As businesses strive to deliver higher quality goods and services in less time and with fewer resources, more and more managers are realizing the importance of teamwork to accomplish company goals. As a result, many business leaders place a greater focus on building a productive team of employees. Such an approach certainly makes sense. After all, a unified group of people working toward a common goal can generally outperform a solo worker. Unfortunately, the manner in which many managers build teams is far from effective.

Too many business leaders believe that a single day retreat or an in-house training session will be the cure-all to their teambuilding needs. What they fail to realize is that developing a productive team of people requires more than a bandage approach or a single day motivational message. True teambuilding starts at the company’s core and permeates every department, division, supervisor, foreman and field worker.

When teambuilding strategies fail to delve beyond the surface or are not in place at all, trust among employees declines, which causes morale to drop and productivity to lag. As the cycle continues, co-workers lose respect for each other and their managers,
and customer satisfaction drops in importance. Soon, product or service quality becomes substandard, and the business ultimately suffers.

If we want to prevent these problems, we must get to the core of our company’s teambuilding needs. But how do we accomplish this? How can a business leader look beyond the surface issues and build a team from the inside out? The solution is to develop norms by which companies operate. Without established norms, no company can succeed.

**What Are Your Company’s Norms?**

Norms are the standards or expectations individuals or groups agree to operate by while working together. When your company’s norms are in place, you will maximize productivity and effectiveness in a positive setting and ensure that every individual feels respected and valued. As the norms take hold in your organization, your team members will take on more responsibility and will work together to build community in the group. In the process, risk-taking and out-of-the-box thinking will prevail.

At first glance, norms may seem very similar to rules. In actuality, they’re very different. Whereas rules are confining and rigid, norms are standards of behavior for people to work together. People typically regard rules as restrictions placed upon them. Norms, on the other hand, are guiding principles people recognize the benefit of and voluntarily agree to follow. To establish norms that your employees will live by and honor,
use the following norm-building process.

Allow employees to identify their own norms. Since your employees are the lifeline of the organization, they should personally identify which guiding principles are most important to them. As they suggest standards, such as “respect” or “patience,” have them delve deeper into the principle and define it exactly. Why? Because the more people you have employed in your organization, the more perspectives you’ll have for how a certain standard should work. So instead of employees simply stating that “respect” is one of their norms, encourage them to clarify it and state what respect looks like, what it doesn’t look like, what it sounds like, and what it doesn’t sound like. When employees have a crystal clear definition of a particular norm, there will be less confusion regarding how they should implement the norm.

Limit the list of norms to five or six. Implementing too many norms will quickly overwhelm people and defeat the whole teambuilding process, while utilizing too few norms will make the process meaningless. Narrow the list of norms to the most relevant five or six, and then define them in the most simple and positive terms. Norms that are lengthy are too difficult to remember, and norms that state negative consequences rather than promote positive activities hinder morale. For example, instead of writing a lengthy norm that details customer service principles, simply state your norm as “Make the customer’s day.” This gives employees the freedom to interact with customers in a positive way so they can work together to meet expectations.

Enact the norms from the top down. For any norm to take hold in an organization, the CEO and executive staff must buy-in completely with the norm. From their daily interactions with employees to their meetings with colleagues and customers, the company leaders must exemplify the essence of every norm in all that they say and do. Employees do what their leaders do, so
when they witness their stated norms in action, their own behaviors will follow suit. In order for norms to be successful, leaders must live the norms.

Reinforce the norms regularly. Effective norms embed themselves into the company’s culture. For this to occur, though, managers need to reinforce the norms regularly and openly. Encourage employees to discuss the norms during meetings and in regards to how they are going to solve a company or customer challenge. Based on the discussions, determine if you need to edit or reconfigure the norm for better future application. The more consistent you are in regards to discussing and reinforcing the norms, the quicker they will become second nature and an integral part of your company’s cultural fiber.

Include the norms in your interviewing and training process. As you bring new people into your company, interview prospective candidates with the norms in mind. Talk about the established norms during the interview and determine whether the job applicant understands and shares your company’s norm philosophy. Once on board, train new hires on what the norm means to the company and to their fellow employees. Discuss the norms during performance reviews as well to ensure they are taking hold in new and long-term employees alike.

Celebrate your company’s norms and resulting success. As your employees align at their core as to what the company stands for and how they will operate, they’ll work together to creatively solve challenges and increase overall productivity. When you notice such moments, recognize your team for a job well done. Post accomplished goals on a company bulletin board, host a luncheon to celebrate the meeting of a tight deadline, or simply offer a sincere “thank you” when employees exemplify a given norm. Such positive reinforcement of norms will keep the spirit of teambuilding alive and vital within your corporate walls.

The Power of Norms

Norms are the essential elements for any team to excel in today’s business world. When your norms are in place, your employees will have a set of unifying core principles that will guide their actions and lead them to success. Encourage your employees to establish norms today. The result will be a cooperative team where all members perform to their maximum potential.

About the Author
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