
The leader's role in making the team work

Ten Teamwork Terminators and Some Sure Cures

by Hawaii retreat attendees

Teamwork is one of those all-American concepts like motherhood, apple pie, and developmentally appropriate practice. No director should lead on without it.

*How to be a team builder was the focus of a **Child Care Information Exchange** management retreat in Hawaii in February of this year. Participating directors shared a wide range of experiences and insights at this retreat, and these form the basis of this article.*

One interesting insight at the retreat was that, as much as a director may want her staff to function as a team, she may be the biggest stumbling block to making it happen. Participants identified ten behaviors that directors may engage in that unwittingly undermine team performance, as well as some keys to making the team work.

1. Playing Favorites

Nothing sours team spirit more quickly than a perception that some team members enjoy a privileged status. If you consistently single out one or two teachers for praise, give them preferential treatment in scheduling, or tend to seek their input more than anyone else's, other staff members will feel more like outsiders than team members.

2. Tolerating Laxity

If one staff member frequently arrives late, fails to help with clean up, or is lax in attending to the children, and you let this misbehav-

ior go unchallenged, other staff members will resent having to work harder. They will blame you for caving in and will be less inclined to work hard for the common good.

3. Covering from Conflict

Teacher A lashes out at Teacher B and stomps out of the staff meeting. You continue as if nothing has happened. Afterwards you make small talk with the two teachers separately hoping to jolly them out of their angry moods. Efforts to maintain an outward appearance of harmony may ease tensions in the short run, but the hostility remains and may draw others into the conflict.

4. Fuzzy Roles

To the extent that there is confusion about roles and responsibilities, energy that could be directed toward working with children and parents will be consumed by anxiety and frustration. For teachers to feel secure and focused, they need to know exactly what is expected of them. They need to know what tasks they hold final responsibility for, what tasks they share responsibility for, and what decisions they must clear with someone in authority before going ahead.

5. Inconsistency

In January, the director announces to staff that building self-esteem is going to be the center's number one goal. In February, she holds a staff meeting in which she shares her excitement about implementing a new environmental awareness curriculum.

In March, she decides it's time that the center took a stand on violence in the lives of children. Such vacillation, whether it be over curriculum goals, operating practices, or personnel procedures, contributes to a sense of uncertainty among the staff

and a loss of credibility for the leadership.

6. The Tyranny of Taboos

Teamwork tends to bring out the best in people, to motivate team members to work hard for the common good. The focus of the team is on uniting the talents of individual team members. Teamwork is promoted by focusing on achieving goals, not on obeying rules. Directors who attempt to direct staff by promulgating rules and by punishing misbehavior will not build team spirit.

Staff who are motivated by team spirit will focus their energies on accomplishing goals. Staff who are directed by rules and admonitions will focus their energies on avoiding punishment.

7. Holding On to the Reins

Many early childhood leaders have a difficult time releasing the reins of authority. They want to have the final say on every decision. By tightly controlling every activity, a knowledgeable director may assure that everything is done right — but with a significant cost in terms of staff morale. Staff will get the message that they are not trusted. They will see themselves more as dispensable machine parts than as valued team members. The bottom line is: Just let go.

8. Fake Participation

Even more demoralizing than an authoritarian director is a director who goes through the motions of inviting staff participation in shaping decisions and then ignores staff input when the final decisions are made. More often than not such behavior is not intentional.

A director may believe in the value of staff involvement and genuinely reach out for advice. However, when it comes to the final decision, he may be so locked into his own point of view that he can't understand or be influenced by conflicting views. But whether or not the behavior is deliberate, the impact on the staff will be the same. Staff will feel misled, frustrated, and angry — certainly not in the mood to work hard for the team.

9. The Hindering Hierarchy

To be an enthusiastic team player, you need to believe that your contribution makes a difference. You need to feel valued and respected. In an organization with a formal or informal hierarchy it is hard to develop team spirit among staff who perceive themselves to be on the bottom rung of the ladder.

Many centers have evolved into a quasi caste system whereby the administrators are viewed as *the bosses*, the head teachers as *the educators*, and the teacher aides as *the workers*. In such a system, the workers will not feel valued or respected, and certainly will not be motivated to become team players. In addition, any feelings of superiority the educators possess will get in the way of their ability to participate with fervor in a team effort.

10. Lack of Recognition

Being part of a smoothly functioning team is a gratifying experience. Working together to try out new ideas, to solve problems, to help each other grow, and to achieve results can be invigorating and fun. However, sometimes, especially in the early, rocky stages of team building, these intrinsic rewards

are not enough. Team members who feel their hard work and special contributions are not appreciated will eventually want off the team.

Keys to Building a Successful Team

- **Make team building a priority**

Teamwork doesn't just happen. A staff will not naturally evolve from a collection of individuals into a well-oiled team. The leader needs to identify teamwork as a high priority, gain the support of staff for the idea, and develop a deliberate process for making it happen.

Built into this process will need to be (1) an open assessment of the talents and interests of all team members; (2) the development of goals that all team members are committed to accomplishing; and (3) the organizing of tasks and responsibilities in such a way that the talents and interests of all team members are put to best use.

- **Keep your finger on the pulse**

Periodically the leader should encourage the staff to stop and take a look at how the team building process is going. Initially you may want to use a simple instrument such as the "Twenty Questions about Team Spirit" that appears with this article (you have the permission of Exchange to reproduce this freely for internal use).

Ask staff members if they would agree to fill this out, and ask them to do so anonymously. Tabulate the results and share them, unedited, with the entire staff. Focus on the areas where good things are happening, and then talk about those areas where progress needs to be made.

Elicit from the group first what suggestions they might have, add in your thoughts, and then try as a group to arrive at some specific steps to make. (Note: If at this point you simply step in and say, "Okay, here is what needs to happen!," staff members may not be inclined to share the responsibility for results.)

Try to use the same form to measure progress every six months or so. Then as your team begins to jell you should be able simply to hold open discussions periodically to air concerns and develop solutions.

- **Make meetings meaningful**

Staff meetings that are boring, unfocused, or unimaginative actually can sap team spirit. Who cares about being a part of a team that can't get excited or that isn't fun to be with.

Staff meetings are the connection points that enable teamwork to develop. They should be the hub of your deliberate team building process.

To be successful, staff meetings must engage the interest and enthusiasm of all participants. They must provide a safe environment in which staff members can challenge basic assumptions, take risks, stretch their thinking, ask stupid questions, and share their feelings.

Establish ground rules for team building staff meetings that provide everyone equal opportunity to be heard and all ideas to be open to question. Every meeting appoint a different staff person to be the process monitor to make sure in a kindly way that these ground rules are observed.

Make meetings unpredictable so that people come to meetings eager to see what will happen next. Move meetings around to different rooms, different locations. People are more open to new ideas if they come in expecting something new than if they come in turned off expecting the same old stuff.

Twenty Questions about Team Spirit

A Child Care Information Exchange Center Evaluation Form

- ___ 1. I understand the curriculum goals of the center.
- ___ 2. I am in agreement with these goals.
- ___ 3. I am proud to be associated with this center.
- ___ 4. I have no fear about expressing my opinions and concerns at the center.
- ___ 5. When I have something to say, people here really listen.
- ___ 6. I am kept up to date on developments at the center.
- ___ 7. I find staff meetings to be informative and productive.
- ___ 8. I have a clear understanding of my role at the center.
- ___ 9. My full range of skills is tapped in my work at the center.
- ___ 10. When important decisions are made, I am consulted, and my opinions are taken seriously.
- ___ 11. When decisions are made, new policies announced, or new goals set, the director sees to it that they are implemented.
- ___ 12. When conflicts arise between adults in the center, the director moves quickly and effectively to resolve them.
- ___ 13. When other problems arise at the center, the director moves quickly and effectively to solve them.
- ___ 14. When dealing with a problem, the director involves the appropriate staff members in helping work out a solution.
- ___ 15. I believe that I am treated fairly as an employee.
- ___ 16. I have not observed anyone else being treated unfairly.
- ___ 17. I don't believe any employee is granted favored status.
- ___ 18. I enjoy a friendly relationship with other staff members.
- ___ 19. I receive support from other staff members when I need help.
- ___ 20. I consistently receive valuable feedback about my performance.

The most important step the organization could take to improve team spirit is . . .

I am eager for team spirit to improve at our center, and here is what I am willing to do to help . . .