Chapter 7

Lucky #5 - Teamwork

By: Vic Pepe

What does it mean to be a team player? Why is it important to be supportive of others in the workplace?

It starts with encouraging teamwork from the top down. As a leader in any organization, you have to plant the seeds of teamwork from the start and nurture them day after day, as opposed to relying on sporadic "team building" retreats. A weekend in the mountains ziplining will not truly *build* the teamwork necessary to

succeed. Sure, it's fun -
however, only consistent, daily
encouragement and support can
grow the seeds of teamwork
you've planted, regardless of
the good intentions and
temporary enthusiasm generated
by team-building events.

A key aspect of ensuring team
unity is rapport. It can be
tricky, even brutal, in
professional environments to
maintain positive, productive
rapport, so it falls squarely on
the shoulders of leaders to
ensure that people connect on a
personal level to the best of
their ability. If everyone can
get along outside of work, that
will carry over to office life,

where genuine collaboration can be achieved.

Teamwork is more than just doing projects together when they need to be done. The key ingredients of teamwork are collaboration, working well with others, and actively demonstrating an "I've got your back" culture. A leader who seeks his employees' contributions and likewise offers to contribute to their efforts actively demonstrates a collaborative philosophy that will be mirrored. This is particularly true in difficult situations, such as team members struggling with a problem and needing support. In other words,

good faith collaboration rooted
in trust from the top down can
be wildly contagious.

Consistently applying these
concepts can be problematic in
the daily hustle and bustle of
the workplace. However, this
marks yet another critical point
- leaders cannot rely on
sporadic "team building events"
to guarantee collaboration. A
solid plan must be in place to
maintain healthy collaboration
long after that team building
trip to the ski resort has
ended.

Naturally, working well with
others plays a pivotal role
here. You can offer your support
and find ways to contribute to

all manner of problem-solving
scenarios to every employee on
the team, but without the
determination to respect and
care for your team members,
attempts at collaboration will
more often than not be viewed as
empty gestures. Without *mutual
respect*, teamwork becomes a
virtually impossible endeavor.

A thought about the all-
important work-life balance:
while venturing off for a brief
team building retreat at a fancy
spa may highlight non-workplace
lifestyles, it is far more
effective to establish
consistent, daily connections
between work and life outside of

work, be it family, sports, music, faith, health, art, etc.

If, by example, a leader demonstrates an active, diverse life outside of the company walls, the team will follow this example and more effectively buy into the business goals. Showing the team you have a life outside the office walls does not mean you are a slacker showing up solely to collect a paycheck. It demonstrates that you are laser-focused on delivering solid results efficiently and leading an active, fulfilling life outside of work. This, again, can become quite contagious.

This is not to say that team-building events have no value. They certainly do. However, a weekend jaunt to the mountains to climb rocks hoping everyone returns to work as besties, rarely translate to long-lasting, measurable value.

Here's the point: team building must go beyond special events. I attended many a well-intentioned leadership team building retreat, with the idea being that we would openly discuss our feelings about one another in a beautiful, relaxing setting. Lavish dinners in an elegant setting at our disposal became void of business agendas under the guise of being honest

about our issues with each other.

   I thought it was an excellent opportunity to focus on the business strategy and allow the leadership team to get to know me better as a person - and in turn, I could learn more about them. To support exposing a side of me they knew little about, I brought a guitar, hoping to break away from the strictly business mode, believing we'd actually enjoy ourselves beyond pure business strategy.

   The guitar never came out of its case. The team building never happened once the casual dinner ended, and we all

returned to the familiar
business dialogue. At no time
did playing the guitar seem
appropriate at an event
ostensibly meant for precisely
that type of human interaction.
I never had a genuine
opportunity to get to know my
coworkers personally. We did not
bond. We did not build our team
any more than it had been upon
arrival. Matters of personal
interactions gave way to one
extended strategy session, which
we might as well have held at
the office. Even minimal bonding
on a personal level would have
gone a long way, especially
given that much bad blood

existed between team members before I joined.

Worst of all, when the retreat ended, all unresolved personal issues remained unresolved, and we accomplished virtually nothing other than having a few fine meals on the company. It ultimately created more damage than improved any aspect of the business, as no one was held accountable for the problems we intended to resolve, so the open sores only festered and worsened.

It's certainly not the end of the world if team-building activities ultimately fail, but these events can provide a temporary boost to morale when

work needs to get done. Again, good teams are built on trust, which can be difficult to foster in a purely office environment.

Trusting your teammates parallels trusting teammates on a sports team. A quarterback throws a ball to a receiver, placing it precisely where he knows it can be caught and hopefully gain extra yardage. Just watch any top professional football QB slice apart a defense to witness this first-hand. If he thinks the receiver will drop the ball or risk being intercepted, he tosses it somewhere else in hopes of a better result. Trust is built

over time through demonstrated
behavior and collaboration.

However, being a good team
player requires an individual to
suspend some of the strengths
that established their
reputation and identity,
including ego. Team building
must necessarily be more than
retreats, dinners, and off-site
events. It necessarily requires
a buy-in from everyone on the
team to win the championship
trophy.

One way to make sure every
team member occupies their best
place on the team and moves
toward the organization's goals
is to encourage and provide

professional development among staff.

So, I know I beat the proverbial dead horse on leadership retreats; I get it. If you're in HR and reading this, those events check boxes (in my experience), but they don't accomplish the mission.

So what is it that we can do? Host lunches often and have a non-business agenda. Create laughter. Allow folks to come in and share something about themselves that others might not get to know otherwise.

Celebrate the wins of others frequently. Highlight accomplishments on an individual and group level - allow everyone

to participate in the celebration.

Learn together. Create specialized training for groups of coworkers where they enjoy the path to knowledge - again, together.

Lastly, work through losses - together… No one loses alone. Ever! Singling out a specific individual for a mistake sends shockwaves through the company. It builds a culture of fear. Have that dialog one on one. Never in a public forum.

Without supportive teamwork *every single day*, you're done.