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I recently had the opportunity to guest speak on team coaching to an undergraduate class at a prominent university.

The class was divided into five teams of four to five people. I gave a simple demonstration of what team coaching looked like by using one of the class teams as a guinea pig and then turned it back on each team in the class to practise on itself.

One member from each team would step outside his/her role as a team member and assume the role of team coach – with the intention being to coach his/her team when “issues” arose such as losing focus on the agenda, unhealthy conflict, or decision-making reluctance.

The challenge for each of the team coaches was thinking as an outsider.

What happened was this: each team coach started off as an “external” coach but as soon as a topic came up within their team that directly impacted them, they forgot their role as a team coach and reverted back to their role as a team member.

CLEAR TEAM DIRECTION

Leadership teams at the top face the same challenge.

They remain “objective” until the moment they don’t – until an agenda item impacts them directly. Then, they fend for themselves.

The first time I saw this was eye-opening because, in my mind, a team is a *team*, not a group of individuals sharing the same space calling themselves a team.

Yet, that’s often what happens – not just with leadership teams at the top but also with project teams, management teams, sales teams, and start-ups.

Each one of these “teams” is comprised of smart, savvy, experienced people, and the assumption is that *because* they’re smart and *because* they’re experienced, they don’t need help or direction in how to come together as a team; that they’ll figure out how to work together on their own.

But they don’t. They rarely do. Without direction, it’s hard to get anywhere.

SOLID FOUNDATION

Start with the basics. In the United States Navy’s Sea, Air and Land (SEAL) Teams, nothing we did was really *that* advanced.

Okay, maybe some things. But the majority of what we practised was fundamental.

You don’t become elite in anything without a solid foundation under you. Get the fundamentals right, and everything else will follow.

WHY TOP LEADERSHIP TEAMS STRUGGLE



GETTING THE BASICS RIGHT



Get the fundamentals right, and everything else will follow.

Purpose pulls, passion pushes. Purpose is what calls you forward *through* the chaos, *through* the uncertainty, and toward the unfathomable that you never knew you had the capacity to endure had it not been for purpose calling your name.

Teams are no different. There needs to be a compelling reason for *why* the team exists and *what* it aspires to achieve. A purpose should be clear, challenging, consequential, and shared.

Remember what Friedrich Nietzsche said: “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.”

3 Value On the coattails of having a clear and compelling shared purpose is understanding why pursuing that purpose is important.

Oftentimes, people don’t speak up in meetings because they don’t know how they fit in, and the conversations that would identify how they might add value haven’t occurred yet.

One of the metrics I like to use when coaching a team is a sociogram. A sociogram maps interactions between members, which is handy when you want to measure social interactions and communications (what gets measured gets managed and what gets managed gets improved, right?).

The beauty of a sociogram is that you can use it to understand how people contribute – how they add value or why they don’t – in a team environment.

TYING IT TOGETHER

Whether you’re in a leadership, management, or project team, start with the fundamentals.

Get so good at the fundamentals that the only struggle you face is the day when you have to leave the team.

That’s teamwork.

The same holds true for teams. In my experience, there are four fundamentals that every team needs to establish to start off “right” – and stay “right”. They are clarity, competence, confidence and curiosity.

In this article, let’s look closer at clarity – because I can’t think of anybody who suffered from too much clarity.

Here’s how clarity breaks down and how you can find it in your team:

1 Identity Oftentimes people assume that groups and teams are the same, but they’re not.

One of the main differences between groups and teams is that a team shares the same fate; a group does not.

Nor are teams the ideal solution for

every problem set. Whether you structure yourselves as a group or as a team depends on the task to be achieved.

Another aspect of identity is team membership. You want to clarify those who are directly on the team, those who are directly not on the team, and those who indirectly influence the team.

One common assumption I see as a team coach is equating one’s rank or title with team membership (“I’m a senior vice-president, so of course I’m a member.”)

The problem with porous membership is that it disrupts how the team works together – how they meet, communicate, and make decisions – which impacts results.

2 Purpose I can’t think of anybody who doesn’t want a purpose in life.

■ Jeff is a former Navy SEAL who helps business teams find clarity in chaos. He is a contributor at Forbes and Entrepreneur.com, speaks at the Harry Walker Agency, and recently authored “Navigating Chaos: How To Find Certainty In Uncertain Situations.” What do you think of this article? Let us know at editor@leaderonomics.com.

