



by Brad Crosson

Thanks to a recurring overseas exercise, I have had several opportunities to take about two dozen people who have never met before and quickly turn them into a functioning team. I measure my impromptu teams' success by how well these strangers turn into a team in three short intense weeks. There are a few thoughts that come to mind that help direct my actions. Hopefully you find them useful should you ever find yourself in a similar situation.

First, some quick background. These two dozen strangers came from different bases, different branches of service, had different "badge skills", were ranked from E-3 to O-4, were active duty, guard, reservist, contractor, civilian, and retirees, and together needed to execute a theater-level mission to form a critical link between two unified commands. All the above means that they did not speak the same "language" in terms of processes, specialty, or theater-specific considerations. Also, our combined foreign partners whom we worked with did not speak English.

Before work could begin, these individuals needed to meet each other, understand each other's backgrounds and points of view, experience levels, and expertise. Next, they needed to understand their mission, which is difficult since they marginally understand the waterfall of new acronyms cascading their way through successive briefings. At the tactical level, they needed to learn a new computer program that was AOR (Area of Responsibility) specific and then understand the inner workings of an organization they didn't know existed until shortly after their international flight touched down.

But how?

The following are basic rules that have enabled team building multiple times and are posted throughout the area my forming team occupies.

Expectations

1. Good Attitude
2. Take Initiative
3. Learn, Then Teach
4. Communicate: Simple, Clear, Concise
5. If Your Team Fails, Everybody Fails

I refer to these expectations almost daily in providing team expectations as I learn individuals' names, strengths, and weaknesses. Additionally, I find the following to be core ideas in forming the team.

**#1: Good Attitude.** A positive attitude creates a better working environment and improves group dynamics. It is also critical to interacting with outside organizations. This is the foundation of an enjoyable working environment which encourages productivity and therefore success. A positive attitude is the cornerstone towards good personal interactions.

**#2: Take Initiative.** I expect individuals to take initiative. It takes significant time to understand the problems presented, then a bit more critical thinking to determine where initiative can be applied. This implies individuals understand the problem and have or can find the resources to analyze and create a solution. Also, there is a significant degree of self-motivation involved. That implied motivation creates a palpable atmosphere where individuals want to excel.

**#3: Learn, Then Teach.** With an enormous amount of new information presented, I strongly encourage that after folks learn something new, they then teach it to others. This adds a degree of professional education and encourages conversation about the exercise. I often have "pop-quizzes" about concepts or information. These are always light-hearted and meant to educate and not to degrade. This sets the stage to remove an individual's ego from the equation and in fact allows the "teacher" to retain the information better. It's a win for

everyone.

**#4: Communicate: Simple, Clear, Concise.** As a liaison element between different commands using four different computer systems which do not interact with each other and often needing to speak to non-English speaking counterparts, communication is critical. The above rules of being “simple, clear and concise” carry extra weight when having minimal time during a briefing, engaging one on one, in translated meetings, sending messages via chat servers, emails, SharePoint, and text messaging. In terms of communication, I remind myself of two quotes, “if you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough” and “be brief, be brilliant, be gone.”

**#5: If Your Team Fails, Everybody Fails.** This places ownership on individuals to create a team. Having individuals own their own success and encouraging them to act as a team discourages failure. The glue that holds a team together is the personal relationships between individuals. When folks know each other, they also care about each other and are then willing to go out of their way to help teammates. This defines a team.

Shortly after arriving, I ensure personnel wear the unit patches for their new temporary organization. This is a small thing, but I find it helps them take pride in being a cohesive body and thinking like they are part of their new team instead of individuals from a myriad of different units and backgrounds.

About 20 strangers quickly go through the “forming, storming, norming, and performing” stages of a team while trying to execute a mission and understanding what is being said in meetings - the new acronym struggle is real. Since this is a recurring exercise, a lot of the “problems” have been previously addressed but are new to my temporary team. Because of this, I may intentionally give them vague directions to see if they come up with a new solution that I have not seen or thought of before. I am often impressed.

Lastly is how to go about talking to individuals and encouraging personal interactions. Motivations and competency always vary. Within a few days, I need to create a new organizational chart and put folks in charge of mini teams. My initial talk to my Team Leads focuses on attitude. As such I place the emphasis on the Team Leads of any rank that the attitudes of those around them and below them are the responsibility of the Team Leaders. I have always found the axiom, “attitude reflects leadership” to be as consistent as gravity. Giving these folks the responsibility for the conduct of those around them helps empower the Team Leaders and encourages the team to become self-policing. This is one way of getting after creating a culture for the team which then internally enforces those standards.

The exercise is designed so that as soon as the training objectives are met, the exercise concludes. Shortly after the exercise ends, my new team flies back to where they came from and hopefully has a little bit of pride in the temporary patch on their arm and the knowledge that they were integral in turning individuals into a successful team. My measures of success are sincere handshakes and honest critiques.

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