



Teamwork & The Consensus Trap

Introduction

It is pretty broadly accepted in our culture today that organizational effectiveness is directly tied to how well the members of the organization work together as a team. I'm sure you've all heard that the word "TEAM" is an acronym that stands for Together Everyone Achieves More. Teamwork is a stated goal or value in many, many organizations today. Some of those organizations are highly successful, but many are not. Does this discredit the value of teamwork in success? Does this mean that teamwork should be declared dead – another management buzzword that has past its useful life?

Let me offer these thoughts:

People in organizations where teamwork doesn't breed success may have a culture that promotes a different definition of TEAM. Perhaps their informal definition of the acronym is Teamwork Ensures Absolute Mediocrity. As the old saying goes, a camel is but a horse designed by a committee. Or some might say, "Sure, we have a team – it's made up of the 11 best quarterbacks that money can buy." These are all comments on the sad state of the view of the effectiveness of teamwork within some organizations.

I think this has a direct parallel in the area of new product development. There are a lot of firms out there that have a lot of brilliant, innovative thinkers. They come up with some absolutely outrageous product ideas that have the potential to be huge hits in the marketplace. Clearly, innovation is a very important characteristic for successful businesses, especially in today's highly competitive, rapidly changing marketplace. But still, many of these highly innovative organizations don't survive. Is this a commentary on the value of innovation? No, it just proves that some innovative firms know how to turn their ideas into successful products in the marketplace, while others simply have good ideas. Are the successful firms just lucky? Maybe. But more likely, they are just deliberate about creating an innovative culture that is supported by a strong focus on rapid, well-defined product development methodologies.

So I am not ready to hold a memorial service and pronounce that teamwork is now dead as an organizational value. I don't believe that it is the concept of teamwork that is the problem with many poor performing, yet professed to be team oriented organizations. I believe it only shows that there is a big difference between having a stated goal/value of teamwork and having an organization that operates as a highly effective team. That difference is that organizations that are highly successful and credit their success to teamwork, make the deliberate effort to create a culture that truly supports team oriented behavior. Many, many organizations just have a long way to go on the journey toward creating a thriving culture of teamwork and success.

Now teamwork is a pretty broad subject. There are a lot of team behaviors that together provide the correct culture. Clear common goals, individual accountability for team performance, well-developed communication processes, cooperative spirit...these are but some of the characteristics of highly successful, team oriented organizations. Creating each of them in an organizational culture is a challenging project, and each deserves its time in the spotlight. However, I'd like to focus on one that I believe is absolutely essential – a healthy perspective on decision making.

Many organizations fail to successfully implement teamwork because they fall into what I call The Consensus Trap. The Consensus Trap is equating teamwork with making all decisions by consensus. Now some of you are probably squirming and are about to shut down and quit listening to me because you are firm believers in consensus decision making. You are already concluding that I'm about to say that consensus is bunk. Well I'm not. As a matter of fact, I strongly believe in pursuing consensus. So stay with me and let me explain further what I mean by the The Consensus Trap.

In my mind, there are two aspects to the Consensus Trap. The first snare in this well camouflaged trap is in defining consensus too strictly in terms of searching for unanimous acceptance of the best idea. If the team fails to achieve a consensus, making a decision without it is to abandon their stated value of teamwork. The second snare is defining consensus too broadly such that it is not clear what is expected. Many a team has been derailed when some team members believed that consensus had been reached and acted accordingly, while other team members didn't really support the decision that was made.

The Tale of Two Teams

Let me illustrate these by telling you the Tale of Two Teams.

Tommy's Toys was a company founded by non-other than Tommy Teamwork. Tommy had a strong belief in the power of teamwork to help make Tommy's Toys a market leader in motorized toys. Tommy described himself as a real people person, and he took great pride in the fact that everyone was to have a voice in the decision making process in his company. He gathered a strong group of employees with diverse backgrounds and well-rounded cross-functional expertise for all aspects of running a good toy company. Tommy told his new team that he wanted all of their decisions to be by consensus, and that if consensus couldn't be easily reached, they would continue to discuss the issue until everyone would agree. The first major decision facing the organization was what their first product was going to be. The group had some great brainstorming sessions, and a number of very innovative, eye-catching ideas made their way onto the list of potential products. Tommy was elated with the creativity that was resulting from this team activity. Tommy also knew some tools and techniques for making a selection from among a number of competing ideas. So he led his team through a multi-voting exercise that yielded three clearly superior product ideas out of the 10 they originally proposed. Tommy was so excited. They were on the verge of

having a product! He thought surely this team of very talented people would not have any difficulty selecting one product from among the three remaining candidates. So the discussion began.

Tommy took a vote. Idea 1: 4 votes. Idea 2: 4 votes. Idea 3: 4 votes. Tommy abstained because he didn't want to influence the discussion. Then Tommy asked each person to explain his or her vote. Each person had an apparently logical explanation supporting the vote. Over the next two months, Tommy met with the team almost every day to try to get the team to decide which product they should pursue. He tried every team-based decision making model he could find. At several points, he had the majority of the team supporting one idea or another, but there were always 3 or 4 team members who disagreed. Tommy was getting very discouraged. He had promised everyone that they would make consensus decisions, and that they would not move forward until they did. But he was losing time. His business plan called for having prototypes ready for some focus group evaluations by this time, but he hadn't even decided on a product. Money was flowing out for salaries and overhead, but they were no closer to seeing a revenue stream than they were when they started. He looked at his plan. He looked at his financial position. Suddenly he realized, he did not have enough money left to finish a product development activity for any of the 3 alternative products.

Tommy's Toys closed its doors without ever selling a single toy. So it goes with many failed ventures.

However, Timmy, Tommy's brother, was also an entrepreneur. And like his brother, Timmy Teamwork was also very democratic in his leadership style. Tommy also witnessed the trials his brother had endured. He did not want to make the same mistake. So Timmy told his employees that they would strive for consensus, and that once the majority of the team supported a particular decision, they would go with it and move on.

Timmy's company, Timmy's Toys, came to be started in a very similar fashion to Tommy's Toys. When faced with making a decision about what their first product should be, Timmy employed some of the same tools and techniques as his brother Tommy. They had some wonderful ideas, and they initiated a lively discussion to try to select one alternative from among the three best ideas. Over the first week they took numerous votes, but there was still no clear winner. At the end of that week, they had a breakthrough. After wearing down a couple of members of the team, 4 team members managed to get 3 others to join them in supporting their product idea. The vote was cast at the next meeting, and Idea 2 got 7 votes from the 12 member team. Timmy was happy – he had his consensus – so the decision was made to develop Idea 2 into Timmy's Toys' first product.

Unfortunately, a couple of the people with the dissenting votes were not too pleased with the selection. They still believed that Idea 1 was the way to go. So once product development on Idea 2 got underway the next week, these two people were spending a

few hours each day starting to do some skunk works activity on product development for Idea 2. A month into the product development, Timmy realized that his team was well behind schedule at completing the product development against the schedule in his business plan. He brought the team together and explained the situation. Most of the team agreed to work harder to try to catch up, but the two guys doing their skunk works project were spurred on to work even harder on Idea 1 – obviously the behind schedule situation on Idea 2 was a clear indication that Idea 2 was indeed not the right path, and if they didn't keep working on Idea 1, the company would not have a product to take to market. They figured that Timmy's Toys would soon consider them to be heroes for doing the right thing while everyone else was headed down the clearly foolish path.

A month later, the numbers told the story. The project was even further behind, and there was not going to be enough money left to complete the product development.

Timmy's Toys, just like Tommy's Toys, closed its doors without ever selling a single toy.

The Two Pitfalls

So what caused the demise of these two promising entrepreneurs, Tommy and Timmy Teamwork, each with an appreciation for the need for teamwork, each with a desire to get their people involved in the decision making? Sadly, in each case, lack of sound teamwork caused the disaster. More specifically, it was the incorrect application of the principles of teamwork in the decision making process. Tommy defined teamwork in the decision making process too specifically, and his team became paralyzed to action. Timmy did not define it specifically enough, so his team was not truly committed to following through on the decision. But both mistakes led to the same outcome.

Consensus

So let me propose a much healthier vision for what sound decision making looks like in an organization with a sound team-oriented culture.

First, let's establish a working definition of consensus. I think a very clear and simple definition of consensus is "a point of maximum agreement so that action can follow." Pretty straight-forward, isn't it. Notice it doesn't say a majority decision, it doesn't say a unanimous decision, and it doesn't suggest a need for compromise. Notice that it also doesn't suggest that it is necessarily the best decision. The first phrase – a point of maximum agreement – is necessarily a little vague. Depending on the decision, maximum may mean 100% agreement. On the other hand, maximum may mean only the agreement of the person who is vested with the authority to make the decision. The real kicker in this definition is the second phrase – so that action can follow. The purpose of making a decision is to facilitate action because action creates value. The objective of consensus decision making is to get everyone to agree to act, regardless of whether they agree that it is the best decision.

Now some of you may be saying, hold on there man. If this is what you call consensus, then the boss can make a decision and direct the team to act on it, and he can still call it a consensus decision. That's absolutely correct. So now you're trying to figure out which screwed up management school I went to, right? Hang with me here. I would propose that there are many, many decisions that need to be made day in, day out, that don't require team discussion in order to get team commitment to act in accordance with a decision. Can you imagine trying to get anything done if every little decision required team discussion? And if you actually did this, what would be the implication for another oft quoted teamwork value – empowerment? In that environment, nobody is empowered to do diddly.

In reality, I think we all know that there are some decisions that warrant team discussion and consideration, requiring all members of the team to at least agree to support the majority decision, and there are others that are most effectively and efficiently made by an empowered decision maker acting on his own. By my definition, so long as everyone acknowledges the authority of the decision maker, then the latter is considered a consensus decision as well. But if you still have a hard time accepting that label, I think you will still admit that those types of decisions are necessary and congruent with a sound team oriented culture. So let's agree to disagree and move on.

As much as I would like to discuss the conditions under which to involve all of the members of the team in the decision versus when to just do it, I'm afraid that discussion is best left for another day lest this presentation turn into a full day workshop.

So far all I've managed to do is tell you about a couple of fictitious companies that demonstrated the fallibility of so-called teamwork and give you a definition of consensus that you may not agree with. I guess its time I tried to give you something worth listening to, eh?

A Healthy Model

What is a healthy decision making process in a culture that claims to believe that teamwork is the key to success?

First, we have to acknowledge that most organizations are not democratic institutions. Organizations are formed to accomplish goals, and usually those goals include maximizing the return on the resources that are applied. Most organizations have line managers up through a CEO or executive director and often a Board of Directors in order to make decisions, not to poll employees to establish a majority position, or to prevent any sort of action until a unanimous decision is reached. I have never heard of a successful company that completely eliminated any hierarchical positions, leaving all decisions up to the team. Inaction will eventually lead to the death of such organizations.

Does this mean that consensus decision making is out? No. But I believe that the correct posture for a team-oriented organization to take is that we are consensus-oriented decision makers, but we are not consensus bound. We should believe in the value of considering all available data and points of view in ensuring we make the best possible decisions for the organization. Every team leader, project manager, supervisor, department manager, director, vice president, and even the president of the company (or whatever the correct titles are in your organization), should strive to make decisions by soliciting a broad range of inputs, providing a forum for healthy debate, and facilitating groups to reach consensus instead of making unilateral decisions. But let me qualify this with (1) they only do this for decisions that merit that kind of investment, and (2) they reserve the right to make a decision in the absence of strong agreement. Failing to grasp these two principles led to the demise of Tommy's Toys.

A third key element that is part of sound decision making -- the value of empowerment. Most people equate empowerment with driving decision making authority down in the organization. This is true and valuable, but I think there is a second aspect to empowerment that is less often discussed but equally important. Your team members must be encouraged to freely express their opinions openly and honestly in the interest of ensuring that all points of view are considered in our search for optimum decisions. This freedom means there should be no fear of repercussions from management or fellow employees for expressing one's opinion. Without this open dialogue, there are two potential problems. First, you never know when the best course of action was never considered because it never made it onto the table. Second, team members who believe that the team doesn't listen to them are rarely going to be committed to carrying out decisions that conflict with their own opinions. Some pessimistic managers carry the belief that involving people in decision making processes only sets them up to complain in the event that the decision is not consistent with their personal inputs, so why waste the time? I just don't buy that argument. I believe that fundamentally, most people just need to know that their input was heard and considered in the deliberations. Most of the time, if they feel their input was valued by the team, they will be satisfied with the decision of the team, and they will be willing to diligently carry out the actions dictated by the decision. If however, they believe that they did not get the opportunity to share their ideas, or that the group didn't really listen to what they had to say, or that the group didn't care about their input, then the person will feel disenfranchised with the process, causing resentment when it comes time to do the work. I'm going to talk more about this predicament later.

If you are going to create this culture where team members are safe, two things need to be true. First, leaders who undermine this philosophy must be dealt with quickly. Once burned, people are very reluctant to risk being burned again. Any of you with teenagers have, I'm sure, had to explain to your son or daughter how trust, once lost, is just a very difficult thing to recover. If you are ever going to recover it in your team, the offender must be rebuked, and the offended must be aware of the rebuke.

Second, with this freedom for all team members to speak openly comes the responsibility of expressing those opinions honestly, professionally, and without discrimination. Healthy teams have healthy, constructive dialogue. Ideological debate is accepted and encouraged, but personal attacks, cloaked agendas, and manipulative behavior just cannot be tolerated. Teams need to be prepared to deal quickly with any failures to meet this responsibility. Plain and simple, this undermines the effectiveness of the team, and must be viewed as deficient performance.

So we've covered (1) this organization is not a democracy or a jury; (2) we are consensus-oriented, not consensus-bound; and (3) we have absolute freedom to speak up – responsibly. These are all important aspects to establishing healthy decision making processes in a team environment, but the next principle is where the rubber meets the road – you have to be able to expect absolute compliance with the decisions made, regardless of whether they were reached through consensus or unilateral decision. This statement eliminates any ambiguity between the first two statements. Successful teamwork is critically dependent upon all team members performing their roles as defined by the decisions of the team. If the quarterback in the huddle calls a play that requires the wide receiver to do a crossing route just in front of the strong safety where he knows he's going to get clobbered when he catches the ball, the wide receiver can't decide on his own to just do a down and out instead.

How the decision was reached has no bearing on this dependency. If a team member disagrees with a decision that has been made and does not feel like they have had the opportunity for their point of view to be considered in the decision, then they must speak up; however, they cannot fail to initiate necessary action required to comply with the decision that was made. In the case of the wide receiver, he can object, but once the quarterback calls the play and breaks the huddle, time to talk is over, time to act is at hand. If he runs the play and he gets clobbered, he can come back to the huddle and explain to the quarterback why the crossing route against that defense is not a good call in hopes of convincing the quarterback to make a different decision in the future. Healthy teams expect, and get, absolute compliance with the plan, nothing more, nothing less. Timmy's Toys collapsed because a couple of the team members did not understand this principle.

Discussion of the last point sets up my final guideline for sound decision making in a team environment. Point #5: As individuals working as part of a team, we all face "moments of truth." And I'm not talking about the one you faced last weekend when you bought that new big screen TV and didn't tell your wife about it until it was already delivered and installed. This is the point we reach when we are committed to one course of action, we've debated aggressively to sell our idea to the rest of the team, but the organization has decided to go a different direction. We are so committed to our selected course that we struggle with being compliant to the direction the organization has selected.

This is the moment of truth.

Per our previous discussion, the expected action on your part is to get over your own feelings, call it a lost cause, and accept the idea that maybe the organization is right and you are wrong. If you can't accept that the organization is right, then you at least need to commit to behaving as if it's the right thing to do. In the team environment, this is absolutely essential. I can stand here and say get over it, but you all know that this may be easier said than done. Yep, you're right. Divorced from the emotion, it is not a big deal. Faced with the reality, this can be a very significant event. So what are you going to do?

If you cannot suck it up, take one for the team, swallow your pride, however you want to describe this decision, there are two and only two options. You could probably think of 10 or 12, but I think that there are really only two that are legitimate.

Here's the first: If you cannot do this, you must decide that your cause is more important than your employment here – find another place to work. No harm, no foul. This is a legitimate decision and one that should be considered very healthy in an environment that values teamwork. In my opinion, the reason for your inability to comply with the organization's desire here had better be pretty significant. Differences of opinion over how to most efficiently reach a particular goal? I have a hard time imagining an instance where this would be worth leaving your job over. A belief that what the organization is asking you to do violates your ethical values and standards? Now that is the kind of thing that is worth standing up for. As a matter of fact, if you were on my team and told me that what I was asking you to do would be unethical, and I believed it was not and told you to do it anyway, and if you did stay and do it, I would have to question your integrity. Is this really the kind of person I want on my team? So anyway, the point is, if you really cannot comply, then taking a walk is one of your available options. It is not the best answer for the team (your compliance would have been), but it is better than the only other remaining choice.

What is your remaining choice? Your remaining choice is to stay in the organization and continue to fight, actively or passively, resisting direction to implement the company's decision. I'm sure some of you are thinking this is madness. What kind of option is this? My answer – you are right; it's a terrible option! But it is an option that is selected everyday by people at all levels of organizations of all sizes, all types, and in all industries. I don't believe that this option is selected more often than the optimum option – sucking it up and getting after it. But I do believe it is selected far more often than the option of hitting the road, and it is definitely selected far more often than most leaders are willing to admit.

Why is this? Here's my theory. Employee Joe gets hired by Company X. During the interview process, Joe's boss to be, Frank, repeatedly tells Joe how the people at Company X work together as a team. Joe was cautious and asked questions to confirm that Frank's attitudes about including the employees in the decision making process. Frank talked generally about how they make consensus decisions at Company X, and

that he really values diverse inputs from the members of his team. Joe was satisfied and anxiously looked forward getting involved in the team-oriented environment so touted by Frank.

During Joe's first couple of months, he attended many meetings in which the team discussed and selected various courses of action. Nobody really explained the groundrules of the decision process, so Joe just sort of observed the process and was quickly making valuable contributions to the conversations. Joe watched Frank, and Frank seemed to be pretty good at guiding the team in problem solving, but when it came to making a final decision, the process of confirming consensus seemed to be pretty soft. And Frank was not particularly good at clearly defining the decision and assuring that roles were laid out. Joe also noticed that his preferred approach was not always the one the team decided on, but he generally agreed that the selected approaches would probably work. So he never really felt hurt by the team. In fact, he really thought the environment at Company X was pretty cool.

Then one day, Joe found himself in a team meeting that was very different from his previous experiences. The team was working on defining a new, more efficient process for getting a particular task accomplished. There were 3 or 4 ideas floating around the room. Joe contributed one of the ideas; Sam contributed another idea. Unfortunately for Joe, Sam's idea, if implemented, created more work for Joe. The debate was pretty heavy, but the conversation was professional and courteous. After nearly 2 hours of discussion, Sam's idea seemed to be gaining acceptance among most of the team members. But Joe stuck to his position. Finally Frank looked around the room and asked the team if Sam's idea was the right path to chose. Almost all of the team nodded in agreement. Frank looked at Joe and said, "Joe, I appreciate your position on this issue. However, the team seems to think that Sam's approach is best. I'm going to have to go with the team on this one. We're going to implement Sam's approach." And Frank adjourned the meeting.

Joe was flabbergasted. Here he had just spent 2 hours trying to convince the people on the team that his idea was the best one, and he believed the team was supposed to work until consensus was reached – meaning that **HE** accepted the decision. All he could think of was that this company only gives lip service to the idea of teamwork and consensus decision making. In reality, this place is just like any other egotistical company – the management makes the decisions and the employees are just here to carry them out. A few minutes later his thoughts had progressed to: "If they think that I am going to sit here and put up with doing more work when they didn't even consider my opinion, they've got another thing coming. I'll show them who is right..." And he immediately began to figure out how to not do what he had been asked to do. I don't think I have to follow Paul Harvey's model and tell you the rest of the story...

Was Joe a bad employee? Maybe, maybe not. Did he intend to be a bad employee? I don't think so. So what caused Joe to go to no man's land? Was the mistake in selling Joe on the professed culture of the company? No. I think that highlighting teamwork, if

that is your organization's culture, is a great recruiting tool. No, the mistake was not clearly explaining to Joe how decisions get made in the framework of the team at Company X. Joe learned about the process by observing it and creating in his own mind what the ground rules must have been based on that observation. Clearly Joe's rules didn't match the company's rules – what's that called? It's called a disconnect in expectations. Joe expected one thing, the company delivered another. The company expected one thing, Joe delivered another. They fell into the Consensus Trap.

Implementation

So how do you prevent this from happening in your organization? First of all, never expect that you can create perfection and never have this problem. People are but people, after all. Second, cast a shared vision for decision making to everyone in the organization. Cast it today, cast it tomorrow, and cast it again the next day. Be very deliberate about continuously reinforcing the message. When you think everyone gets it, repackage it, and start the casting all over again. Setting clear expectations is the first step in assuring excellent results.

What should that vision say?

- This organization is not a democracy or a jury

Decisions get made based on trying to do what is best for the organization as a whole. The organization is not going to be so loose as to believe that a simple majority is the way to make quality decisions, nor is it going to be restricted by requiring unanimous decisions in order to act.

- We are consensus-oriented, not consensus-bound

We value getting inputs from a multitude of sources. We generally believe that working together to make decisions, we can make better decisions than any one individual acting alone can make. But we also recognize that some decisions just don't warrant taking the time to collect a multitude of opinions.

- We have absolute freedom to speak up – responsibly

This organization promotes and preserves an environment where everyone is empowered to provide inputs that bear on significant decisions. No matter how different one person's views may be from that of others, if it is shared honestly and professionally, then that person has no need to fear any sort of repercussions for speaking his or her mind.

- We require absolute commitment to selected course of action

Once a decision is made, regardless of how the decision was made, everyone is expected to comply without hesitation and without any resistance, passive or active. Efficiency is only realized in a team environment when everyone is operating to the prescribed plan.

- We must recognize the moment of truth

The moment of truth is real. If you cannot accept a decision, then you must acknowledge the disconnect and decide to head down a different path. Subverting the decisions made, either passively or actively, is deficient performance. Being in this no man's land is what gets people fired.

Conclusion

So there you have it. Five points to avoiding the consensus trap. I know that they are not fool proof – you just never know exactly how each individual is going to react to this concept. But I suggest that if you cast this vision in an open, honest, and positive way, most people should respond with appreciation that you took the effort to make the rules very clear. If one of your team members responds negatively to this vision, then perhaps that person is not really the kind of team player that you really need. Better to find that out now than wait until he has hit the moment of truth and decided to hang out in no man's land. I'm sure that Timmy Teamwork would have liked to prevent that from happening.