

Building Cohesive Teams

By Henry S. Givray



With few exceptions, teamwork is an important ingredient to success in any work environment. With teamwork, we work together as individuals and organizational units towards a defined goal. Good teamwork is a result of individual skills and behaviors around cooperation, collaboration, effectiveness, efficient processes and, ultimately, successful collective execution.

Cohesiveness is a higher state of teamwork. Cohesive teams comprise individuals who are united in purpose, possess common values and develop shared meaning. As a result, their efforts are multiplied rather than summed. Good teams achieve specific results based upon set goals, assumptions and work plans. But cohesive teams produce desired outcomes regardless of new challenges, changing conditions or unfavorable surprises. They drive enduring success for themselves, their teams and the larger organizations they serve through individual and collective accountability, reflection, self-correction, learning and growth.

Cohesive teams exemplify and consistently exhibit the following behaviors and group dynamics:

- Genuine bonding – team members support each other in good times and in bad.
- High quality communication that is direct, open, frequent and credible.
- Sufficient and active participation by all.
- All parts connect and work in harmony.
- Swift, direct, honest approach to surfacing, confronting and resolving conflict – with one overriding objective – to work it out and move on.
- No team member lets formal hierarchies or organizational boundaries get in the way of serving clients, solving problems, living chosen values or simply doing the right thing.
- An abiding, unshakable belief and mutual commitment of co-destiny, linked success and joined accountability for setbacks.
- A shared sense of something bigger than any one member's functional area, set of duties or spheres of influence.

It is also important to note that although getting along and liking each other are desirable team qualities, they are not sufficient to achieve cohesiveness. They aren't necessary either, though their existence can help foster a collegial team environment and be good for the well-being of individual members. The one absolutely necessary requirement for building a cohesive team is that *all* members on the team share the same purpose *and* share the same values. If that's missing, no incentives, individual desires, actions by the team leader or other efforts will work. But even unity in purpose and common values alone are not sufficient. Each member of



a team brings different strengths and weaknesses, backgrounds and experiences, and personal styles. Also, each member is likely to process information, solve problems and make decisions differently. These differences and many others among human beings challenge and impede even the best team's ability to achieve cohesiveness.

So what does it take to build a cohesive team? Endless interactions, ever-changing roles, complex relationships and other human factors mentioned above make team cohesiveness elusive and fleeting. Leaders understand this. They also know they can't legislate cohesiveness. However, they can articulate what it looks and feels like by describing its behaviors and group dynamics. And they can insist that failure to achieve cohesiveness is not an option. Most importantly, they recognize that building, nurturing and sustaining team cohesiveness requires constant work, dogged focus and steadfast determination. That's why leaders prioritize and dedicate their time and energy around certain principles and actions. Specifically, they:

1. Critically and honestly assess common values and shared purpose among team members.
2. Set performance expectations and priorities for each team member both for their individual area of responsibility and for being a member of a cohesive team. Then hold each team member accountable on both requirements.
3. Teach, coach and mentor team members on what it takes to be cohesive.
4. Serve as a role model.



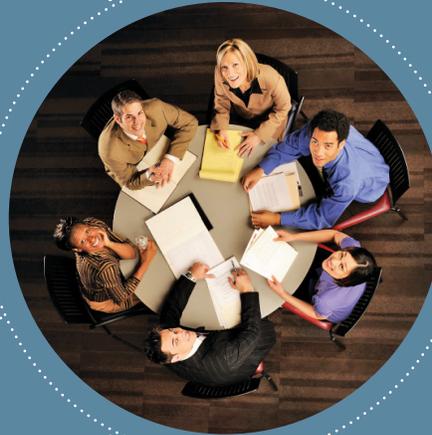
Behaviors and Group Dynamics of Cohesive Teams

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High quality of communication – direct, open, frequent and credible

Sufficient and active participation by all

All parts connect and work in harmony



Swift, direct, honest approach to surfacing, confronting and resolving conflict

Formal hierarchies and organizational boundaries do not get in the way

Co-destiny, linked success and joined accountability for setbacks

Shared sense of something bigger than individual functional areas, set of duties or spheres of influence

5. Provide clarity and context for making decisions, and insist that each member stand up and be counted.
6. Ensure that conflict is dealt with openly and directly. But also know when to intervene to make it so.
7. Have the courage to let someone go in order to preserve team cohesiveness – but do it honorably and fairly.

During an interview for possible inclusion in the book, *Apples are Square: Thinking Differently about Leadership*, the authors asked me several questions. Among them was, “As a leader, is it more important to place your energy on the individual or on the team?” My answer was “both.” Here’s why. Ultimately, judgments, decisions and actions are made and taken by individuals. Therefore, attracting, developing and retaining talented, high-performing individuals in order to achieve desired annual results is a critical part of what executives, managers and human resources professionals think about and do. However, a group of highly gifted, ambitious and motivated individuals doesn’t necessarily make a high-performing team. Sports examples abound. Furthermore, a team of well-intentioned individuals who get along and work well together won’t automatically produce extraordinary results. That’s why

great leaders place a high priority on not only promoting good teamwork, but, more importantly, building cohesive teams. They recognize that achieving team cohesiveness helps ensure long-term success, vitality and endurance regardless of the inevitable up and down cycles, or unpredictable shocks to the general economy or specific industry. •

Henry S. Givray is Chairman of the Board of Directors of SmithBucklin, the association management and services company more organizations turn to than any other. He served as SmithBucklin President & CEO from 2002 to 2015. Henry is a dedicated, ongoing student of leadership, committed to speaking and writing as a way to teach and give back. His insights and ideas on leadership have been prominently featured in business books and top national news media. Henry has been invited to speak at numerous association conferences, corporate meetings and educational forums that were attended by diverse audiences. Recognizing that growing leaders from within is essential to an organization’s enduring success and vitality, Henry created and facilitates two intensive, high-impact leadership learning programs. The SmithBucklin Leadership Learning Forum is a nine-month program for top performing employees at various levels within the company. The SmithBucklin Leadership Institute is a six-month experience for board members of SmithBucklin client associations.