. You need both to be successful
- Allowing people autonomy implicitly recognizes their competence and your trust in them. Denying autonomy questions competence and undermines trust. You can always find reasons for either choice; the only question is which set of results you want.
- Keep the pace of work relaxed at first, and then increase it as people become increasingly comfortable with one another. If you've done things right, you'll soon find yourself running to keep up, and you'll find your team far more productive than if you'd tried rushing forward right out of the gate.

The majors or the bush leagues: where do you want to play?