

## ¶4101.6 ***It Starts with You***

There are many quotes that refer to leadership as “a journey” attesting to the fact that it is not a stationary activity. However, do you ever stop to consider those who are on the journey with you? When I think about team building activities my memory automatically drifts back to college when I was a member of a service organization participating on the leadership team. At a retreat for the group, we participated in an activity in which all the team members held the end of a piece of rope in different locations throughout the room with the overarching goal of navigating to the person at the other end of your rope without becoming entangled with the other multiple rope trails that crisscrossed the room. If my memory serves me correctly, I do remember some cases of rope burn, but the activity required all the participants to work together and not individually in order to be successful.

In *It Starts with You: Five Ways to Build an Outstanding Team*, Donna Obeid provides her secrets to cultivating a great team with the hope of sharing information that will be both of value and of interest to those facing the challenges of team building.

*Individual commitment to a group effort - that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.*

– Vince Lombardi



## ¶4120.20 ***It Starts with You: Five Ways to Build an Outstanding Team***

Donna Obeid, Stanford University

Teams change the world. From U2 to the Harlem Globetrotters to the *Saturday Night Live* cast and crew, we've been in awe of the work of great teams.

Throughout my career in instructional design and development, I've had both the privilege of collaborating with teams so strong they seemed almost magical and the unfortunate of witnessing a few rather lousy teams. Through it all, I've learned some secrets to cultivating a great team. Here are five of them:

### **1. Develop and Implement a Mission Statement and Goals.**

A mission statement is your department's compass...without one, it's going to be very difficult to know which direction you're all headed. If you don't already have a mission statement, develop one. A strong mission statement should be 2-3 sentences long and should answer these questions: *What do we do? How do we do it? For whom? What value do we bring?* Once you have a mission statement, post it on your website and talk about it often.

Then consider your team's goals, for if the mission statement is the compass, the goals are the map. Every team needs *both* organizational goals and individual goals – these should be as specific as possible and focus on the bigger picture of what is ultimately trying to be achieved. I recommend utilizing the S.M.A.R.T. goals model to assist you.

SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely. An example would be: By August 1, develop a 10-class training program so that staff can increase competency, streamline procedures and provide more effective customer service.

Dedicate a meeting for your team to brainstorm on what specific things they'd like to see the department achieve. After the meeting, organize the goals into a manageable document which is distributed to the whole team. Then develop an action plan on how the goals will be achieved, by whom and by when. Including everyone in the development of goals gives everyone a chance to be heard and increases the likelihood that goals will eventually be reached. Why? Because teams that fully understand the purpose of what they do are usually more engaged than teams without this focus. Goals – and transparent goals at that – play an enormous part in how your team members feel day-to-day, as well as in their long-term success. Strong leaders talk about goals on a regular basis and know the importance of connecting overall organization goals with individual performance goals.

### **2. Create a Training Program that Empowers Employees.**

I've spent the last year developing an empowerment training program for the Engineering Research Administration team at Stanford. I began with an initial analysis and assessment of needs before collaborating with subject matters to design and develop ten courses. Classes – each no more than 1.5 hours in length – were then implemented and evaluated for effectiveness through surveys and feedback. Informal

one-hour ERA Connect sessions were also added as way for staff to exchange ideas and further connect with those who may be in seated in different buildings.

It hasn't all been easy. I've faced challenges in integrating training tools and workshops with the workloads, pressures and deadlines that make up so much of the job of a research administrator. But the training program has gone a long way in terms of increasing competency, streamlining processes and empowering our staff members.

Each of us needs to be committed to being lifelong learners. A training program that focuses on positive change goes a long way in terms of building team.

### **3. Build An Employee Recognition Program.**

In his article *Recognizing Employees Is Critical to Retention*, Chad Brooks discusses a workplace survey of more than 400 employees in various industries. The results of the survey reveal the key to keeping employees happy is to recognize them for their hard work. Nearly half of those surveyed said they would leave their jobs if they didn't feel appreciated by their managers. We can't help it...each of us wants to be recognized for a job well done!

Last year, we developed the Gold Star Recognition program in our department to recognize one employee each month for their extraordinary contributions to the organization. We aligned the program according to the three pillars of our mission, namely, to deliver outstanding customer service, ensure compliance and provide solutions. Individuals are nominated by their peers and receive a \$50 gift card as well as a printed certificate to hang on their cubicle wall. The results have been terrific. *Everyone wants that gold star!*

If you don't already have an employee recognition program in place, considering starting one. If you can't provide a gift card, perhaps a certificate and announcement will do. Whatever it takes, always celebrate achievements. Recognition is a great way to bring out the strengths of your teams, increase morale and encourage the weak performers to step up to the plate.

### **4. Encourage and Develop Employee Strengths.**

Great leaders know how to instinctively recognize an individual's strengths and align these strengths to the success of the team. While it's no easy feat to do this, teams that focus on building and connecting strengths reap far more reward than teams that take the hands-off approach. Who in your department is a strong writer? Who excels at analytic skills? Who can easily discuss the best way to navigate through Fastlane or Grants.gov?

Bring out your employees' talents and strengths by encouraging them to lead a committee, develop new tools, apply for a conference, give a presentation at an upcoming staff meeting, etc. This is the way employee gain awareness not only of their strengths but also of the strengths of their colleagues. It's your job as a leader to tie individual strengths and goals with overall organizational goals. Doing so creates something of a happy and healthy village whose members cannot help but want to keep making things better. As Henry Ford once said, "If everyone is moving

forward together, then success takes care of itself.”

### **5. Create an Unforgettable Employee Retreat.**

Last summer, we had an employee retreat for the purpose of simply building team and learning something new about ourselves and each other.

Our theme was: *Amazing You*. We spent months planning for the retreat and decided that rather than hire an outside company who would charge us well into the thousands, we’d do it all ourselves. We booked a room in a location that was filled with natural light and away from our normal workstations. We sent out invitations and encouraged everyone to attend. We had specific goals and a task plan for the event and stuck with them.

On the day of the retreat, we served breakfast and lunch, had an Amazing Race, a guest professor, games and activities. We gave away *One Day Off* prizes and t-shirts. We did all this on a shoestring budget, creating our own riddles, finding a guest speaker who’d present for free, and serving healthy but simple food. The result? Our staff were talking about the retreat for days, even months later. People learned more about each other from one day than they had all year. I encourage you to develop your own retreat...it’s a perfect way to get employees out of their cubicles, learn new things together and just have fun.

In summary, the five strategies I’ve mentioned here can be effective ways to build team in almost any workplace. Change of course is never easy for people and many of the suggestions I’ve given here are indeed that – *change*. Some people won’t understand the value of a mission statement or won’t understand the need for goals or simply won’t see the reason for training. And just when you think that everyone has heard the same message and clearly understands it, you’ll likely see that you’re wrong. That you’ll need to communicate your message again. And again. And again....

You’ll need to be committed on educating employees on the reasons for the change and how it benefits each of them as well as the organization. You’ll need to be committed to maintaining a transparent leadership by encouraging a feedback-rich culture and addressing the tough questions. Keep people informed. Talk about moving forward together, leaving the past behind. Doing so builds the sort of trust and respect between leaders and employees that is in fact at the very core of every outstanding team.

### **About the Author**

**Donna Obeid** is a Training Specialist in the School of Engineering at Stanford University. She has served as an instructional designer for more than fifteen years, developing learning programs for government offices, private corporations and universities. She served as a visiting university lecturer in Northern Thailand where she lived for two years. Donna earned a B.A. in English Literature from the University of Michigan as well as both an M.A. in Teaching and M.F.A. in Creative Writing from American University. She enjoys yoga, magical realist stories, and photography, maintaining her own website at [www.donnaobeid.com](http://www.donnaobeid.com)

