The Team-Building Trap

Three Critical Elements in Building Strong Teams

By James C. Galvin

As you walk through your office, you look at the boxes stacked in the hallway and wonder why they haven't been moved in weeks. With new eyes you notice papers piled on desks and files cluttering the bookshelves. People aren't greeting each other in the hallways and everyone looks tired.

Later that morning, you share these observations in your weekly staff meeting and everyone agrees, adding: "People aren't getting along." "Staff members aren't cooperating with one another." "Morale is down." "Teams aren't functioning." "We're not loving one another."

"What should we do?" you ask. The answer is unanimous: "Let's do some team building." So you book two days at a retreat center for the entire staff. You begin by taking a personality inventory and sharing results. In the afternoon the camp staff leads you through the ropes course. You set out table games and refreshments in the evening.

The second day brings more creative exercises and a reminder about the importance of listening. A good time is had by all. A few weeks later you walk through the office again and look around. You get this sinking feeling that nothing has really changed.

You just fell into the team-building trap.

Team Building Trap

What is the trap? It's putting your staff through team-building sessions that don't produce any lasting results. Team-building activities don't build teams. Think back over your career. How many insipid team-building sessions have you had to endure? How many times have you spent a day in creative activities that were somewhat enjoyable but didn't make any difference back on the job? Why does this happen?

Starting in the 1980s, businesses began using teams in a big way and getting serious about forming high-performance teams. Team building became a critical need. Those who built good teams could accomplish more, faster, went the theory.

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In response to the need, corporate trainers, psychological testing services, consultants and others started promoting whatever they had to sell as team-building tools. Teams became a fad and team building became watered down.

Giving It Meaning

Today, some people say "teambuilding" and mean building relationships. Some say "teambuilding" and mean appreciating differences in co-workers. Others say "teambuilding" and mean learning how to listen. All these are important for teams, but none of them alone produces high performing teams. Team building is sometimes confused with a general sense of teamwork that's needed in any organization.

We all need to treat each other kindly. We all need to care for one another and function as a biblical community. Relationship building and community building are very important, but they're different than team building. The purpose of team building is to build high-performance teams.

Teams are not built by retreats or creative activities, but by men and women committed to each other and to accomplishing a lofty goal. Here are three ways to avoid the team-building trap.

■ **Make Sure You Have a Real Team.** Sitting around a table in a staff meeting doesn't turn individuals into a team. Being listed on the same branch of an organizational chart doesn't make a group a team. Giving them matching shirts doesn't make them a team. A real team comes into being when a group of women and men commit to each other and to a purpose they can't attain working independently.

People who happen to work in the same department and have regular staff meetings are simply a working group. Only those who learn how to work together are a team.

Before you invest in team building, make sure you have a real team.

■ **Make Sure You Have a Lofty Goal.** This is counter-intuitive. You can build team relationships faster and better by focusing on a lofty goal than by focusing on the team itself and trying to build a sense of teamwork. Think back on the best teams you've been a part of and your experience might be similar.

The teams with a "Big, Hairy (or Holy), Audacious Goal (BHAG), the impossible challenge, are the ones that produce the best performance and deepest relationships. Essentially, if you have a task that's bigger than all of you, you have to learn to work together. When the team is clicking and accomplishing important work, you feel close.

Without a goal, the alternative is to try to build teams by focusing on team relationships. The efforts may be well received at first, but you risk having the team turn inward on itself, becoming consumed by group maintenance instead of team performance. They become less effective but feel pretty good about it.

Without a goal, you can't answer the most basic team-building questions: "Why are we here?" "Do we have to work together?" "What's my role?" A lofty goal provides a clear reason for the team to exist.

■ **Focus on the Performance Challenge.** You have a lofty goal and you've formed a team to accomplish it. Now you need to do some team building. Focus the team-building sessions on the performance challenge. Build the team by doing real work together. Map out your action plan. Talk about the strengths each person brings to the team. Clarify roles. Dialogue for shared

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The Five Levels of Team Performance

◆ **Working Group:** A group of people where there is no significant need that calls for a team approach. They meet together to share useful information and make decisions. Each person accomplishes his or her work alone. The sum of the whole equals the sum of the parts.

◆ **Pseudo-Team:** A group with a need that calls for a team approach but has no interest in improving collective effort. They may call themselves a team but spend their time in disruptive ways that actually detract from individual performance. The sum of the whole is less than the sum of the parts.

◆ **Potential Team:** A group that has a significant need for a team approach and is trying to work together better. They need more clarity on purpose, goals, and establishing a common approach. The sum of the whole equals the sum of the parts.

◆ **Real Team:** A group that is committed to a common purpose, goals, and approach and who hold each other accountable. They are able to accomplish more as a group than they ever could alone. The sum of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

◆ **High-Performance Team:** A real team where the people are also committed to one another's personal growth and success. High-performance teams significantly outperform all other teams. The sum of the whole is far greater than the sum of the parts.

These five levels and the "team performance curve" are described more fully in *The Wisdom of Teams* by Jon R. Katzenback and Douglas K. Smith.

vision. Pray. Bring in an outside facilitator if needed, but make sure the team-building activities are focused on the performance challenge.

As a leader, how do you care for the relational needs while focusing on the performance challenge? The best team leaders imbed this within their retreats and other meetings. With this approach, you aren't asking busy people to take time off work to attend a team-building session. Rather, you're asking the team to go to work and also have some team-building experiences along the way. For example, you can:

◻ Travel together offsite for a one-day meeting, even if it's only to a nearby church;

◻ Schedule a meeting to start with breakfast so you can enjoy a meal together;

◻ Add a short team-building exercise to regular meetings;

◻ Meet in a remote location so you won't be bothered by other duties and so deeper conversations can occur naturally;

◻ Take time for prayer at the beginning *and* at the end of meetings.

Nehemiah and Team Building

Nehemiah is a prime biblical example of someone who achieved stunning success through teams. The protective walls of Jerusalem were in shambles. The people were divided and treating each other poorly. Yet he rode in and helped the people rebuild the walls around the entire city in only 52 days! He also avoided the team-building trap. Here's how.

First, he made sure he had real teams. The officials, priests, and nobles ruled the city, but they were not a real team. They were simply a group of leaders. He quickly figured out that the natural teams in the city were the family units, priests and Levites, and people formerly from the same geographic region.

These leaders could pull together their people into teams quickly and effectively. He divided the work into more than 40 sections along the wall and brought together family leaders and officials to get it done. (Check out the long list of real teams in Nehemiah 3:1-32.)

Second, Nehemiah set forth a lofty goal—rebuild the entire wall. This was a difficult task. It was a genuine BHAG. The priests and Levites could never do this alone. The job was too big for any one person or any single family. No other leader had been able to pull it off. All the people needed to work together to make this happen. The task cried out for many high-performance teams.

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.—Nehemiah 2:17-18
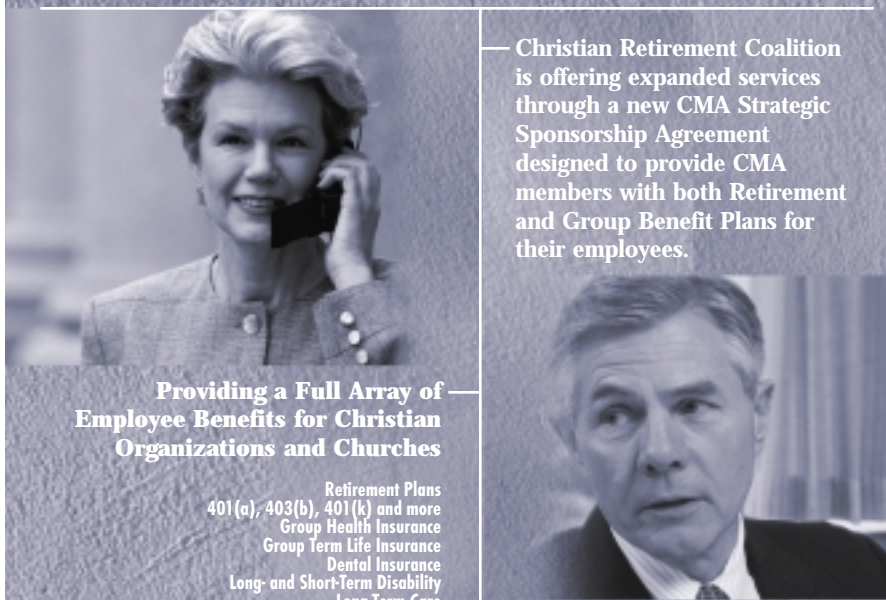
Third, Nehemiah kept the teams focused on the performance challenge. The people didn't need a retreat, or an offsite communications workshop. They needed to get the rocks out of the valley below and placed in the wall, and to finish the job before their enemies could organize. Crippling issues arose and Nehemiah dealt with each one capably. The people had to be reassured against violent threats from their enemies, so Nehemiah posted guards so the work would continue (4:16-18).

Relational problems erupted, so he took corrective measures (5:6-8). Enemies sent messages to set fear in their hearts (6:1-9). Working through these problems and brushing aside distractions, Nehemiah kept everyone focused on the performance challenge.

God used Nehemiah to accomplish a huge task through teams. As you follow his example, make sure you have a real team, identify a lofty goal, and focus on the performance challenge. This will help you avoid the team-building trap.

James C. Galvin, president of Galvin & Associates Inc., Winfield, Ill., is an organizational consultant focusing on faith-based nonprofits. He is CMA's lead consultant for designing and developing the Executive Leadership Program as well as serving as a faculty member. You may contact him at Jim@GalvinandAssociates.com.