

What Makes a Good Team Member?

By Linda Adams

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"That's not my job."
"Tell them what they want to hear."
"I don't get paid to think."

There is a great deal of focus on leadership and all that it takes to make a good leader. A wide array of books and training programs tell leaders and managers what they should be doing to improve themselves. And not only is there a lot of advice, much of it is conflicting.

If you're a leader, do you ever feel just a tad defensive, like all of the responsibility is on you to make sure that meetings go well, that people are happy, that business runs smoothly, that the organization succeeds? If you're like me, you might sometimes feel that too much focus is put on what's expected of the leader and not nearly enough is paid to the role of the team members.

Some books and training reinforce the idea that it's the leader's job to be in charge-of goals, of projects, of meetings of productivity, of targets, of performance and that team members are there primarily to carry out the needs and wishes of the leader. In this kind of environment, team members are neither expected nor intended to have a real voice or to be involved in planning and decision making. Even in the books and programs that advocate high involvement and participation by group members, just how they are to be prepared to participate fully is not spelled out.

We All Know How To Follow: That's The Problem

Because people, by and large, have been formed by experiences in strictly hierarchical families, schools and workplaces, we learn how to be followers. Don't rock the boat. Don't speak up. Don't disagree. Go with the flow. Leave your opinions at the door. Do what you're told. Depend on the leader for guidance.

Using our full capacities and developing our full potential in the workplace is, unfortunately, still something that is valued in only a rare handful of workplaces (even though it's become very common-and popular-for upper management to give lip service to the idea). When top management doesn't walk the talk, employees understand very quickly that there's too much risk in speaking up.

When people live and work in this kind of environment, their habit of depending on others to initiate ideas and make plans and decisions becomes even more deeply ingrained. Think of the tremendous amount of potential that is lost for both the organization and for each individual when this happens.

How Can Leadership Be Distributed?

Given the choice, wouldn't you rather have all of the resources of every single person in your organization available to meet the challenges and solve the myriad problems that are inevitable?

So how can team members develop the capacity to be fully functioning, highly involved, highly participative members of a group? How can they feel free to offer their ideas, opinions, suggestions, comments and problems? What inhibits free expression?

Developing fully engaged team members certainly can't happen overnight. Often, leaders in an organization who are trying to foster full participation become frustrated because, early in the

process, they want and expect team members to participate fully. And yet instead they still sit silently in meetings or don't fully share important information or data. This situation should surprise no one.

Not having had the experience of being a member of a group in which their ideas and opinions are valued, team members usually aren't prepared to risk speaking up, at least not at first. They need encouragement, support and practice. They need to learn how to function in a democratic, participative group-one in which their ideas, information and expertise are valued and taken seriously.

To make it possible for team members to develop and release their full creative capacities, the successful organization needs to undertake the long-term effort to foster a climate in which employees feel free to think, problem-solve, innovate, express their opinions and collaborate. It's easier said than done.

Probably the single most important element in that climate is the leader's willingness and ability to listen with understanding to the contributions of team members. The leader's goal is not to influence or direct the group's discussion to go a certain way; it is to listen openly without giving in to the temptation to offer evaluation and focus on truly hearing the points of view of team members, though they may differ markedly from the leader's own.

Not only does this kind of listening tell group members that their contributions are of enough worth to be heard and understood by the leader, it also facilitates the participation of others. As they become less defensive, more open, more clear, more articulate, something equally important happens. When they observe the leader listening with understanding, they begin to listen to each other better. When conflicts arise, such team members are much more open to other's views and less intent on defending their own in a knee-jerk way.

Even more effective than pure modeling is explicit training geared toward teaching team members in how to express their opinions, ideas and feelings whether positive or negative in a non-blameful, respectful way; how to listen with understanding in a non-judgmental, accepting way; and how to resolve conflicts with others so both sides get their needs met.

When team members experience a climate in which their full involvement and participation is valued over a long, consistent period of time and they have the communication and conflict resolution skills they need, the result is a workforce with more energy, more motivation, more commitment, more confidence and more coherence. The payoff for the organization in both goodwill and higher productivity can be astounding.

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