

# **Convening Teams to Exceed Expectations**

## **By Jeff Cowart**

Team is a concept firmly established in the language of our corporate lives. We convene people frequently to collaborate, innovate, envision and address issues. But, over the years, as I have conducted leadership counseling for organizations over a wide range of disciplines, I've seen that gatherings of talent are not necessarily teams.

By definition, authors Barr & Barr describe a team as: 1) mutually trusting people; 2) working together responsibly; 3) to achieve unifying goals; 4) while supporting each other in an open, candid, communicative environment.

True teams have common goals that everyone clearly accepts. There is an embrace of the concept that team members must work together to accomplish those goals. And, most importantly, a team has invested substantial time in learning how to work together.

By contrast, convening talent without the discipline of a team makes it a workgroup. A workgroup tends to have a strong, authoritarian leader who presides over task-driven meetings with little creative exchange. Workgroup members are individually accountable for assigned work deliverables that fit together with other deliverables to complete the project at hand.

Workgroups are usually navigating on the path of least resistance to move toward an answer that typically is designed to "fix" something.

What typically gets sacrificed in the workgroup setting is creativity, true innovation, and new ways of looking at and doing things that can take something to the next level.

Teams have shared leadership roles and mutual accountability for team outcomes. There is a shared and understood mission and purpose for the team (other than task completion). Open-ended discussion is encouraged and the team itself challenges the tyranny of the loud voice. Active and creative problem solving and idea generation during the team meetings lead the team away from safe and conventional pathways and along pathways where new, creative solutions are often found.

The foundational success of a team is the commitment at the start that everyone convened has something meaningful to contribute and that they can make a real difference by working together. Individuals want to be included in decisions that affect their lives and want evidence that their thoughts are heard, understood and considered.

The characteristics of a quality team include:

- An informal, comfortable and relaxed atmosphere of work
- The team objective is clearly understood by everyone
- Members have made a commitment to listen to each other
- There is disagreement and comfort with disagreement
- Everyone participates in frequent and focused discussion
- Desired outcomes overcome politics and personalities
- The team frequently analyzes its performance against its goals

And, back to the point that team members have invested substantial time in learning how to work together. A team requires training as a team to achieve its best results. Imagine your favorite athletic team as a collection of talented athletes convened on the field. Without training as a team, a shared and understood game plan, and real empowerment to use their special talents to excel individually in team-aligned performance, chances of success exceeding expectations are greatly limited.