

The Importance of Being on the Same Page

This year certainly has been a year of dramatic changes in the way that organisations function, or in some cases, cease to function. And as with most things in our lives, the same things can be perceived to be both good news and bad news. From a managerial financial perspective, some of the good news is that organisations are discovering that in many cases, they do not need massive central office locations. With all the lockdowns and subsequent cautions, many organisations are now demonstrating that their people can deliver performance by conducting business from home and on video-conferencing. That is the good news. More good news is that many organisations are also finding that they can utilise the talents of contractors instead of having all the extra expenses connected to full-time employees. Clearly more good news. The not-so-great news is that conducting business remotely and using contractors can put their long-term sustainable potential at risk.

The reasons for this risk should be pretty clear. By utilising office environments, especially with external contractors, what can happen is that the level of alignment around vision, goals, and strategies can begin to slip. Previously, teams were usually in a central location where effective two-way communications was easier. But now, in our new environment, communications are typically done through emails, messaging, and video-links. All great options for sharing what needs to be done. But the reality that our environment has changed – and with it, our beliefs and assumptions about what could be behind the communications has changed as well. Our ability to “all be on the same page” has diminished greatly, and because of this, the ability of our organisations to realise their respective potentials has slipped.

The impact of not having everyone on the same page was demonstrated a dozen or so years ago. A management team that I had been working with was assembled for what they thought was going to be a de-brief conversation. What actually happened was that the 24 or 25 team members were divided into three groups.

Each group was told to stand next to one of three tables, each table having a large unmarked box on it. The “rules” of the exercise were pretty simple. The three tables were spaced far enough away from each other to ensure that any conversations at one table would be almost impossible to hear at either of the other tables. Inside of the boxes on each table were identical large 1,000-piece jig saw puzzles. The only other part of the “rules” was that the members of each group could talk about their puzzle and work collectively to assemble as many pieces as possible in a fixed time frame. It was pretty easy to see that the team members sensed that this was going to be a fun, highly competitive game that was a welcome relief to all that they were dealing with when they were doing their “day- jobs.”

What the teams were not told was that, even though each team would be working with the same identical puzzle, the set-up for each team would be different. Team “A” would be given the puzzle but with no picture on the puzzle box that would show what the completed puzzle should look like. In team “B,” only one person would be allowed to see what the completed puzzle would look like. And in team “C,” all the team members would be able to see the completed puzzle picture. After reiterating the exercise instructions – the “rules” – the teams opened the boxes and began the puzzle assembly process.

The members of team “A” were clearly frustrated as they really didn’t know what the completed puzzle should look like, making it pretty difficult to even figure out the colours on the pieces would mean. Team “B” spent some time having the one person in their group who knew what the completed puzzle should look like trying to explain clearly what that picture was and trying to get the team members to look for specific colours that would begin to fill in some of the picture. The members of team “C” just self-organised, with people separating the pieces into colour groups that would match up with the picture of the completed puzzle on the box top that they could all see and reference.

Every five or ten minutes, everyone was instructed to stop, so that monitors could make a quick count of how many pieces had been

James B. Rieley advises senior leadership teams from all sectors of business and industry, higher education, and government, and has written extensively on the subject of improving organisational performance through leadership.

successfully assembled before being told to continue. After thirty minutes, the exercise was stopped.

Group “A”, the one in which no one in the group knew what the desired completed puzzle would look like, only had a hand-full of pieces assembled appropriately. Group “B”, the group in which one person did know what the completed puzzle should look like, and consequently, spent time trying to communicate how the pieces should fit together, did better. But even that team only had several dozen pieces together. Group “C”, the group where everyone knew what the desired completed puzzle should look like because they could see the picture of the finished puzzle, did the best, with more than 100 pieces assembled correctly.

The de-brief of the exercise with all three teams together was pretty revealing. Team “A’s” members seemed to keep talking about how it was virtually impossible for them know what they should be doing when they didn’t know what they were trying to accomplish. Team “B’s” members seemed to think the exercise was unfair because the one person who did know what the finished puzzle should look like was struggling to communicate consistent visual messages about the desired completed puzzle and at the same time, keep some sense of discipline when team members were mis-interpreting what the messages were. The members of team “C” couldn’t figure out what the problem was. They all knew how their individual actions would positively contribute to the successful assembly of the puzzle pieces.

This exercise is a brilliant analogy for why it is important for everyone in an organisation have a clearly understandable picture of where the organisation is going and what it will look like in its desired future. If you don’t know what your day-to-day work contributions are toward a desired future, it is pretty difficult to be able to help your organisation get there.

The Importance of Being on the Same Page: Questions to Consider

1. Has the way your organisation or team operates changed in the past year?
2. Has the level of alignment (everyone on the same page) changed because of other changes you have experienced?
3. How do you know that?
4. How does your organisation (or team) talk about the challenges they are facing?
5. Are there “undiscussables” within your organisation or team?
6. How do you deal with these undiscussables?
7. Do you believe that if everyone on your team was asked to explain how their day-to-day activities supported the organisation or team vision for its desired future, that the responses would be the same?
8. What will the impact be for your team or organisation without high levels of alignment about where it is going, how it will get there, and why all this is important?
9. If you were on a team that was charged with creating a high performing environment, but there was a lack of alignment on the team about what this environment would look like, what would be the end result?
10. If you are the one responsible (CEO, Team Leader, whatever), what are you doing to ensure that you have a team of people who are on the same page, and highly committed to helping the organisation or team realise its potential?