by
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True Team Building

More Than a Recreational Retreat

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This manifesto will provide a look at team performance that will put traditional relationship-focused team building in its proper perspective—that improved relationships are only a part of an effective team's performance puzzle. It will introduce new ideas and more importantly it will put many known facts into a comprehensive model that you can use, starting today to create and maintain more highly effective teams.

It was like many emails I had received before. The gist of it was, "We need some help with team building. Can you help us?". I replied with a request for a phone conversation to bet–ter understand the situation that prompted the email. Soon, I connected with Carol, a very capable and energetic adminstrative assistant. Over the course of our call, I probed to learn more about the request, and eventually, after realizing the limitations of her role, I asked to have a conversation with the manager of the team that needed "building."

Sophia and I had a wonderful conversation, but it became clear after a short while that my line of questioning was irrelevant to her. She said, "Kevin, I have a team of smart and talented people, but they don't get along. I need team building from you or someone to solve this problem."

I never did any work for Sophia and Carol. Let me explain why.

Teams are everywhere and everyone wants to build a better team. Consultants and trainers hear it all of the time, "Can you do a team building session for us?" But from my experience, there are incorrect assumptions underneath that question, including (continued next page):

- Team building is about getting people to like each other.

- All team building is the same. If I can find a good consultant/facilitator, they can give me a solution that will work for any team.

- The right team-building event will solve many of a team's problems in an afternoon. And, apparently, most trainers and consultants either:

  a) agree with these assumptions, or

  b) are willing to play along for a payday.

Most of these events are fun in the eyes of most participants. And while deemed "a waste of time and money" by the most cynical (or those who have been through many of these events in the past), they are viewed positively by most.

Some of these events even include time designed by the facilitator to help people translate the good feelings and laughter into learning—helping people get some value back at work for the time spent together in "team building". (This is often a touted component in the consultant's plan, but is often missing in actual application.)

All of these assumptions and experiences lead to a vicious cycle in the team building business. Budgets get built each year that include funds that will be used for team building. The events don't necessarily provide any real return on investment, but people like them, and managers get kudos for much the same reasons as cruise directors on ships are appreciated—they know how to put on a great event.

So team building events continue.

And teams still struggle to be as effective as they could be.

A single retreat, however good or fun it is, won't suffice.

Relationships alone aren't enough.

It takes much more than that to take advantage of the synergy that can be created by a highly effective team.

The CARB Model

Dr. Robert Atkins made a living and created a cultural phenomenon teaching people to *reduce* their intake of carbs. In a strange way, team building efforts have taken this advice unknowingly. My advice counters Dr Atkins; I teach teams to indulge, even delight in their CARB intake.

CARB is an acrostic representing the four major dimensions ultimately responsible for a team's effectiveness:

Commitment to the team and each other

Alignment and goal agreement

Relationships among team members

Behaviors and skills

This manifesto then could be described as the anti-Atkins diet for teams—it takes *more* CARBs (or more of each of the CARB components) for teams to be successful.

Commitment to the team and each other

Commitment is a very powerful thing, and without it, the work of teams won't be as success-ful as possible.

Why?

Because people are busy. They have many tasks and priorities. The work of the team will just fall into that long list of priorities people accrue unless team members find a reason to be truly committed to the team itself and its goals. With only so much focus and energy to spread around, without commitment they won't be fully participative and effective on the team.

There are two parts to this commitment. People must feel a commitment to the team and its purpose, and they must have some commitment to the individuals on the team, believing in them and their contributions to the team.

Thinking about commitment in this dual way helps undermine the assumption we started this manifesto with—that people who know and like each other will make a great team. There is a difference between liking people and liking the team. And there is a huge difference between being committed to the people on a team and being committed to the work and purpose of the team itself.

Both are required. Ignore this fact at your own risk.

Of course commitment can (and often will need to be) built—it won't pre-exist when you put people on a team. Since team formation, development, and success is a complex thing, several of our other CARB factors will aid in the development of this commitment. But recog-nizing its importance is a good first step.

How will you know when you have built a level of commitment, or what are the factors that will build that commitment? High levels of commitment correlate with several factors, including:

- **Belief** – People will believe in each other. Individual motivations are clear and generally understood. People are able to believe in the team, its individual members and the work of the team.

- **Agreements**—People have a mutually agreed to set of behaviors that are acceptable to the team. By building a set of agreements on performance, behavior and "how things are done," productivity is greatly improved. Why? Because effort and energy isn't spent on these distractions. Effort can be directed to the work at hand.

- **Trust**—A major underpinning for team performance is trust. Trust in team members and trust in leadership. It is clearly necessary for the levels of commitment required for high-performing teams.

- **Support**—Support is a critical factor, but it is also a bellwether for the rest of these factors. If people are supporting team decisions, commitment is likely present. If people are supporting each other through tough parts of a team's life, they are likely committed.

Is it possible for a team to get results with low commitment? Sure, you can get some results. But you will never approach the results that could be achieved with people who are committed to the team and each other.

Alignment and Goal Agreement

Teams can't succeed in a vacuum. Yet far too often that is what organizations expect them to do.

Sometimes this vacuum is created by omission—leaders just aren't thinking about it or are "too busy" to set a context for team success. Other times the reason is optimism—leaders believe in their team members and their skills. After all they hired bright people—and bright people will figure it all out. Assumptions like these can frustrate or burn-out talented people and kill teams.

And sometimes the vacuum is caused by a far more pervasive problem—that no clear organizational goals, objectives or strategies exist. Leaders must create clear strategies and they must create a clear line of sight throughout the organization, so people (and teams) can connect their work to the important strategies of the organization.

It takes effort to get a team in alignment with the organization's goals and strategies. It is impossible when they don't exist.

Yes, strategies and goals may exist. And yes, they may have been communicated. This is a good start, but isn't enough. Teams can't gain the clear direction they need without conversation. It is the responsibility of leadership to provide that opportunity for conversation. Conversation implies a dialogue—not a one-way email or set of PowerPoint slides provided by leaders. This conversation will provide a context to help the team to clarify their goals and make the decisions that come along during their work.

If you want to build stronger alignment between the team's work and the organization's goals, consider the following:

- **Start at the beginning.** Make sure the organization's goals and strategies are set. If not, there isn't much chance of the team being highly successful. At a minimum the team needs to understand, from the start, why their work product matters in the bigger picture and how they can make a positive impact.

- **Generate conversation.** Don't deliver the goals in the email when you ask people to join the team. Don't put it in the packet of materials people get when being hired. Make the time to have conversation. The alignment we are searching for needs to be deep—almost visceral. Help individuals and the team develop meaning and purpose. Help them understand how they can create work that matters.

- **Get the team's help**. Get their input. Remember that you are trying to create alignment and agreement. When people have the chance to shape the goals of the team, and when given the opportunity to have input into those decisions, they will have greater agreement with the goals.

- **Provide a connection.** Teams need someone in leadership "above" them that can provide support and resources—someone who can answer questions and keep them on track. Some people call this a team sponsor. The sponsor doesn't need to be on the team; rather they provide leadership, support and connection. The sponsor keeps the team from feeling like they are all alone.

- **Make them accountable**. If the alignment is clear and the goals set, then the team needs to be held accountable for results. In organizations where accountability has been lax in the past, this may seem like a jolt, but it won't be long before this accountability not only drives results but improves team dynamics too.

It is easy to see how these steps will help a team succeed. But more than helping them deliver a desired result, the sense of clarity, meaning and direction that these steps create help teams get over many other hurdles.

Why?

Because people want to belong to something that matters; they want things to believe in. When we give them those things, collectively they will work through many personal issues and challenges, and they will also become more committed to the end product.

A non-aligned team could enjoy each other and their work. They could accomplish much … but all of that productivity and results of their efforts could be completely counter to what the organization really needs. Can you see this happening?

It isn't just a fantasy, I've seen it.

And unfortunately, these are often the situations when a leader might look for some "team building," because "the team just isn't getting the results we need."

Relationships Among Team Members

Ah yes, the Holy Grail of effective teams—relationships.

"We need people to get to know each other better. Once we have done that we will be fine."

As previously mentioned, this is a terrible and dangerously limiting view of teams.

This isn't to say that the relationships between team members don't matter, they do. When teams that have good relationships also have the other CARB factors in large amounts, look out—team performance can soar.

Traditional team building events can be helpful. They can help people get to know each other and they can help people find common ground. They also, at least in the short term, build a sense of camaraderie. And while all of these things are important, they aren't the things that cause lasting improvement—they only set the stage for that improvement.

The best designed relationship–focused team building events do more than create laughs—they create learning. These events help people do more than get to know each other, they provide opportunities for teams to:

- **Learn each other's strengths**. Strong teams not only like each other, they know each other's strengths. They are collectively able to tap into the strengths and experience of the members of the team.

- **Find ways to capitalize on those strengths**. The best teambuilding activities give people a chance to be themselves, without all the structure and trappings of the work–place. And when people are themselves, others will see them in new, and often flatter–ing ways. This gives their strengths a chance to shine, and helps others see how those strengths can be tapped by the team.

- **Get comfortable with asking for help.** Highly effective team members are willing to ask for help, regardless of their role on the team. Teambuilding activities can help raise people's comfort with asking.

There are other factors about team relationships that matter, that might not get addressed in traditional team building, but they are quite important. Again, these require effort and time

spent to develop processes—and most likely support from leaders outside of the team. These include:

- **Initiation processes.** How new team members are added to a team, how they become oriented and acquainted with team members, norms and expectations is something typically left to chance or a quick meet and greet. Organizations that develop processes and plans for this will have greater success with teams that change membership frequently.

- **Role definition.** Team members need to understand where they fit in and what their roles are. When new teams are chartered or started there needs to be a format and plan for discussion of team member roles and expectations.

As you can see, even the Relationship component of this CARB model is about more then just "liking one another." So why is it that people always feel the relationships are the key to more effective teams? Along with popular opinion and habit, sadly the most prevalent reason is because it is completely inwardly team-focused. Leaders can invest in a team building session so people get to know each other, but they don't have to invest themselves or look at the systems they have created as a part of the problem.

Behaviors and Skills

Being a successful member of a team requires different behaviors and skills than are required of an individual contributor. Therefore, when you put people together on teams they will perform more confidently and successfully if they have the right skills.

While the list of skills and behaviors that support success on teams is long, here is a short list to get you thinking about the types of behaviors and skills to look for when creating a team, or to develop in an existing team.

- **Strong technical skills and competence**. Having the subject matter knowledge, industry perspective or specific skills the team needs is critical. Of course not everyone should bring a cloned set of skills, but it is important to identify the subject matter needs of the team, and make sure that each team member contributes to one or more of these skills.

- **Able and willing to collaborate and share credit.** Working alone allows for people to feel the spotlight and glory when things go well. It also means those individuals will be accountable when they aren't as successful. Highly effective team members recognize that the team success will reflect on them most when they focus on team success rather than individual accolades. The best team members are willing to collaborate.

- **Able to trust others.** Trust is something that is developed between people over time. In fact, as relationships are built, trust can blossom. The best team members though are willing to start from a position of basic trust in their teammates. Certainly this trust can deepen and grow, but the most effective team members are willing to assume the best and work together more effectively from the beginning. This behavior becomes more important as the makeup of individual teams changes more quickly.

- **Able to participate and lead effective meetings.** Meetings are an important component of team success. Whether the team meets everyday, on remote conference calls or meets only quarterly, the ability to contribute ideas and insights, to help the team move towards the desired results, to provide feedback when needed, and the ability to and willingness to stay focused are critical skills for effective teams.

- **Comfortable and competent at group problem solving.** Some problems a team faces can be solved by individuals. Sometimes a sub team will tackle a problem and sometimes it requires the entire team. In every case, effective team members know how to work together to solve problems, how to listen to the ideas of others, to ask questions without being condescending and make sure that the strengths, experiences and insights of each team member are taken into account in the problem solving process.

- **Willing to continuously learn.** The work of today is more complex and demanding than it has ever been. This means that for teams to succeed each individual on the team needs to continuously improve their individual skills.

The workings and success of a team is a complex thing, and like many complex things in our world, we try to find easy answers, we try to isolate one factor that can make the difference. For most people the one factor they have simplified team building into is getting people together to have some fun and giving people a common experience.

In the real world, this is just one way to improve team performance.

I've had the honor of working with one organization for nearly twelve years. This is an organization committed to building teams that can make a difference in how they reach their organizational goals. The leaders strive to understand the workings, dynamics and skills needed by teams. They walk their talk. And while they do have team retreats, they recognize two important factors that lead to great success for those retreats:

- The retreats are more than just fun. They take time to consciously work on each of the components of the CARB model, strengthening them through dialogue and shared experiences.

- The retreats aren't seen as an event. Yes, the retreat is an event, but they work hard to integrate these events into the culture, lore and expectations in the organization. This

means that these events become an ongoing, planned part of the team development process of the organization as a whole.

So please, before you call me (or any team building consultant) to ask for a team building event, think more about the team, the organization it is a part of, and what the team's make-up and goals are first. Then, when you make that call, encourage your consultant to give you options and approaches that will help your team where it really needs help the most.

Use the CARB Model to remind you of the components that suport highly effective teams. Use the CARB Model to help you identify the best fits with consultants that you might use.

And most of all, please use the CARB Model to remind you that highly effective teambuilding requires more than a recreational retreat.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Eikenberry is an expert in leadership and team development and Chief Potential Officer of The Kevin Eikenberry Group.

Kevin has spent the last 13 years helping organizations all across North America reach their potential. His specialties include: teams and teamwork, leadership development, developing organizational and individual potential, consulting and the consulting process and more. Kevin's students and clients consistently rave about his effectiveness, many calling him "the best trainer I've ever experienced."

Kevin is the author of the best-selling book, *Vantagepoints on Learning and Life*, and a contributing author to more than 15 other books. He publishes four ezines, read by over 105,000 people worldwide. His goal is to reach organizations and individuals who believe in the power of action—organizations and individuals who are passionate about succeeding at their highest level.

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