

WHOLE PERSON LEADERSHIP

By Jack Keogh

For several years now, we have been delivering team-building seminars, highly rated by our clients based on the measurable results we have achieved. It has just dawned on me that I do these programs a great disservice by calling them “team building.” Sure, we use elements of traditional team development activities. But, I’ve belatedly realized what we do is way more than “team building.” Let me explain why I think team-building does not do justice to what we have been doing and why I think it’s necessary to go “beyond teambuilding” to achieve sustainable change.

One of the great lessons that the current recession is driving home is that success as a leader involves far more than excelling at “business.” We have to succeed in all areas of our lives to be truly successful at work. Genuine work-life balance means we also have to develop our “our own private selves.” Leadership based on this principle is referred to as “whole person leadership.” It’s about finding mutual balance among family, community, work and our private selves. It means developing individual’s personal, holistic abilities so that they can truly function as valued contributors on a team.

Our clients have been telling us that we deliver proven results, individuals are finding a renewed sense of purpose and the teams we work with deliver sustainable change by being more “connected” to each other and their subordinates. I don’t say this to tell you our programs are good but rather to explain the question we asked ourselves: what elements of our approach are helping get these results?

The first fairly obvious answer is that we involve participants in a “whole-person” sort of way. In other words, we apply principles of adult learning. In addition we involve teams intellectually, emotionally, and physically. But I don’t think those factors, alone, differentiate what we do from other approaches.

We encourage participants to move beyond their comfort zones and in order to do this we create a safe space for learning. A space which enables learning by doing, where it is OK to fail, and where it is possible to practice new skills. Change does not occur in environments where there is distrust and lack of respect or commitment for the emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being of team members. Everyone who participates must understand that we are all learners and we are all teachers. That means participants choose to learn about leadership – which is not the same as being sent to a program to fix a problem. When people begin to feel they are part of a team, they go the distance for each other; not because they have to, but because they want to. Leadership is best learned in a group of like-minded people who are willing to support each other’s learning in the context of real-world issues that matter to the business – and to the personal lives of the participants.

Why do companies provide “team building?”

Usually, a division or a particular team is at a crossroads. Perhaps a new executive (often an expatriate) has taken over. Or, a team is facing a particular challenge – falling behind in quality control, not delivering projects on time and within budget. Often it’s because they are facing ever stiffer competition in an increasingly tougher market. Senior management expects more of middle management and virtual teams. Divisional managers want to re-invigorate their teams commitment or they want to enable high performance by showing team members they are valued assets of the organization. The bottom line is usually that the corporation wants to count on committed and creative employees in order to survive and prosper in these turbulent and highly competitive times.

Self Leadership

Teamwork is based on the contribution and effective collaboration of individual leaders. And all true leadership starts within the individual. As Peter Drucker wisely pointed out in his classic 1966 book “The Effective Executive” the first person you lead is yourself. 90 percent of being an effective leader is about self-leadership. The charisma, relationships, and vision a leader creates come from the inner core of an individual.

Amongst other skills, leaders and team members need to learn to consistently listen with genuine curiosity in order to encourage development of diverse opinions and supporting rationales, rather than simply proposing solutions and working to build consensus around them.

Listening

It seems to me that listening is one of our most underutilized skills. Many of us have never made the effort to improve our basic communication skills. We think about six times faster than we speak – so our minds easily and frequently begin to wander. We rarely focus on the speaker’s needs. We utilize “random sampling” to find isolated points of agreement where we can nod and get back to thinking about what we want to say. Listening is hard work!

Good listening and feeling that we are being “listened to” (which is not the same as being “heard”) requires an atmosphere of trust and respect that are more absent that we care to admit in our interpersonal relationships – at work, and at home. The end result is that we don’t really listen to the other, thereby initiating a vicious cycle of lack of trust and misunderstanding.

A holistic approach

To be a leader means knowing and understanding oneself. This includes understanding your strengths and your governing values. It means knowing how to

manage your emotions and the emotions of others. It means knowing how to *really* listen. And, it means being aware of your “shadow” side – that pesky part of your personality that can emerge in times of frustration and stress to derail your best intentions. It is being in touch with your authentic core and inner voice so that you can listen to your customers, to your competitors, to your critics, to your fans, to your leaders, and to subordinates as well as peers.

To unleash this sort of creative power and achieve transformational improvement we find appropriate personality profiles accelerate understanding of self and others. Self knowledge begins with understanding all aspects of yourself as a person: how your emotional, cognitive, psychological and spiritual make-up influences your behaviors.

Authentic self-leadership implies understanding and questioning values, knowing how we gather data, how we make decisions, what we assume about the world, ourselves and others. It embraces all the dimension of our personality, our cognitive ability and our emotional intelligence to focus on our inner resources.

To thrive, and not only survive, in the 21st century, it is no longer enough to be a ‘super-manager’, ‘super-engineer’, or “super-anything.” What seems to guarantee the greatest level of success and productivity is having a balanced and integrated approach to personal growth and wellbeing in order to function on a high performing team. In my recent experience, I’m seeing that leaders and organizations who take this into account are attracting and retaining the best talent.

To answer the question I posed a few paragraphs back, about what specific program elements are helping us achieve results, I think it has been a question of listening to the “new” challenges that have emerged in this recession and developing leadership perspectives and processes that go beyond the traditional models of management.

This has resulted in finding a perspective that connects management and employees conceptually, focusing on vision, purpose, and meaning. The result is stronger teams that resemble “communities,” which encourage development of the whole person. The added bonus is that this personalized development influences not only the work environment but also family and community life. Implementing this new approach to whole person leadership is transformational and empowering for the company, the team and the individual’s personal life. The term “team building” simply does not do it justice.