

Improve Your Team— at the Expense of the Organisation

BY STEVE SIMPSON CSP

While I must admit to not reading all that much about this topic, I'd be prepared to wager that most psychologists and consultants would say that a sense of team is created, in part, through focusing on the competition and trying to 'beat' them. It makes sense that people feel more part of the team when they have identified and agreed on an 'opposition'.

Do you want evidence of this?

Consider what people do during typical team building exercises. People are put into pairs or small groups, assigned a task to complete, and subsequently 'compete' against the other small teams. The 'winning' team usually bonds from a sense of euphoria, and the 'losing' teams bond closer together in their despair.

Harmless fun, you might say? I don't think so!

An association of which I was a member suffered its demise probably around five years ago. This was disappointing to me, as it was essentially run by volunteers in most Australian states, with a view to fostering the cause for improved customer service across the country. Financial troubles ended the association.

On many occasions I used to cringe when I attended my state committee meetings. The state president used to continually boast about the performance of the association in our state by comparing with, and running down, the performance of other states. I regret that I never spoke up about this—but I used to ask myself "Aren't we members of the same association, driven by the same cause?"

Are Senior Leaders the Cause?

There's a real lack of honesty and authenticity in meetings of senior leaders in many organisations. So often I see a façade of friendliness and 'success' in meetings, where the real agenda is to boast about wins and to compete against other work areas.

Too often, senior people are pitched against one another with consequences that are unintended and damaging. The budget process is a good example of this—limited money is available, so managers have to make their pitch (read: 'compete'!) in order to gain an increased share of the pie.

There are more subtle cues however, that result in a competition amongst senior people. If individuals are rewarded for 'empire building', then this sets the scene for growth competition. If people are rewarded for hiding the truth, then this sets the scene for putting a positive spin on everything, and placing blame on others.

And even if these 'subtle' cues are not evident, a lack of acknowledgement of the benefits of working together for the good of the entire organisation, may still result in that sense of competition.

Stock Take

In our work with organisations, we help them understand and improve their culture by taking them through a number of process steps. One of these involves acquiring

an understanding of the 'unwritten ground rules, or UGRs® in what we call a 'UGRs Stock Take'. We do this by getting people to think about their organisation and to 'complete the sentence' to agreed lead-in sentences.

In one organisation, in response to the lead-in sentence, "Cooperation between teams in our organisation is...", we received the following responses:

- This is a low point. We have all these silos. We do not integrate freely. The blame quite correctly can be laid at the feet of senior management. There are efforts being undertaken to correct this but again if the culture is to be changed it needs to be driven by the senior management team setting an example, leadership which is missing at that level.
- Very bad with little effective cooperation
- I feel there is a 'them and us' mentality between head office and the regions, which in a lot of cases is not warranted.
- Very low and a lot of people really think only about their area and looking good themselves
- Shocking. The silos don't talk to each other on an open and honest basis. Trust between silos is non-existent. Too many precious managers

In this organisation, a total of 41% of responses to this lead-in sentence were negative. (Think this is a function of this being a large organisation? Think again! This organisation comprises around 150 staff.)

In another organisation we worked with recently, the corresponding percentage of negative responses to the lead-in sentence 'Cooperation between work areas is...' was 36%.

This is evidence of there being a real need to foster cooperation among work areas—to create a sense of the 'bigger picture' across the organisation. Often, the negativity associated with cooperation can be traced back to a genuine lack of understanding of the value added by other work areas—a problem that is relatively easily fixed.

Douglas McGregor was a Management professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management whose 1960 book *The Human Side of Enterprise* had a profound influence on management practices. He died in 1964. He wrote: "Most teams aren't teams at all but merely collections of individual relationships with the boss. Each individual vying with the others for power, prestige and position".

Maybe things haven't changed too much in 40 years.

STEVE SIMPSON

Steve Simpson is an author and international speaker based in Queensland. Creator of the globally acclaimed UGRs® concept, Steve has spoken at two World Conferences on Customer Service Management where he rated in the top 10 speakers. Last year he was invited to speak in seven countries including the US, UK, South Africa and India.

Contact details are:

Phone +617 5530 1465 Fax +617 5530 1295

Web www.keystone-management.com

Email steve@keystone-management.com

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