



BUSINESS

The **Aerodynamics** of Teamwork

BY PAUL VITALE

For an individual whose interest is often perked by various examples and analogies surrounding the basic concept of teamwork, I'm often amazed by the knowledge that can be gleaned from observing the things around us—whether a bird, an insect, our general surroundings and so on.

From pre-school to high school we learn quickly that living means being a part of a team. Teams come together for various reasons, and the idea of playing a role within a unit larger than oneself has become second nature in the society in which we live. SWAT teams, paramedics, utility services, governmental boards and others all depend on individuals teaming up and working together toward a common cause.

Not long ago, I was stopped at a traffic light when out of the corner of my eye I noticed a flock of geese flying above. In a V formation, each traveled in unison, flapping its wings and moving briskly along. Counting nine birds while waiting for the light to turn green, I began trying to recall the reason why these winged animals travel in such a configuration. So I spent a brief stint on Wikipedia and Google searching for “Why do geese fly in a V formation?”

I quickly was reminded of one of nature's greatest lessons. By flying in a V shape, the entire flock adds at least 71 percent greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own. The aerodynamic V shape configuration reduces the air drag that each bird experiences during flight in comparison to that same bird flying solo. This not only allows them to cover longer distances with much less effort, it also serves as an

excellent example of teamwork to all of us.

Much like the geese, people who share a common direction are able to get where they are going more efficiently if they travel on the thrust of one another. Do you remember the first time you heard the mantra, “All for one and one for all?” Each of us has a role to play in society and the world as a whole. There are amazing benefits when we not only work together as a human race, but encourage and support each other along the way. Much like the geese honking from behind to motivate those in the lead to keep up their speed, an encouraging word or act of kindness goes a long way.

Because humans are not geese and as such are extremely complex—not to mention unique—it is rare to find a team whose members don't struggle to develop good working relationships. Some team members even find themselves locked up in a disagreement, rather than working in unison to accomplish actual goals. With this in mind, let's examine five practices to ensure a congruous team.

The creation of a comprehensible vision statement. According to About.com's Susan Ward, a vision statement is the inspiration and framework for a team's strategic planning. Such a statement may apply to an entire company or to a single division. Whether for all or part of an organization, the vision statement answers the question, “Where do we want to go?” The vision statement should resonate with all team members and help inspire a sense of pride and ownership. It's easy to find examples of vision statements. For instance Wal-Mart,



the largest retailer in the world, strives daily to live up to its vision: “To be the worldwide leader in retail.” This one statement is guaranteed to serve as an important reminder when team members need a reminder of the organization's core purpose.

The sharing of clear expectations.

We are all guilty of communicating tasks to others without explaining the anticipated results. Have the expectations for the team's performance and outcomes been clearly communicated? Has this communication been consistent from start to finish? According to a work study by Watson Wyatt Data Services, companies whose employees understand the organization's goals and expectations enjoy a 29 percent greater return than other firms. Simply stated, when individuals of a team know exactly what is expected from them and their

performance, accomplishment is much more likely.

The implementation of an effective plan. It is one thing to understand the overall vision and expectations that accompany it; it's another to be set up for success. To not just work a plan, but instead be effective throughout the process, team members have to be informed on the overall concept, team coordination, priorities, resource allocation and so on. The more information team members have about the overall plan, the less likely they are to experience confusion. In addition, the opportunity for internal friction and frustration is reduced. It's better to offer too much information than not enough when asking a fellow team member to invest time, energy and expertise in the quest for outstanding results.

The understanding of accountability. The phrase "The buck stops here" made popular by President Harry Truman sums up the fact that someone has to make the tough decisions and accept the ultimate responsibility for those choices. Whoever shoulders that responsibility always should exercise fairness, consistency and

decisiveness. A well-functioning team performs best when parameters not only are in place, but are reinforced in an appropriate manner. Granted, there always will be team members pointing fingers at others and placing blame. Nonetheless, by exemplifying transparency in this crucial area, the individuals comprising the team can approach problem solving, process improvements and increase overall accountability with more ease, while boosting confidence in the complete functionality of the team.

The celebration of team. I wholeheartedly believe that nothing stimulates growth as much as sincere and enthusiastic praise. Some might argue the fact that accolades carry a great deal of weight, but I guess that depends on whom you ask. Studies have shown that over 80 percent of adults consider praise for a job well done as one of the best compliments they could receive. It also seems to encourage individuals to do their very best, not just for themselves but the entire team. This is one of those no-brainers. Just think about how it feels when you are given a compliment or a simple thank you note shows up in your mailbox or

inbox; a sincere "thank you" or "good job" goes a long way toward strengthening loyalty and dedication. As long as teams continue to win together and lose together, there will always be room for celebrating accomplishments.

So, the next time you're sitting at a stoplight and notice a flock of geese honking overhead, take a moment to admire its formation and attention to teamwork. Much like me, you might not instantly recall the textbook answer for why these winged animals travel in such a beautiful configuration, but you'll witness individual birds working in harmony for a common cause. As nature has reminded us countless times before, its causes and ours are not too far apart. Team up and celebrate success!

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