Eliminating Barriers to Team Effectiveness

Ask any two people the same question and you’re likely to get two very different responses. Why then would we expect anything less from a room filled with people asked to arrive at a solution while working as a team? It’s tough enough being a team player, especially difficult when team members don’t understand each other and are not sure who exactly is carrying the ball.

The success of team projects may vary greatly depending on how much understanding individuals have about the goals, processes, background, orientation, and thinking of other team members. One’s temperament, upbringing, values, and ideas about “how things are done” are the foundation of people’s different ideas about “how things should be done.” These assumptions are not a problem when everyone has the same understanding. When they do not, a barrier to team effectiveness is created. And knowing how to eliminate the barrier is important in order to enjoy better communications, create more ideas and develop better products and services.

You Are Where You Stand

Regardless of your title or job function, there is an understanding of “who” you are as an individual and how you react in a group setting that’s important. Some people organize the world in a pecking order of who is above and who is below them. Others organize the world in a lateral fashion, seeing people on an equal plane. From these two basic worldviews, many behaviors and assumptions follow.

In the workplace these orientations are seen as hierarchical and horizontal or democratic relationships. In emergency situations, when the clock is running or in the military, the hierarchical relationships (which use command and control methods) are very appropriate. In situations that are not time bound, collegial relationships work well. They require an involvement that fosters creativity and commitment or psychological buy-in.

In a company setting, the most effective team effort is on a lateral playing field. Each team member has to recognize the ground they are on, look at all of the players as a unit, be aware of how a pecking order affects the quality of decisions and not allow a pecking order to drive the momentum of the meetings.

The Gender Gap

In group settings or teams, it is important to the end result to understand each individual on the team. Men understand women differently than women understand men. The gender difference alone can create barriers to the team’s progress. To get beyond this, men and women have to understand each looks at the team in a unique way. According to Lillian Glass, Ph.D., and author of “He Says, She Says,” men tend to be more assertive and argumentative in business, while women take a more emotional approach. “Men have a more analytical approach to problem solving, while women tend to be more diplomatic, looking for the reasoning behind the problem before
solving it.” Indeed, studies show that males order their world in terms of who’s in charge—the hierarchy. Women, from the time they are young, tend to organize their groups to be inclusive or exclusive. Team members should ask whether they see themselves as a hierarchy or collegial group and determine how these assumptions affect their decision making, actions, and communications with others.

How do men and women function differently on teams? In analyzing a problem with team participation, one team learned most of the men thought teamwork was doing what the coach said to do. The women thought teamwork was everyone helping out, not playing a specific and exclusive position.

Jane Clark of Logikos, a Midwest data processing company, observes that putting two genders together usually results in a better product because of the two vastly different views. “While men tend to be very broad in coming up with solutions, women tend to be more detailed. The final effort is definitely a better product because of the vast communication. But, when a team effort becomes deadlocked, it usually happened because of individual pre-determined opinions of other team members.”

Human Traits

While studies show gender is a factor in building barriers, individual character traits also impact team functioning. For example, any number of participants may be introverted, or extroverted. Those who feel free to speak and readily offer input may appear overbearing to a more introverted person who will study all angles more carefully. If a woman is asked how to do something she has not done before, she usually provides a disclaimer that she hasn’t done it before and then stumbles out the possibilities. Males, appearing more confident, say essentially the same thing, but without the disclaimer or stumbling. Men have cultivated a “high authority voice.” It is very useful in a hierarchy, but not so useful in a collegial setting.

Men are able to be more single-minded in their pursuit of a goal. This is called focus. Women, both behaviorally and physiologically, seem to be able to multitask, doing more than one thing at a time. To males this appears scattered; to women it’s the natural order. Conversely, as some female executives lament, often male colleagues and subordinates can only do one thing at a time.

Team members should think how this phenomenon affects what work gets done and how it is accomplished. Do those who can only do one thing at a time feel like nonparticipants to the others? Do those who can do several things at once feel overburdened as though others are not pulling their weight? Does your team insist that issues are put on the table for discussion or that one or two individual members address concerns privately? It can work both ways as long as everyone knows the rules.
What you don’t say speaks volumes

Nodding and smiling are part of the silent encouragers offered to speakers that keeps people talking. Lack of facial expression is read by females as almost anything besides “Keep talking, I’m interested” and extinguishes communicating ideas or opinions. Research indicates women are more nonverbally sensitive than men and that in the United States, African-Americans are more nonverbally sensitive than Euro-Americans. Most people are aware of being affected by nonverbal communications but examining them in the context of team meetings allows the group to explore how people are encouraged and discouraged and how they establish credibility.

Avoid barriers before the fences are built

There are many steps that can be taken to ensure a successful outcome from a team effort. Set the stage from the very beginning. Is there a facilitator or someone in charge, or can a lateral playing field be established? Will team members have assigned positions or roles, or do they rotate roles and functions? Find out if everyone can agree on the importance of working together for a successful outcome? Allow for all team players to have a free flow of ideas. And, regardless of your gender or personality style, understand everyone processes information differently.

Each member of the team needs to understand that gender attributes like aggressiveness and submissiveness are human traits and are not meant to create adversaries or opponents. Give each team player enough space. Understand and encourage honest communications about ideas and impacts, and the barriers will disappear. This will result in better communication, a more open exchange of ideas and potentially the creation of a better product or service. While the rules of play may vary from organization to organization, it’s the final outcome that will be most important to the end user—the company’s valuable internal or external customer.

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