No One Has Written the Rules for Playing the Sport of Office!

By Janet Kuhn

We are all familiar with sports teams, and how they utilize each member's particular strengths to score more points than the opposing team.

Workgroup teams are very similar, bringing together members from various departments and disciplines to complete a specific task or project.

The only difference is – there are no rulebooks or referees!

Teams are critical to success with ITIL, and that makes team building a critical but often neglected activity. Being able to recognize the forces in place during the five stages of a team's lifecycle is key to building and participating in an effective team.

A typical IT Service Management (ITSM) implementation pulls together people from many IT disciplines and business interests into one of a number of groups, or teams, to discuss, design, build, implement or oversee a particular process or function.

How many times have you attended that first team kick-off meeting full of excitement and hope about working within a multi-talented and multi-discipline team? Yet, as the calendar rolls by, many teams struggle mightily with the realities of sorting through disparate opinions, making decisions endorsed by all parties, and focusing on the objective that pulled it all together in the first place.

This article looks at building and sustaining high-performing teams in today's business environment

What a Team Has

Let's take a look at the common characteristics of a performing team. A team has a purpose. The purpose of a baseball team is to play baseball and win games. The purpose of a project team is to complete an identified project on time and within budget.

- A team requires a mix of different skills and talents. Baseball players assume positions, and bring individual skills and talents needed to play those positions well. Work teams come from various departments and disciplines and bring with them valuable knowledge and skills from those areas.
- A team continues to exist if it loses a member, or a member is indisposed. It has reserves, drafting capabilities, and it has a plan to "cover" for each member should the situation arise.
- A team has a leader. Baseball teams have coaches, and work teams have managers. They help set the direction and coordinate the efforts of the team members.
- A team is greater than the contribution of any individual member. No matter how talented, or how knowledgeable, an individual may be, it takes the rest of the team to play the game and make a goal.

Life Cycle of a Team

Teams are a type of group, and social scientists have published many studies about efficiency and effectiveness in groups. In an article in the Psychological Bulletin ("Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," 1965 Psychological Bulletin, 63, 384-99), Bruce Tuckman outlined an alliterative description of the group development process, which characterizes the steps to a fully functioning team.

- Forming

- Storming
- Norming
- Performing
- Adjourning

Forming

All newly formed teams go through an initial, or "getting to know you" phase. During this phase, the team and its members avoid serious issues and feelings, and focus on routine items, such as team organization, who does what, when to meet, etc. The team depends greatly on the leader for guidance and direction, and the leader finds him- or herself continually answering questions about the team's purpose, objectives and external relationships.

- This is a comfortable stage, but by avoiding conflict and threat not much actually gets done. A team that stays in this phase too long will may never get around to actually addressing the task at hand.

Storming

As a team leaves the initial Forming phase, it starts to address important issues, and confrontations will begin to arise. During this phase, team members may vie for position as they attempt to establish themselves in relation to other team members and to the leader, sometimes challenging the leader. Cliques and factions may form, and there may be power struggles.

- Some members will observe that it is good to be getting into the real issues, while others will wish to remain in the comfort and security of the Forming phase. Even if outwardly visible conflict appears to be suppressed, it is often still there, just under the surface.

In this stage, the leader coaches the individuals and focuses the team on its goals. He/she helps to build the team's clarity of purpose, ensuring that members understand the issues and that the team avoids the distractions of relationships and emotional issues.

A team that remains too long in the Storming phase will spend precious time resolving conflicts among members, but fail to address the tasks it is charged with resolving or performing.

Norming

When a team moves into the Norming phase, it signals the establishment and acceptance of the "rules of engagement" for the group and the scope of the group's tasks or responsibilities.

Having had their arguments, all members of the group understand each other better, and appreciate each other's skills, experience, roles and responsibilities. Individuals listen, appreciate and support each other, and are prepared to change pre-conceived views. The team easily agrees on big decisions, and it comfortably delegates smaller decisions to individuals or small teams within the group.

The team works as a group in all aspects, with general respect for the leader who moves into a facilitation and enablement role. Commitment and unity is strong, and the team may even engage in fun and social activities. However, the leader must continue to be aware that the team is still fragile. Individuals have worked hard to attain this stage, and may resist any pressure to change – especially from the outside – for fear that the group will break up, or revert to the Storming phase.

Building upon this stage, the move to the penultimate, or Performing stage, remains to position the team as a truly high-performing entity.

Performing

Not all groups reach the Performing stage, in which the group displays interdependence as well as flexibility. Everyone knows each other well enough to be able to work together, and trusts each other enough to allow independent activity. This high degree of comfort means that the group can direct all of its energy toward the task(s) in hand. Strategically aware, it knows clearly why it is doing what it is doing. The team shares a vision and can stand on its own feet with no interference or participation from the leader.

Disagreements still occur, but now the team resolves them positively, making necessary changes to processes and structure. While working towards achieving its goal, the team also attends to relationship, style and process issues. Its members are equally task-oriented and people-oriented.

The leader of a Performing team delegates and oversees, sometimes assisting team members with personal and interpersonal development issues.

Adjourning

Finally, no matter which level a team rises to, it faces the challenges of disengagement, from both the tasks and the other group members. This is especially true in project-driven groups where the team disbands at the end of the project. Some authors describe this stage as "Deforming and Mourning" to recognize the sense of loss felt by the group.

Many teams recognize this stage with a formal ceremony that provides closure to the group and the task. Individuals will be proud of their and the group's achievements and glad to have participated in such a well-performing group. The Adjourning phase helps them to recognize what they have done, and consciously move on.

Keep the Momentum Building

Understanding the team's lifecycle provides a critical link that contributes to sustaining the effectiveness of your IT Service Management (ITSM) implementation. A team encompasses many people within the organization, and the responsibility for building an effective team extends far beyond the nominal leader of the team. In fact it lies solidly at the feet of each of its members.