

The five pillars of teamwork (Part IV)

Commitment or lack of it

Sanjeev Baitmangalkar

After Trust, Conflict and Attention to results - the article proceeds to 'Commitment or lack of it', the next value in five pillars. Ever worked a jigsaw puzzle? You have got a thousand pieces to the puzzle - all the necessary resources to complete the project. How do you begin? By looking at the cover of the puzzle box and studying the picture of what the pieces will look like once they are assembled properly. In other words, you start at the end result and plan backward to the beginning. Then, you begin to work towards the final goal you have defined. And since most projects require the involvement of other people, you must be able to articulate this clear project goal to all team members if they are to help you succeed. If the project team lacks commitment, even excellent skills and the best equipment will not be sufficient to ensure the team's success. And how would you overcome this hurdle? Read on...

We have seen the importance of 'Trust', 'Conflict' and 'Attention to results' and how they are important values in building successful teams that win. If we do not trust one another, then we are not going to engage in open, constructive, ideological conflict. And we will just continue to persevere a sense of artificial harmony. Many people mistake conflict, and think, 'we may not have plenty of conflict, but we have harmony'. What you really have is tension and there is almost no constructive conflict. Passive and sarcastic comments are not the conflict we are talking about. Why then is harmony a problem? Harmony by itself is good if it comes as a result of working through issues constantly and cycling through conflict. It is lack of conflict that is the problem. But, if harmony comes only as a result of people holding back their opinions and honest concerns, then it is a bad thing. I would trade that false kind of harmony any day for a team's willingness to argue effectively about an issue and then walk away with no collateral damage.

I have seen many staff meetings, only few argue very well. I have seen frustrations surface in the form of subtle comments. But, more often I have seen them bottled up and being carried around. This leads to wastage of precious time without thrashing things out. Just think: how long have your customers told you about their requirements and you have fallen short of meeting their expectations. Maybe, they even had to modify and adapt your equipment (which means you are not being customer focussed) - TPM friendliness, adaptability to flow line, easy to relocate the machine in the layout, SPC, etc. Surely these things are known, but then ask yourself why has not the customer got it and you will have the answer. Remember, one of the major trends today is mass customisation, and if you are not there, you would not be there when the equation of demand and supply changes.

Some people tend to think that argument means loss of time. Yes and no. Meaningless and diffracted argument is surely a waste of time, as there is no goal post there. But passionate argument objectively done is a productive investment of time. By engaging in productive





Role of commitment

What are the causes for this lack of commitment? Largely two, and they are consensus and certainty. Usually, great teams understand the danger of consensus (carrying unwilling passengers) so they try and find ways to achieve a buy-in even if a complete agreement is not possible. Psychologically, it is known that people only want to know that they have been heard and considered and nobody need to get in their way to support a decision. I have seen many meetings fall short of their complete objectives because decisions have been dictated and people have not bought in, hence there is no commitment from the members. At ANZ, they were struggling to produce a thousand assemblies of a particular kind. The demand was more than four times. When the production team sat down with process planners, defined their goal posts, and set about in new direction the result was that they were able to improve their productivity by 400 per cent without adding men or machines. This was possible only because the production team was not only sold out to the new processes, but was totally committed to it. If you ever enter a dead zone or an impasse, then the leader has to take the call but must explain his reasons, strategy, vision or constraints so that the team can then see it his way - provided it is convincing enough.

Bold leadership knows that a decision is better than no decision. Because, they know that they can correct it if the decision was not the best one made. This is certainty. In contrast to this would be to wait and collect an endless amount of data to feel certain that they are making the right decision, but in the process it can be paralytic and breed lack of confidence. Conflict underlies the willingness to commit without perfect information. Many times teams have all the information; it resides in the minds and hearts, which must be extracted through unfiltered debates and discussions. It is only when everyone has tabled his or her opinions and perspectives that the team can confidently commit to a decision with the confidence of having tapped into the collective wisdom of the entire team. When an executive team does not commit to clear decisions it is because there exist unresolvable discords deeper

in the organisation. Be careful of this one as it can create dangerous ripple effects in an organisation especially on the subordinates.

A team that fails to commit	A team that commits
Creates ambiguity in the team about direction and priorities	Creates clarity around direction and priorities
Watches the windows of opportunity close due to excessive analysis and unnecessary delay	Aligns the entire team around direction and priorities
Develops lack of confidence and fear of failure	Develops an ability to learn from mistakes
Revisits decisions and discussions again and again	Takes advantage of opportunities before competitors do
Encourages second guessing among team members	Moves forward without hesitation
	Changes direction without hesitation or guilt

Credit: Lencioni

How does a team go about ensuring commitment from the team members? They can take steps to maximise clarity, buy-in and resist certainty or consensus. A few tools used in these processes are: **Cascading messaging:** When an executive meeting is concluded, a team must review the decisions and decide how and to whom (other functional areas, employees, etc) to communicate the decisions for maximum clarity and impact. This does not mean that this team is allowed to modify or alter the decisions in anyway what so ever. It so happens that every member of the team is not playing his role at the same level on the decisions, so they must clarify specific outcomes before putting it into action. Make it clear, which decisions should be confidential (if any) and which not. This whole process may take 10-5 min, but by leaving the meetings aligned with one another, leaders can send a clear and consistent message to employees who have been habituated to inconsistent and contradictory statements from those attending the same meeting. **Clear deadlines:** Make clear deadlines for honouring decisions with dates, discipline and even rigidity. The enemy of this discipline would be lack of time discipline and ambiguity. Remember, committing to deadlines for every

conflict, and by tapping into team members' perspectives and opinions the team can confidently commit and buy-in to a decision knowing that they have benefitted from everyone's ideas. 'Commitment or lack of it' and the failure to buy into decisions is the next value in the five pillars of teamwork.

Commitment here is committing to a plan or a decision and getting everyone to buy into it. This is why conflict is important. The negative side of this is, when people do not open up their feelings and opinions they are really not on board. It is important to let everybody who may have a different opinion to make his case. Be careful, decisions do not have to be a consensus thing. It is ok if it naturally comes about like that, but it is possible that all views may not have been looked at. Be careful that consensus does not become an attempt to please everyone. Let every member know that his point of view has been heard and considered.

Every team member must learn to disagree and yet commit when the team has made its decision. That is called buying into the decision completely. If there is no buy-in, then people are not going to hold each other accountable. They could after all then say, that they never agreed to it anyway. The evidence of lack of commitment is in ambiguity. Great teams make clear and timely decisions and move forward with complete buy-in from every member of the team including those who may not have agreed with the decision. Such a team leaves the meeting with the confidence and assurance that everybody is aboard and that they will give their best shot at the goal.



milestone enroute to the goal of a major decision is as important as achieving the final goal itself. This ensures alignment of each team player in the achievement of the final goal.

Contingency plans: If your team struggles with commitment, then you may begin to overcome this by discussing contingency plans at the beginning itself. Call it as

plan B or worst-case scenario. This will help people to understand that costs of failure can be overcome, costs of incorrect decisions can be survived, or simply that course corrections can be applied to achieve the goal. They must know there are methods to minimise the damage.

Exposure to low risk therapy: Some times teams get into collecting and analysing enormous data in their belief that it is the right way to take a correct decision. It has been found that many times when teams make fast decisions and with little or available data (provided that the available data however less is accurate) their decisions are accurate and result bearing. This is a low risk situation for a commitment phobic team. This is not to undervalue the importance of research, but some teams just overdo them.

The leader must be:

- Comfortable with making decisions that ultimately may turn out to be wrong
- Constantly pushing the group for closure of issues
- Pushing for adherence of schedules
- Careful not to put a high premium on consensus.

Success is not a matter of mastering subtle sophisticated theory but rather embracing common sense with uncommon levels of discipline and persistence. Teams succeed because they are human. By acknowledging the imperfections of their humanity, members of a functional team overcome the natural tendencies that make trust, conflict, commitment and results elusive. ♦



The author is the CEO of Stratmann Consulting. Consulting in lean manufacturing, core competence, leadership, industrial marketing, business

process re-engineering, change & transformation, management & strategy. He has also worked as the director/CEO with the Texmaco Group in South East Asia, and as VP & SBU head with the Kirloskar Group in India. He has authored articles on various management subjects of strategy, re-engineering, lean manufacturing, marketing, ethics, processes, culture, leadership & case studies. He can be contacted at: stratmannconsulting@gmail.com