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Dear Reader,

Haven't we heard enough about "good teamwork" for one hundred years already? And if so much has been researched and written about it, why is it that it continues being everyone's daily challenge? With this question in mind ARL News went to get some opinions and perspectives from someone with 25 years experience helping people work together.

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BETTER TEAMS

Interview with Ernie Turner

Do you ever think that your team meetings are a waste of time? Do you wish you had other people on your team? Do you think that you can solve issues faster or better on your own? Do you have an 'unspeakable' feeling that the decisions made through discussion aren't nearly as good as your own, especially when you are in an endless debate with conflicting perspectives? Do you suffer the down side of democratic participation and consensus-building because you don't respect the opinions of others? Do you get anxious when the atmosphere grows cold, tension increases, and no one knows how to resolve the existing polarities? Are you happy when certain team meetings get canceled so you won't have to endure the monotony or the pain? Are you tired of hearing the same conversations repeated time after time with no resolution, or each time someone bringing in a few new options to consider, which makes a decision impossible?

If you identify with any of the above thoughts and feelings, we have good news. Teamwork CAN be better and even fun. You don't have to go to the movies to find high performance teamwork. We interviewed Ernie Turner, President of LIM, who shares with us his experiences and lessons coaching teams in 'becoming better'.

ARL News: First of all, can teamwork be effective AND fun?

ET: Absolutely! But, of course, it all depends upon one's definition of 'effective and 'fun'. To me being 'effective' means a number of things – identifying and going after the 'right' challenges; having the 'right' people; getting the 'right' results; continual progress in accomplishing our team's mission (business); on-going improvement in our team's process (the way we work together). In short – learning and earning. When

this kind of 'effectiveness' exists teamwork is fun. I would also say that the better teams take time to relax and do 'fun' (non-work related) things together. These 'fun' things can range from a dinner together, a golf game, a bike ride, a camping trip, etc. What often happens during these 'fun' times is that personal awareness and appreciation for one another grows and helps to create a climate of trust and acceptance that enhances high performance.

ARL News: You've covered a lot of territory here. I'd like to explore with you a few of the words you've used. Let's begin with what you mean by 'right' challenges.

ET: Probably the first question the sponsor of a new team or the team leader needs to ask is "What is the challenge or mission of this team?" And related to this question is another key question "Is any team, and this team, in particular, really needed to accomplish this challenge, and if so, why?" I worked with a team once that was not clear on its mission. So we began our work together with their sponsor defining and reaching alignment on the team's mission, their reason for being. This conversation included the scope, authority, resources, deliverables, measurements, time frame, reporting and supporting relationships. Once these questions had been addressed the team was ready to look at other issues.

ARL News: What about the 'right' people?

ET: Occasionally a team gets assembled without sufficient thought. Sometimes people get put on teams for reasons of convenience, availability, numbers and politics instead of competence, chemistry, influence, interest, and willingness to work on a team. Once you know the mission then you should be in a better position to determine the competence and influence needed. Then it's a matter of qualifying potential members to see if they have the necessary competence, interest, commitment and willingness to work on the team.

ARL News: What are some of the other key factors that a team should consider if it wants to achieve 'high performance'?

ET: Three stand out for me:

- 1) taking time to really get to know one another at a personal level
- 2) identifying and agreeing upon the core processes that support teamwork
- 3) selecting a few practical tools and techniques that make these processes work

ARL News: Why is it so important to get to know one another at a personal level at work and how can teams get better at this?

ET: I've discovered over the years that as teams take time to really get to know one another at a deeper level personally it carries over into their professional work. Usually, appreciation and trust increase. This is the foundation for teamwork. And since most of us spend 50% or more of our time at work, why not combine the personal with the professional? The process can be as simple as organizing a conversation over a meal. The 'organizing' can be as simple as inviting everyone on the team to write down or think of a question they would like to explore over dinner that would enable everyone to get to know each other better. It helps if the table is round and you're sitting in a reasonably quiet location. Someone can play host and keep the conversation moving at a natural pace. Some teams institutionalize this 'ritual' into their life and as a consequence have grown very close and have become strong as a team. There are many variations on this theme such as focusing a meal on 'Appreciative Toasts' or reflecting on and exchanging "The Best of the Day". These ideas can also enrich one's personal life by trying them out at home...

ARL News: So can you say more about the core processes that support teamwork?

ET: Sure. There are seven that I look for when I'm working with any team. I'm sure there are others but these are the ones that stand out for me:

- 1) setting practical norms that will shape the culture of the team;
- 2) deciding upon an inclusive decision-making process;
- 3) agreeing upon an inclusive planning process;
- 4) establishing a feedback process individually and collectively;
- 5) identifying a simple meeting management process;
- 6) contracting roles and expectations among team members and between the team and leader;
- 7) agreeing upon ways of making meaning.

ARL News: OK. Let's take a closer look at a few of these. Can you give me an example of some really practical norms?

ET: Yes. Two come immediately to mind because I use them frequently in teams where I'm a member. One came out of a team I worked with in Hong Kong.: is called 48 or Forget. This simply means that team members are both willing to receive and willing to give constructive feedback to one another within 48 hours if something comes up or forget about it and not let it fester and grow. Of course, for this to work well team members need to understand the conditions and process for giving feedback effectively. Another norm I really like is called 100% Responsibility. This means that everyone on the team has 100% responsibility for the success of the team. Therefore if something isn't working for someone s/he is responsible for speaking up and making an offer, suggestion or request. There should be no complaining.

ARL News: I like those. Tell me about the inclusive decision-making process? And why did you use the word inclusive twice?

ET: I've discovered over the years that inclusive decisions are usually better in quality because they have everyone's input and they have a greater chance of being implemented because there is greater ownership. To me 'inclusive' means real engagement and not just grunts, nods or show of hands for or against.

ARL News: So how do you get this real engagement?

ET: There's a tool we use for getting everyone's input on decisions called the "Fist – Five". It is simple, practical and inclusive. This is how it works. Instead of raising your hand if you're in favor of a decision at the count of three everyone raises either his/her fist, one finger, two fingers, three fingers, four fingers or five fingers. And here's what each signifies:

- Fist – I can't live with this decision; I'll block it if I can and I may leave the team – physically or emotionally
- One – I can live with this decision but I have little energy to support it if there is work required
- Two – This decision is OK; but I'm not wild about it
- Three – This decision is good; no problems
- Four – This is an excellent decision; but I won't leave if we don't make it
- Five – This decision is vital; if we don't take this decision I may leave – physically or emotionally

The beauty of this process is that everyone 'votes' at the same time and the chairperson can then check on the thinking behind a fist, a one or a two to determine what's missing. For this process to work effectively everyone must welcome a fist as much as a five and discover what needs to change for the decision to 'fly'. If a fist remains silent in the decision-making process sooner or later it will emerge in the implementation process and either derail or slow down the action. This process is not culture bound or gender bound and gives everyone – introverts and extraverts – equal opportunity to participate.

I was working with a group of investment bankers a few years ago and a member of the group raised his fist when we were testing a group decision. I asked what was behind his fist and he shared his concern with the group. I asked if he would reword the decision accounting for his concern and we would re-test the decision. He did and the group gave his re-worded proposal 4s and 5s. They later thanked him for 'speaking up' and saving them from a poor decision.

ARL News: This process reminds me of my kindergarten days doing 'paper, scissors, stone'. Does this

really work with adults in the workplace?

ET: Most adults are kids at heart. And when they understand the wisdom, practicality and simplicity underlying this process they use it very effectively. Like everything else that's new, there are a few nervous smiles and laughs the first few times but once the team gets used to it, the process works fine. In fact, I've seen it used to test decisions before a discussion. On occasions everyone is already 3s, 4s and 5s so there's no need for a lengthy conversation. When there are big differences (fists and fives) it is very productive and time saving to get these people to talk with one another and share their different perspectives. By exchanging rather than debating differing points of view team members often come up with workable solutions.

ARL News: I'm curious about the last process you mentioned. What do you mean by 'making meaning'?

ET: This is one of the responsibilities that teams often set aside due to all the 'work' they must do. They don't realize that 'thinking' is real work, too, and don't take the time to slow down, think and ask themselves some important questions like...Where are we headed? Is this where we want to go? If not, what must we do to get back on track? How are we feeling about what we're doing and how we're doing it? What's keeping us from being better? What's contributed to our success so far? What's missing in our current picture? What are we learning?

ARL News: So if making meaning is so important, why do you think teams don't do it more often?

ET: I don't think they have a process for this kind of conversation. Discussion and debate don't lend themselves initially for this kind of in-depth listening and exchange. We've found that Reflection and Dialogue (R&D) allow for a different and more reflective conversation than most teams have previously had. The ground rules are pretty simple – listen actively to what's being said as well as to what is intended; speak from your heart as well as your head; build upon what the others are saying; slow down the pace and allow a slight pause between comments; avoid judgments or taking decisions; and avoid 'ping pong' (question and answer or debate) conversations between two people.

A couple of years ago I was working with an OD team inside a company. At the end of one of our meetings I introduced R&D and after about 30 minutes I noted that our designated time for dialogue was over. One of the team members said, "Ernie, this is the first time we've had this kind of conversation in our 3 years together; you can't stop us now."

ARL News: You've said quite a bit about what supports high performance teamwork. What are the causes for low performance?

ET: Many things – the wrong people; lack of definition and/or alignment around mission, vision, values and strategy; the wrong structure; lack of supporting processes; and ineffective leadership.

ARL News: So what is effective leadership?

ET: That's a great question for an "R&D" conversation and one I often ask a team and team leader to ponder separately and then together. The best teams are conscious of how they're sharing or distributing leadership among themselves. A jazz ensemble is a great metaphor for this kind of leadership. The team leader isn't always 'conducting' or tooting his horn. Effective leadership takes on many different shapes and forms including active listening, asking questions, clarifying, seeking alignment, summarizing, saying "No", challenging, supporting, coaching, being transparent, being vulnerable, speaking up, taking decisions, delegating, appreciating, making offers and requests, reflecting, doing, giving and receiving feedback, celebrating, constantly learning and many other characteristics.

And when effective leadership and effective teamwork come together you'll hear more than notes; you'll be listening to inspiring music. But don't be fooled. Once you're 'high performing' doesn't mean you'll always be. 'Becoming Better' requires discipline and lots of practice.

Let me leave you with a quote from John Heider's Tao of Leadership: "Good leadership consists of doing less and being more."

ARL News: That's a good place to end. Thanks for your thoughts and sharing your experiences.



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