COMMUNICATE TO WIN

Is poor communication hurting your team's productivity? 7 questions you must ask yourself.

By Marie Peeler

Leadership teams face an increased need for cross-functional collaboration and unprecedented demand for faster decision-making. To meet ever-accelerating requirements, teams have to be more efficient and more productive than ever.

Yet, it's not always easy to work on a team. Synergy can be elusive. Not all teams communicate effectively.

One of the hardest things about working on a team is the fact that, sometimes, other people simply don't think and act like we do. One might prefer to talk things out, while another goes off to think about it. She's panicking over getting it done today and he's content to put it off until next week. It can be maddening, and sometimes debilitating.

Making it worse, team members don't always talk constructively about their differences of opinion. They become uneasy and clam up, refusing to talk about what really matters. They sometimes avoid conflict, make ungrounded assumptions, and shut each other down.

Yet small businesses can't afford teams that behave badly or simply fail to live up to their potential. Too much is at stake. The whole purpose of a team is to utilize diverse talents, experience, and world views to make better plans, arrive at sounder conclusions, and solve thornier problems than one might be able to do on one's own. Diversity of thought and experience is important to teams, but how well a team communicates has a tremendous impact on productivity.

As a leader, if you are not seeing the quality of outcomes you need from your team, it is time to assess whether communication issues are stifling your team's productivity. Consider these questions:

1. Are team members comfortable talking about something that may trigger conflict? Many teams are conflict averse. As a result they tend to avoid discussing anything that may highlight differences of opinion. While this may appear on the surface to preserve harmony, it simply pushes conflict to a deeper level where it cannot be resolved.

2. Is there absolutely nothing that your team can't discuss? "Undiscussables" become the white elephants in the room – those topics that everyone knows but no one has the guts to broach. As a result, the issues wrapped up in these "undiscussables" fester and, poison a small business.

3. Do members of the group avoid getting defensive when challenged? While some people seem to be hardwired to cringe at a challenge, team members can learn to view challenge as a path to growth. They can grow and their ideas can be improved upon when other team members care enough to challenge their ideas.

4. Are team members good at checking the intentions and meanings behind what others say? Team members often assume – and even insist – that they know what others intend. Such assumptions lead to misunderstandings.

5. Do team members genuinely listen to one another's opinion? There is a difference between listening for the other person to finish so we can advocate for our own position and listening to the other person in such a way that allows us to gain new information and insight. The latter leads to genuine understanding.

6. Do team members avoid using their power and status to dominate conversations? There are always powerful team members – often it's the leader but there are occasionally others as well – that can stop all conversation simply by stating their own opinion in such a way that sends a clear "This is the final word" message. While this may seem useful for moving the question, in reality, it shuts down all conversation and ensures that, at least on the surface, team members accept the speaker's message, even if they do not agree, won't support, or see obvious flaws with that message.

7. Are team members aware of their impact on others in conversations? Sometimes team members are blissfully unaware of their ability to subvert a conversation, shut down team members, or bring out others' bad behavior. The know-it-all that causes others to mentally, if not physically, roll their eyes. The power-king that doesn't notice that no one dares to challenge him. The old-schooler that makes others want to fight for their positions, just by being so intractable in hers. All of these folks impair the quality of conversations and contribute to team derailment.

Can you answer yes to each of these questions about your team? If not, then the quality of your conversations may be lacking. It may be harming your team's performance and stopping you from being as productive as you could be. ●

Marie Peeler is the principal of Peeler Associates, a Pembroke, Mass.-based organization that helps leaders enhance their leadership effectiveness, focus on what's most important, and achieve their goals. Believing that growth is vital in maintaining and increasing leadership effectiveness – growth of individual leaders, growth of leadership teams, and growth of organizations – Marie helps leaders grow through executive coaching, team building, organizational development, leadership training, business retreats, and keynote speaking. For more information, please visit www.peelerassociates.com.

ZONING AND YOUR NEW HOMEBASED BUSINESS

Start a business in your home? Your home is the logical place to set up a new business but make sure you investigate the local ordinances.

Find out if your community is zoned for homebased businesses. Most municipalities today permit homebased businesses. Many communities restrict or prohibit:

- Storing hazardous materials
- Creating nuisances (noise, odors, waste) and other annoyances
- Doing business outside
- Modifying a home's structure or adding signage and posters
- Creating traffic
- Taking up excessive street parking with delivery, customer and employee vehicles, or commercial vehicles
- Stay in your neighbors' good graces by keeping your business as unobtrusive as possible. It'll pay off!