

# Synergy is the Team Goal

The NSCAA

*Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success. – Henry Ford*

How often have you heard a fan lament, “They’ve done so little with so much.” Indeed, many teams that have very skilled members and seemingly all the “right stuff” to succeed often fail to live up to their potential and the expectations of others.

In contrast, how is it that teams that seem to be less talented and have fewer resources develop into success stories? The highly successful but out-manned 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey Team provides a good example of how much can be done with relatively little. Although there are unique reasons underlying the achievements and disappointments of particular sport teams, one factor that is instrumental to success is team building.

Well-functioning teams are comprised of people (athletes, coaches and managers) who intentionally work together on shared, meaningful goals. Unfortunately, many coaches and athletes mistakenly assume that just because their team wears the same uniform it somehow is an effectively functioning unit. Despite all of the talk about teamwork, the slogans on the locker room wall and the endless pep talks, often little is done to systematically promote and maintain the effective functioning of sport teams.

Just like well-functioning families, well-functioning sport teams are built, not made. “Healthy” families are the product of years of skillful nurturing. Similarly, sport teams do not become effective organizations overnight. It takes considerable knowledge, sensitivity, time and effort devoted to the process of shaping the values, attitudes and behaviors of team members to mold and preserve a team.

Like families, sport teams are systems of people. Teams are made up of individuals who regularly interact with each other – in the locker room, on the field or court, on a road trip or socially. Team members are connected to each other through a complex, yet understandable, network of relationships, roles and interactions, some stable, most constantly in flux. So to understand a team and its needs at any one time, one must understand the current team system that exists.

For example, if a soccer team is not as productive as it once was, the coach should not merely focus on the performances of certain players on the field. Rather, the coach should take a broader perspective that considers how individuals are getting along, what goals members have or have not achieved and what other things may be occurring in members’ lives that could contribute to their underachieving.

## **Team building process**

Although team building means different things to different people, it can be thought of as the process of unifying the system of individuals who make up sport teams. While it may take many forms, team building involves the development of cohesion and commitment in meeting the team’s challenges.

According to Donald Fuoss and Robert Troppman, the goal of team building is synergy. Synergy is a unified effect in which the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

That is, the overall productivity of a team becomes greater than the sum of each individual's ability.

Team building is not a new phenomenon. In fact, numerous successful organizations in business and industry have been involved in the process for years. In a sense, effective parenting is also a form of team building. Much can be learned from successful and unsuccessful efforts in each realm and applied to the building of sport teams.

Team building is an ongoing process. It is not a one-shot intervention that can be done by coach, guest speaker or sport psychologist in a one-hour meeting or presentation. There is no "quick fix" that can create an instant, effectively functioning team. Indeed, team building is an ongoing process because teams are always in flux. Teams change over time as people age, are injured, move away, lose interest, are traded or as the tasks to be met by the team also change. These changes may be minor and barely noticeable or major, causing significant upheaval. They may occur suddenly or at a slow pace. A team may be a team one day or when involved in one activity and not another. Invariably, as people and their challenges change, so does the team. Therefore, regular "navigational" adjustments need to be made to keep the team's ship on course.

### **Stages of team building**

Keith Henschen and Jane Miner have observed that many teams go through four identifiable stages of performance development – forming, storming, norming and performing.

During the forming stage, the team spends most of its time getting to know each other and the system. This is often an anxious period, with team members assessing or testing the situation. Strategies that facilitate teammate familiarity and interaction are most effective in this early stage of team development. Although this is a rather short stage, the direction of the team efforts is initiated and it is, therefore, fundamental to team building.

During the storming stage, conflict and infighting often emerge. The anxieties regarding determining roles and how members "fit" into the team underlie this stage. To assist in moving through this stage, the coach should attempt to reduce some of the uncertainty in the environment by clearly communicating each member's strengths and weaknesses and each player's role and potential contribution to the team.

The quiet following the storm is the norming stage. This stage is characterized by the team coming together, organizing itself into an effective unit. The notion of "there is no 'I' in team" becomes very prominent during this stage. That is, team cohesion becomes defined during this stage. Instead of competing against one another, teammates desire to work together to achieve higher levels of performance and satisfaction. The focus during this stage is on encouraging members to provide mutual support for each other.

The final stage is the performing stage. At this stage, members have a close rapport with each other, roles are clearly delineated, teammate support is genuine and abundant and, according to Francis and Young, the team evidences a mature closeness. Activities that facilitate team harmony, delivery of positive reinforcement and recognition of the special role of each member are effective actions that can be taken to maintain this level. While these stages do not always occur automatically, nor do all teams move through them in a strictly sequential manner, an understanding of where a team is in its

developmental process can assist in the development of cohesion.

### **Benefits of team building**

Team building can be beneficial because it facilitates “team chemistry” and cooperative goal-directed action. Regular, open communication between team members and the coaching staff helps build understanding and trust in each other. People learn to feel valued by their peers and coaches. Given regular opportunities to express themselves and listen to others, team members can acquire a sense that they belong on the team, a feeling that reduces uncertainties and anxiety.

Everyone is seen as a valuable contributor to the team’s success. Whether freshman or senior, rookie or veteran, starter or reserve, each person possesses special knowledge, skills and abilities that can assist the team in reaching its goals, given the opportunity to share those things.

Team building can be thought of as a form of psychological performance enhancement. Although different from commonly recognized skills and interventions like progressive relaxation, imagery or goal-setting, team building can have a major effect on the overall performance of a team. This approach to team building assumes that everyone’s behavior and attitude influence everyone else’s behavior and attitudes. Indeed, if we appreciate the fact that the performance of each team member is influenced by other members of the team system, then by facilitating the functioning or “wellness” of the team, the performance often will be positively affected.

Accordingly, the team is seen as an interdependent system, not merely a collection of independent parts. Further, it is assumed that acquiring and demonstrating sensitivity to the needs of others – walking in other’s shoes – will foster cooperative effort both on and off the field. In general, team members are quite interested in helping others. Team building efforts both encourage and reinforce cooperative behavior.

Clarify the specific purposes of team building. Team building can become a valuable part of the team’s culture in the following ways:

**“Enculturating” new team members.** Becoming a member of a team is often a stressful experience. Team building activities can facilitate learning about the team’s culture (i.e., values, roles, operating procedures and personalities), reduce the amount of time it takes to be accepted as a team member diminish the anxiety felt by newcomers as well as veteran team members.

**Disseminating information.** From an administrative standpoint, coaches can use team building meeting times to inform members about upcoming activities. Team members can ask questions about procedures, policy and upcoming activities.

**Teaching new skills.** Team building gatherings can be used to teach new skills. It is an excellent time to introduce or practice psychological performance enhancing skills.

**Goal setting.** Sessions can be used throughout the season to discuss, set and evaluate team goals. Team building time also may be involved in individual goal setting. However, it has been our experience that this is perhaps not the best forum to be involved in the latter due to the personal nature of individual goals and the reluctance of some team

members to share such information in a group setting.

**Problem solving/conflict resolution.** Interpersonal conflicts can be devastating to the success of teams. Team building time can serve as a special opportunity to inquire about concerns and solve problems. Exploration of the roles, relationships and hidden feelings about and between team members can occur to increase interpersonal understanding.

**Providing support for injured team members.** A common consequence of injury is the isolation and alienation from others that the injured player feels. Team building meeting time can be used to support those who cannot participate and help keep them involved in team activities.

Whatever the focus of team building activities, the coach must be a strong proponent of team building. Enthusiasm for the process comes from the “top down.” Regular support for team building provided by team leaders communicates that the coach is interested in and cares about each team member, not the team’s win and loss record.

Allotting time for team building meetings can be more conducive to success of individual athletes and the team than many hours of physical practice. This is often the case with highly trained and experienced athletes who require little coaching and training to maintain the level of their skill, as well as at the end of a season, when more practice is not beneficial, often leading to burn out.

How does one go about scheduling team building? The most common way is to conduct team meetings. Team building meetings should be gatherings involving all team members and staff and should start at the beginning of the team’s training season. A regular time and day convenient for everyone should be set aside to conduct the meeting. By establishing a specific time for team building sessions, members gradually will make the practice a habit for everyone. Team building meetings are quite flexible and portable. They can be called as needed (e.g., when a crisis develops, when traveling on the road, as well as pre- and post-competition, to discuss what is expected and process what has occurred.

The time interval for team building meetings varies from team to team. For example, an intercollegiate team with the luxury of daily contact can schedule a weekly session. Other groups may not have opportunity to meet so frequently. For example, teams with members who live a great distance from each other – regional or national teams – may only be able to meet every month or at training sessions or competitions.

Four simple ground rules are important when conducting team building sessions:

- Confidentiality of communication is essential. Confidentiality is a foundation of interpersonal trust. What occurs in team building sessions is exclusively for team members and no one else. In order to ensure that team members feel comfortable enough to explore important personal issues, information about the content of team building sessions must stay within the team.
- No team member should be required to participate. Each person is encouraged to listen to what occurs and to be an active contributor to the team. While attendance may be mandatory, no one should be required to participate unless she or he wants

to. Members also should expect and be able to sit with some silence too.

- Team building meetings are not a place to gripe or attack others. Team building meetings are not designed to be gripe sessions. While it can be a proper time to raise issues of concern, discussion should move in a purposeful and problem-solving direction.
- The leader (in the case of an outside facilitator) is not a member of the group. His or her primary role is to facilitate interaction between team members and ensure that the ground rules are adhered to and nothing else.

Sport teams encounter problems just as other organizations do. As mentioned above, team-building meetings can be useful for the solving of interpersonal difficulties. Meetings of this nature can become quite energized and uncomfortable for members, especially those who are involved in conflicts. Therefore, coaches and athletes should especially avoid personally conducting these types of team building sessions themselves to avoid difficulties associated with their often being the focus of conflicts.

This type of team building activity (if not all team building meetings) is best undertaken with the assistance of an objective professional trained in team building skills. He or she can act more effectively as the meeting facilitator, who serves more or less as a traffic cop who helps with the conduct and control of the meetings. Such an arrangement frees coaches and athletes of the problem of dual relationships. Team building efforts will be more effective when coaches and athletes relinquish their roles, especially leadership, during these meetings. Coaches and athletes who let go of their roles will learn a great deal about their teams, but often not without some discomfort.

Most coaches' and athletes' training typically focuses on learning about sport skills, how to teach them, rules and conditioning and training methods. If you want to consider enhancing your personal effectiveness and the success of your team, look beyond the status quo and consider implementing team-building activities. Although team building may not be part of your repertoire, learn more about the process and its potential benefits.

If there is a psychological or management consultant with interest and experience available to you, seek that person out for information, training or professional assistance. Given the opportunity, obtain team building training at coaching seminars in your area. If such programming is not included in seminars, request some in the future. Talk with other coaches and athletes who may have been involved in team building activities or utilized a psychological consultant. Learn about their experiences with team building activities and see how you might apply what they have learned to your team. Consider "stretching" your team's style a little.

According to Mark Anshel, team building is facilitated by "clearing blockages" if and when they exist. To assist in this process, he suggests that athletes and coaches should seek answers to the following seven questions posed by David Francis and Donald Young:

1. What are our objectives?
2. How will we handle the organizational aspects of our team?
3. Who is in charge?
4. Who, outside the team, is concerned about our success?

5. What is our method of handling problems?
6. How do we relate to other teams organizations?
7. What are the costs and benefits of being a member of this team?

David Yukelson suggested that the coach-athlete communication system and team harmony can be enhanced in the following ways:

- Establish open communication channels. The foundation of effective communication between coaches and athletes is mutual trust and respect for each other. This is a two-way venture; both the coach and athlete are responsible for making it work. Listening is just as important a form of communication as talking.
- Develop pride and a sense of collectible identity within the team by setting out realistic team, individual and subunit goals. Feelings of pride and satisfaction develop when teams attain challenging but realistic goals.
- Establish common expectations of appropriate behavior. Teams unite behind common goals; therefore, it is important to establish a team philosophy, goals and norms that the team is striving to accomplish.
- Value unique personal contributions. Each member of the team should have his or her role clearly defined as well as understand his or her potential contribution to the team.
- Recognize those who excel individually and who contribute to accomplishing team goals.
- Attain consensus and commitment on team goals.
- Hold periodic team meetings to resolve conflicts.
- Stay in touch with interpersonal grapevines.
- Seek grails rather than slay dragons. Focus first on achievement, then move to how mistakes can be corrected to facilitate future performance. Look for opportunities before the obstacles.

If you have never been involved in a team whose culture emphasizes team building, participation in team building activities may require expanding your perspective on the nature of your team and your roles. It also may necessitate some changes in your behavior. To contribute in your own way toward making team building work, you probably will need to assume greater personal responsibility. This may take various forms.

Overall, you'll find it useful to become more sensitive to the needs of others who make up your team. Seek out opportunities to show interest in others and in their concerns. Take time to ask teammates "how things are going." Give them the opportunity to be heard. Learn some of the practical skills associated with being a better listener. When doing so, communicate acceptance, positive feelings, support and encouragement to others, especially in situations during which a teammate has experienced frustration or is under stress. By doing so, you'll encourage your teammates to do the same for you and others. As the saying goes, you can never listen yourself into trouble.

Furthermore, take advantage of opportunities to express your own thoughts and feelings to teammates and coaches. Of course, you'll need to carefully determine when it is

appropriate to do so and when not to do so (e.g., in public). Nevertheless, when it is OK to do so, take the risk of being a more assertive contributor to the team. Regular communication between team members facilitates team unity and successful performance.

Knowing that everyone has an impact on the behavior of each team member, start to monitor your own behavior a more closely when you are around your team, whether on the field or court, in the locker room or when interacting with coaches or teammates socially. Whenever possible, refrain from critical, angry or aggressive comments and behavior. Others will observe what you do and can be affected by it. Be a responsible model who is respectful of the needs of others.

Finally, respect the confidentiality of what people share with you personally or in team meetings. Just as you would want others to protect sensitive information they know about you, so too keep personal information about teammates, coaches and general team issues to yourself. Similarly, avoid gossiping and complaining behind others' backs. For example, if you have a concern that involves another teammate or coach, talk directly to that person about your concern. Avoid communicating through a third party and don't delay, hoping that the problem will take care of itself. Such behavior can be detrimental to the success of the team. To a great extent, the success of team building efforts is dependent on the cooperation of each team member.