

Getting Started

Building Better Teams: An Evolution in Thinking

This book had its genesis in a team-building text written by one of the editors (Robert) over ten years ago entitled *The Team Troubleshooter: How to Find and Fix Team Problems*. That said, the authors feel it would be erroneous to refer to *Building Better Teams* as a text revision. Instead, *Building Better Teams* represents a significant shift in the authors' thinking regarding what it takes for teams or groups to build a strong foundation of trust and mutual cooperation, and to forge strong alliances with key organizational partners and stakeholders. In this regard, *Building Better Teams* represents an evolutionary development from its predecessor, in that it incorporates three critical changes in thinking regarding the conditions under which teams learn from their collective experiences. These changes are: (a) rethinking the idea of "teams," (b) a shift from fixing to building, and (c) a shift from conflict management to collaboration.

The First Change: Rethinking the Idea of “Teams”

As organizations continue to evolve, the concept of what is a “team” has also undergone significant change. Not too long ago, the word “team” brought to mind the image of a relatively stable and permanent work unit made up of managers and their direct reports. This concept has quickly morphed to include such diverse groups as temporary project teams, governing boards for nonprofit organizations, teams that operate within government agencies and professional organizations, and large broad-based groups that are attempting to seek common ground on such critical social issues as community sustainability.

In addition, we have seen the proliferation of organizations as global constructs that attempt to bridge national and cultural borders. Many teams mirror these changes in the increasing cultural diversity of their membership. As team-building professionals, it is important that we acknowledge these differences by checking our assumptions regarding the appropriateness and effectiveness of the tools and approaches we bring to the team-building process. Accordingly, this text differs significantly from its predecessor by incorporating the perspectives of consultants from different countries who have implemented team building in a variety of international and organizational settings. These contributors include international mediators, private management consultants, university instructors, and corporate professionals in the fields of leadership and organizational development. We feel that this infusion of talent and diverse perspectives provides a broader foundation for strengthening team performance.

The Second Change: From Fixing to Building

Traditionally, team building has been viewed as a set of interventions that are designed to “fix” a team only after that team has experienced conflict or crisis. The result is that, all too frequently, team building has not been attempted until after team members may have experienced a serious erosion of their performance, interpersonal relationships, and mutual trust. Unfortunately, very often team facilitators and leaders pay insufficient attention to the many ways in which they could take preemptive action to help

teams strengthen their performance and relationships—before team members find themselves enmeshed in damaging conflict.

To understand what we are talking about, imagine the flow of organizational communication as a river. Entering the river from upstream we see different parties trying to determine the most effective way to engage in initial dialogues on important opportunities or challenges. If they misstep at this point, differences of opinion may shift to become stronger disagreements, then could escalate into embedded conflicts. Often, farther down the communication stream, a third-party facilitator or mediator will be called in to help the conflicting parties “resolve the problem.” *Building Better Teams* offers a team-building approach that can be applied “at the source of the river”; that is, as part of a team development process for newly formed teams or as a set of tools for helping experienced teams engage in initial conversations about important issues or potential opportunities for growth.

The Third Change: From Conflict Management to Collaboration

The original text from which *Building Better Teams* evolved defined *team building* from the traditional, more limited perspective of helping teams identify and fix performance problems. That traditional perspective has given way to an increasing emphasis on techniques that can help teams, work groups, and organizations build a foundation of trust, cooperation, and mutual support.

This change involves more than a perspective shift in how we view team building, for the tools involved in building team collaboration are very different from those used to manage conflicts. Collaboratively based tools vary in their form and function, but have in common the aim of helping to shape dialogue so that different parties enter into their initial discussions in a positive way and develop a constructive view of a shared future. This new perspective and these tools help team members seek common ground as they identify what it is that they can gather their energy around—that is, what supports and strengthens team functioning.

This emerging perspective is supported by research findings from areas such as positive psychology and appreciative inquiry. The rapidly emerging

field of positive psychology, as exemplified in the seminal work of psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman, has shed light on the degree to which a team's attention serves to direct its energy. That is, teams perform at their best when they are able to construct a viable and positive image of their desired future, and then work to focus their attention on the strengths and resources that they can bring to bear in actualizing that positive, envisioned state. In other words, we focus our attention on what works, and where possible we seek models of success that we can replicate and build upon. This concept is reflected in what David Cooperrider, a renowned organizational behavior researcher in the field of appreciative inquiry, has termed the *heliotropic principal*. Appreciative inquiry also emphasizes the role that language plays in influencing organizational meaning making and behavior. This book's authors align with this principal to emphasize the importance that language plays in any team-building process, beginning with the way in which a team defines and formulates its needs and desired outcomes. Although an extensive review of positive psychology and appreciative inquiry is outside the scope of this book, at the end of this chapter the authors have listed additional reading on these subjects.

The authors want to stress that we acknowledge the value in helping teams identify and effectively resolve intra- and interteam conflicts; indeed, this book offers a variety of tools for supporting conflict resolution. At the same time, a fundamental premise on which *Building Better Teams* has been developed is that too often facilitators, team leaders, and members rely exclusively on conflict-resolution strategies simply because they have few alternative methods at their disposal. To that end, you will find that *Building Better Teams* emphasizes the application of team building as a set of preemptive interventions that can be used to help teams set the stage for productive and positive dialogues.

Some Underlying Assumptions Regarding Teams

Building Better Teams introduces a team improvement strategy that is based on four underlying assumptions. Understanding these assumptions will help you obtain the greatest benefit from this book.

Individuals Can Affect Team Performance

Regardless of whether you are a new team member, an experienced team leader, an outside facilitator, or one who has been asked to lead a cross-functional team, you can play an important role in helping your team strengthen its performance. This book will show you how. If you are concerned that you lack the influence or authority to make a productive impact on your team, don't be. Throughout *Building Better Teams*, you will be introduced to a variety of tools and techniques that you can use to help make a positive impact on your team. By taking the initiative to share these ideas with others in your team you can help your work group perform at its best.

Team Members Require an Active Voice in the Process

There is a tendency to view team building as a process that is constructed and directed by an outside facilitator. The implication of this view is that a facilitator has the responsibility for defining the team's needs and desired outcomes, selecting the most appropriate team-building approach, and actively leading the team through this preselected process. In short, the facilitator leads and the team blindly follows. In contrast, *Building Better Teams* takes the position that team building is best accomplished when facilitators work with team leaders and members as equal partners in the co-construction and management of the team-building process.

So, if you think that defining the needs and requirements of your team is something that is best left to the "experts," think again. The authors believe that team members and leaders are the ones who are most qualified to understand the types of job demands and challenges that they are encountering. We also believe that people are more likely to take accountability for implementing change when they are fully involved in the change process. What many people lack is a tool kit to help them effectively facilitate team-building sessions. This book is designed to provide those tools, as well as instructions for successfully implementing them.

If you are a team leader you will find that *Building Better Teams* will encourage the members of your team to see themselves as active partners in their team's success. If you are a team-building facilitator you will find that

this book provides a method for fully engaging team members and their leaders in the team-building process, by making full use of their combined experience and knowledge of their team's operation.

Up-Front Assessment Is Key to Success in Team Building

Over the years the authors have seen a lot of well-intended team building quickly dissipate into small, ineffectual puffs of smoke, while other teams barely survive the poorly constructed interventions suggested by their facilitators. Many of these negative outcomes could have been avoided if a little more effort had gone into helping teams perform a detailed review of their desired outcomes—that is, how they hope to change as a result of engaging in a team-building event. You can encourage full ownership in the team-building process by providing a mechanism through which team members (particularly those who have difficulty thinking quickly in the moment) have the opportunity to carefully evaluate both their own team requirements and alternative approaches to meeting these options, *before* they engage in a team-building session.

An up-front assessment helps team members focus their time and attention on the most critical topics for review. At the same time, such an assessment helps facilitators flag potential problems, such as lack of trust, which could otherwise derail the team-building process. It also provides a means for facilitators to increase ownership by familiarizing team members with proposed team-building approaches well in advance of the session. This book will introduce you to a simple instrument, the *Team Building Assessment Questionnaire* (see The Tool Kit), which you can use to perform such an assessment.

True Change Comes Through Direct Application

Over the past twenty years, team-building consultants have discovered that there is a lot of money to be made from creating and selling team exercises and training games. These range in form from synthetic role-play scripts and team-building cases that can be commercially purchased, to the many “team survival” simulations that have recently flooded the market. Most of these tools are fun and some may be of value, especially when they are used as a method for introducing professionals to foundational team development skills.

On the other hand, training is never a substitute for a facilitated team-building session. One of the core assumptions on which this book is based is that substantial change occurs when teams or groups are provided with applied tools and techniques that allow them to tackle actual opportunities and challenges. Such an approach makes use of the team's common history and experience and encourages team members to articulate those factors that impede or support their performance.

The authors believe that facilitators who rely heavily on artificial exercises do so because they do not know how to connect, head on, with the team's actual experiences. The good news is that team interventions do not have to be intimidating. If you have a solid plan, you can take the first step toward helping a team maximize its performance and strengthen relationships among team members. Planning your team-building session is introduced next in Chapter Two.

Additional Reading on Appreciative Inquiry

- Cooperrider, D., & Whitney, D. (2005). *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D., & Stavros, J. (2008). *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: For Leaders of Change*. Brunswick, Ohio: Crown Custom Publishing.
- Hammond, S. A. (1998). *The Thin Book on Appreciative Inquiry*. Bend, Oregon: Thin Book.

Additional Reading on Positive Psychology

- Bakker, A. (Ed.) (in press). *Advances in Positive Organizational Psychology*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Donaldson, S. I., Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Nakamura, J. (Eds.). (2011). *Applied Positive Psychology: Improving Everyday Life, Health, Schools, Work, and Society*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Lopez, S., & Snyder, C. R. (Eds.) (2009). *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

