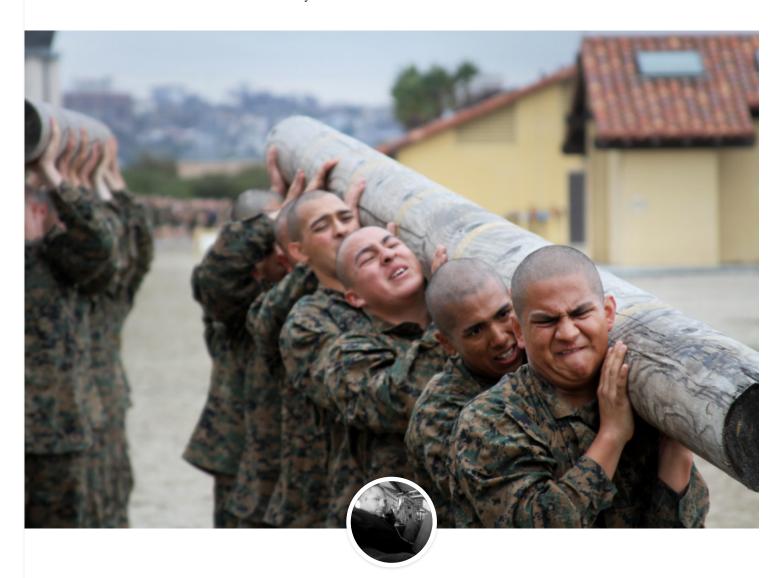Leadership

Mutuality of Concern: A Key Ingredient for Team Success

by AJ Powell0 Comments8 min read

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We all know camaraderie is what makes or breaks your experience in any group, and it can also become the essential component required for the group to achieve success, but what exactly leads to the building of such things?

When people decide to join a group, organization, or become a member of a team, they usually assume that those group members they will be working with share the same level of commitment, maintain the same values, and generally hold many of the same ideals as they do. However, the truth is that everyone brings a unique perspective and their own set of skills and experiences to the group, and that also means that not everyone in the group will initially maintain the same levels, values, or ideals as others do. This is why it is so important for leaders to work hard towards establishing _mutuality of concern_ as early as possible.

What is mutuality of concern? Simply put, mutuality of concern is the idea that members of the same group each individually share in similar levels of commitment for the group, it's goals, etc., and that each member has independently internalized that commitment as a form of personal responsibility.[1] When most or all of the group members share high levels of mutuality of concern, the group is more successful, but when personal goals and individualist behaviors conflict with the groups goals, the results are counter-productive. Beebe and Masterson (2015) make note that, "The success or failure of a group depends, in part, on the degree to which its goal is adopted by individuals as their own" (p. 61). This means that we can establish a clear relationship with group success and the internalized level of commitment maintained by each member of the group.

[1] **Definition:** Mutuality of Concern –
The degree to which members of a team
share the same level of commitment to
the team.

Individuals initially enter a group with different levels of commitment based primarily on their current understanding of the nature of the group, their initial interactions with the other group members, and how those things relate to their own past experiences. Unfortunately, this also means that there may be individuals who couldn't care less about the group or its mission, but instead see it as an opportunity to further their own self-interests. These individuals maintain little to no mutuality of concern for the group, its members, or its mission, because their own hidden agenda(s) and selfish individualistic attitude(s) takes priority in their own minds.[2] Beebe and Masterson (2015) warn that, "Such hidden agendas can be extremely disruptive to the group" (p. 61), and it would not be an understatement to state further, that hidden agendas can also become the ultimate downfall of a group as well.

So how can we help to avoid such things?

For starters, it is very important for leaders to begin by establishing a clear definition of the level of commitment required for the group to succeed – taking into account the group's agenda and its goals – and then communicating that definition to all group members. This should be followed up by getting feedback from each member of the group to understand the level of commitment each member currently has. Essentially, it is imperative for leaders to clearly understand the degree to which each member is concerned with the groups mission from the beginning, and that means getting all group members to clearly state their level of personal commitment to the group, their needs while a member of the group, and their goals both personal and professional.

[2] **Definition:** Hidden Agenda – A
private goal toward which an
individual(s) work towards while
seeming to work toward the group team
goal.

The key is for leaders to establish whether or not a members stated level of personal commitment matches the defined level previously established. If not, why not, and is there anything that can be done to improve it? Next, understanding each person's individual needs allows leaders to help individuals meet those needs. Part of a leaders inherent responsibility of *being a leader* is the stewardship of leadership itself, and that means helping those who support you grow and develop themselves so they can achieve their own desired goals. And finally, knowing what individual goals a person maintains allows leaders to establish whether or not that individual might help the group or hinder it. For those individuals whose personal goals do not line up with the goals required by the group, leaders might question those individual's level of commitment, their desire to be a member of the group, and whether or not they possibly maintain any hidden agendas.

Next, leaders should hold each group member to a set standard of accountability, and align that standard to the previously expressed definition of required commitment. Now, we all understand that circumstances happen, but it is essential to be able to sincerely justify instances of failure to meet the standard. Accountability is important. Not only is this an area where leadership stands a great opportunity to generate

motivation, highlight achievement, and build esprit de corps, however, at the same time, without accountability, some individuals might attempt to skate by while others do all the work. Social loafing is a major hindrance to the establishment, growth, and internalization of mutuality of concern for two reasons: [3]First, social loafers themselves seem to believe that they can get away without pulling their fair share, or even that they don't really have to do their part of the work because someone else will do it for them. And second, because social loafers refuse to be productive, the increased workload left over is forced upon everyone else in the group – on top of the workload they each already have – which drastically increases stress and friction amongst the group.

[3] **Definition:** Social Loafing – The tendency for some individuals to hold back from contributing (to loaf) in a team because they assume someone else will do the work.

Combating social loafing is no easy task. Some people will never be fully self-motivated enough to care about fulfilling their responsibilities or honoring their commitments for the team. These individuals are nothing more than leeches, and the easiest way to assure human leeches don't either make it into the group, or don't last long within the group, is to create a set of Performance-Based Standards that the group understands, agrees to abide by, and to which all are held accountable to. Even still, as a leader, it is important to remember that the majority of people who want to be a member of the group actually want to be there, so it is very important not to jump to conclusions prematurely either.

The establishment, growth, and internalization of mutuality of concern within a group is certainly no easy task, but as a leader, there are some key things that can help you be successful at its generation. Start by getting people to honestly express their interests, their intended levels of commitment, their goals, and even their concerns from the very beginning. Next, help them to work around, solve, or overcome any problems, issues, or concerns that they might have which might prevent them from aligning their own goals with those of the group, and aid them in their own efforts to achieve those goals. Finally, hold everyone to a set standard of accountability – and that includes yourself. Establishing clear expectations, taking real concern for other group members, and holding people accountable will not only greatly improve your chances of fending off hidden agendas and social loafing, but it will also greatly improve the groups ability to develop a strong sense of internalized mutuality of concern and following success.

SOUND OFF!

Have you ever been a part of a group where you had to deal with an excessive work load because you felt someone else simply wasn't pulling their fair share of the weight? What about being a member of a group where you had to work extra hard because someone else spent more time focusing on their own interests when instead they should have been focusing on what's best for the group? Consider for a second that maybe you didn't have all of the information, or that maybe there was an explanation you just weren't aware of… As a leader, how would you go about trying to get all the facts? How do you think you would be able to work with those individuals to improve their mutuality of concern for the group? If they really were social loafers and/or maintained self-interested hidden agendas, and you found out about it, what do you think would be the best way to handle the situation as a leader leading by example for the rest of the group?

Let's discusses our thoughts in open forum. Let us know **YOUR** thoughts in the **comments below**! Open discussion helps everyone learn and grow.

References:

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About the author

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