

A Manner of Speaking

It's quite the sight to behold the well-oiled team in action. Teamwork is touted as THE way people should work together to the point that we sometimes accept the appearance of it for the real thing. But in teamwork, as in everything, there are tests that only the strong survive.

To watch as people work comfortably and efficiently together—enjoying each other, the children, the project, the day—fills me with hope and expectation. For the team, anything, even everything, is possible.

Two programs I recently visited function on the strength of their teams. At Countryside Montessori in Kirkland, Washington, it is the partnership between directors Trie Smith and Christine Simonson that strikes me. When they talk about each other and their history and plans, it is impossible to imagine one without the other. At the Illinois State University Child Care Center in Normal, Illinois, it is the core staff—Scott Brouette, Barb Gallick, Lisa Lee, and Pam Morbitzer—together with director Karen Stephens who make up the team.


Because Roger and I have lived and worked in partnership, I continue to be committed to and fascinated by teams. Why do some work and others not? What holds them together? Where are the stress points? How do teams evolve and include new members and let others go?

I have asked the staff at Illinois State University Child Care Center to write an article for a future issue about their working together and to explore some of these issues. So I won't steal their thunder, but I would like to share three observations:

Teams share a history. The teams I am discussing here have been together for a long time. They didn't get to the well-oiled stage without hitting some slippery slopes. And lubricating is an ongoing process; you don't just build a team and then let it go. It takes continual effort and commitment to keep a team up and running. People often value teams but undervalue the work that builds them; they want the joy, but they want it to come easily.

Effective teams are often short-lived. They come together for a specific purpose, and when the goal is met the team dissolves. **Teams that endure are nurtured by their context.** These teams are organic; they change and grow. Their purpose is often related to long-term goals and processes. The organization or community of which they are a part supports and feeds them. Their effectiveness as a team is desired and valued not only internally but externally as well.

Teams are committed to working in partnership. And as in a marriage, it is the commitment to the relationship that enables partners to face challenges and difficulties without falling apart. They have found a way to define their work using plural pronouns, because they never lose sight of the "we" or the "us." Group goals and personal agendas fit together, because team members choose to make this happen. The commitment to teamwork is a vow that is renewed in many different ways every day.

Teamwork can be evaluated in many different ways. You can recognize it when you see a team in action, you can judge it by the quality of the work accomplished—but most of all, you can feel it—and it's one great feeling! 

Bonnie Ferguson