



Is There an “I” in Team?

By ROBERT M. BARANOFF, M.B.A., FLMI, LLIF
Senior Vice President, Member Benefits, LIMRA

If you look at resumes these days, one asset applicants often tout is the fact that they are a team player. That plays well with HR. After all, who wants to hire someone who isn't going to get along with their coworkers?

That's tough to argue with, but is that what being part of a team really means — merely getting along with your coworkers? I don't think so. The purpose of a team is to accomplish something. Thus, it seems to me that being a good team player means that you are able to play a particular role in achieving the end goal — a role that complements the others on the team to create a synergy that would not exist among a group of solo players. Until the particular needs to achieve the group goal are determined — and the team is actually formed — it is impossible to know if any particular individual would be a good player on that team or not. If a baseball team needs better pitching to improve the team, getting a great-hitting centerfielder won't help at all.

But, all too often, being a good team player merely means “fitting in” and not making waves. You often hear the platitude, “There's no ‘I’ in team.” If everyone in the organization thinks like this, it could lead to a very complacent — dare I say, stagnant — atmosphere. You need individuals in an organization, and sometimes it is the very friction they cause — by not fitting in, by making waves — that enables the organization to move forward.

When used properly, teams can certainly add value. They can be great for creativity, for brainstorming, where one person's idea sparks an idea in someone else and so on. This is a scenario that could not happen with people working in isolation (although, of course, there are some very creative individuals, as we all know). Teams are a wonderful vehicle for generating multiple options, opinions, and viewpoints, as the situation may warrant.

Furthermore, teams can also be excellent vehicles for getting buy-in to the ultimate solution. If you need people onboard with a decision, letting them all play a role in the

formulation of the decision is a long-recognized technique for achieving that goal.

Teams can also be extremely useful if you want to test an employee's leadership skills or see who has leadership potential. Asking someone to head up a team can accomplish the former, enabling you to see how well the team functions and achieves its mission under the individual's leadership. Assembling a team to accomplish a task — without naming a leader — can accomplish the latter, allowing you to see who plays what role on the team and who naturally assumes a guiding role versus a support role.

But, if not used properly, the formation of teams can have a very negative impact within an organization. Under the guise of being an inclusive leader, a manager can use teams to abdicate his or her responsibility as a manager. In an effort to dodge personal accountability, the manager may form a team and create a shared responsibility in an inappropriate situation. This may be done wittingly by a manager who is fully cognizant of what he or she is doing, or it may be unwitting, especially in an organization whose culture encourages the automatic reaction “Let's form a team” for every new situation that arises.

There's an old expression: “When everyone's accountable, no one's accountable.” This can be a significant downside to teams. Or, as that prolific writer “Anonymous” once said, “Teamwork is essential — it allows you to blame someone else.”

Teams can also drag on for unduly long periods of time. Sometimes it's because the team members' schedules are so full that finding a time to meet is difficult, but other times it's because the team's progress just seems to get bogged down. It's not uncommon for them to discuss the same issues over and over, rehashing old ground. Thus, teams can definitely slow things down.

I once had a social studies teacher who avowed that the best form of government was not democracy, but benevolent despotism. He explained how it was much

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more efficient (despotism as compared to democracy), while maintaining the goal of doing what's best for the people (the "benevolent" part). In similar fashion, a good manager making the right decision is far more efficient than having a group of people try to reach a consensus (look at Congress today).

The bottom line: There is certainly a place for teams in the corporate world, but I feel they are overused and often are misused. When constructed properly, they derive their strength by virtue of the individual characteristics each team member brings to the team.

Is there an "I" in team? There absolutely should be — indeed, the team should consist of a group of I's, each of whom makes the team stronger because of what makes them unique. 🌐



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