



Teamwork Doesn't Always Work

"A person who doesn't care who gets the credit has obviously never gotten much credit."

-Jim Mathis

Sad But True

My daughter brought home a failing grade from a Chemistry project the other day. When I asked her why she got an F, she said, "My lab partner won't do any work and I was graded on her performance, too." She isn't responsible for her partner so she suffers the consequences of a bad match-up. This is a great lesson for life. The school system is actually teaching her that teamwork doesn't always work. Teams are made up of individuals who are graded by the performance of everyone on the team. Although they are compensated individually, they are judged by their team production. Why would someone who does outstanding work want to work with a bunch of people who don't care?

There was a television advertisement out several years ago featuring a superstar professional football receiver. He was surrounded by the press and one said the old sick saying, "There's no I in TEAM." His answer was, "There's no WE either." Teamwork doesn't always work because there is usually someone on the team who **won't** work. The hard workers (the superstars) resent the lack of productivity and the pay disparity they get for working with the "sludges" who won't work.

I know this because I have lived it... and so have you (or you wouldn't be reading this). There is little opportunity for a superstar to shine and achieve when they are tied down to a team. Superstars are usually faster paced and outrun the rest of the team. Individuals who don't want to be shown up or don't want to put forth their best effort resent the hard work of the superstars. There is very little WE in team. Gregory House in the Fox TV series, *House* said, "There is no I in TEAM but if you jumble it all up there is a "ME."

But I say that there *is* an I in every team. It is the person who wants to do their best for their own well being. The I is also the person who won't work at all because they either don't care, or they want to sabotage the group effort. In an organization I worked with about ten years ago, one of the team members told me as we were riding in the car together, "I am surprised I haven't been fired yet. I don't care what we produce. I am *trying* to get fired so I am doing as little as possible." He feared his wife's reaction to his potential resignation. He just didn't have the guts to quit. The organization suffered greatly.

He is not the only case. In almost every organization I worked in there were people who for one reason or another didn't want to work with everyone else. They looked out for themselves and no one else. I resented it. You are probably the person who had to cover or work harder, or you wouldn't still be reading this. The sludge workers aren't reading a book on how to work better. Am I right? In fact, the word "sabotage" dates from the Industrial Revolution. It is said that powered looms could be damaged by angry or disgruntled workers throwing their wooden shoes or clogs (known in French as *sabots*, hence the term *Sabotage*) into the machinery, effectively *clogging* the machinery. In a *Business Week* article from August 2009, it was reported that less than 30% of corporate workers really care about their jobs -- and nearly 20% actually want to undermine their co-workers, according to a Gallup study.

Jonathan Littman & Marc Hershon say in their book I Hate People, “Teamwork suffocates creativity and has its own limitations.” They describe the Ringlemann effect, named for a French agricultural engineer who experimented with groups of workers nearly a century ago. He noticed that a person works harder alone than as part of a group. Ringelmann dubbed the phenomenon "social loafing." What it means in the real world say Messrs. Littman and Hershon, is "the more people you throw at a problem, the less each contributes."

That doesn't diminish my desire to create great teams for discussing ideas or short-term projects. The best ones are a group of superstars working together to accomplish a common goal. But it is a great reminder that teams aren't always the answer. There's a lot to be said for the creative power of a single person.

Teamwork in the Old World

In the old world of work, teams were how things got done according to management standards. The word came from on high and everyone followed suit or they were out of a job. I worked for an insurance company for just under a year and the team concept was strong there. Sales executives were set up in competitive teams to out-do one another in sales. The winning team was rewarded with trips to exotic resorts. However, it didn't always work out with parity. Either the same teams won almost every time or the same people (the superstars) won on whichever team they were placed. There was a lot of turnover with everyone except the “sludge” workers. While the superstars would grab the attention and rewards, the middle group would follow their leadership. Eventually the superstars would get tired of a lack of support and find other, more challenging jobs outside of the company. The sludge, never wanting to do anything would meander in and out but never accomplish anything. No matter how excited the sales managers sounded, no matter how pumped up the campaign was, the result never changed. I eventually left the career for the same reason others left.

The other version of teamwork in the old world of work was one huge corporate team out to battle the competition. The CEO or President was the coach and his COO was the quarterback or team captain. Annual meetings were held to encourage the employees to focus on the goals for the current year and plan for the next. I worked with an organization like this for two years. The CEO was a likeable fellow. He was imported from another continent by the Board of Directors to take the company out of the slump they found themselves in. For the first year, he did a great job. But as he succeeded, he sought a new leadership style to maintain his winning streak. He considered coaching for a while, but settled on buying a leadership book and issuing it to every executive in the nationwide chain. All executives were required to read it. They held a grand meeting where it would be featured as the “new way of doing business.” I was asked to keynote the opening session based on the book. It wouldn't have been my first choice but I dove in thinking everyone would be excited about this new direction. I was wrong.

When the meeting started I sensed trouble. Most had not cracked the book open. Those that did couldn't figure out how it applied to their particular industry. The CEO introduced the theme and asked if everyone had read and brought their copy of the book. There was an uncomfortable feeling in the room. As I led the opening keynote, I could tell there was no enthusiasm for making this the Corporate Bible. There was dissension in the ranks. The superstars thought the book was beneath their abilities. The sludge didn't even bring it with them – knowing their jobs were secure anyway. Within a few months they were losing top clients and momentum lagged.

Superstars alone can't make a team win. I was raised in Atlanta, Georgia – home of the Braves baseball franchise. I am proud to say that I was in attendance on both the first day they played in Atlanta and also the night Henry Aaron broke Babe Ruth's all time home run record. It was a great night. It was one of the few great nights when Hank played in Atlanta. The team never got past the first round of the playoffs with Hank on board. Why? No other superstars. “Just let Hank do it!” He was followed by Dale Murphy, a three-time MVP in the National League. Again, four losses in their only post-season appearance. Remember when Barry Bonds played outfield for the San Francisco Giants? They had some great players, but only one superstar – Barry. They never won a World Series with Barry on the team. Teams function best when there is heavy, obvious competition in the sports world.

Michael Jordan, probably the greatest athlete of the Twentieth Century had other stars and super teammates surrounding him. People like Scottie Pippen, Horace Grant and John Paxson.

Teams just don't always work in the business world. Usually the CEO is a poor coach. He leads well but can't coach his players to be the best they can be. The superstars get all the tasks accomplished then get tired of a lack of challenges or lack of increased compensation according to their triumphs. Why would you want to stay in a place where the ones who do all the work don't make more than the ones who barely show up? I experienced this in the church world, too. Staff members who were the true hard workers and were treated the same as the ones who knew who to suck up to in order to keep their jobs. I went in a few years from superstar to sludge. I just didn't want to put forth my best effort when the challenge level was low. Set the bar too low and no one will jump over it.

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