Harnessing Team Synergy

An excerpt from *The Navigator's Handbook,* *101 Leadership Lessons for Work & Life*

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I had struggled to define it for a very long time. What I was clear on was that many leaders believed that doing a once a year team building event was all that was needed to keep their team fully engaged. They would do a half day or full day event and magically, all of the barriers to collaboration were supposed to be removed. They had *harnessed* the collective talent and synergy of their team in only a matter of hours. Not exactly.

So often, these activities are stand-alone events with little or no connection to a larger process for improving employee engagement and collaboration. In true *check it off the list* fashion, some leaders assume that by doing a mix of learning and social activity once per year, teams work more effectively. They don't in most cases. Perhaps for a few days or weeks, but rarely for an extended period of time. Add to this the usual lack of follow-up and accountability related to the team building event and unfortunately they perpetuate what I have come to call, the *synergy myth*.

Very simply, the *synergy myth* is the false sense of accomplishment or progress that leaders often get following many team building events or activities.

Harnessing the collective talent of your team is not just a great leadership opportunity it is also a great driver of your success. Your ability to get them to do their best in concert, toward a common goal is one of the most important responsibilities you will ever have as a leader. It can make the difference between average performance and superior performance. Achieving the latter obviously takes more than the occasional team building event. As a beginning point, it takes a deep awareness about your team and an even deeper commitment on your part to role model positive behaviors every step of the way.

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Hold the Pepperoni Please!

"That <u>was</u> your team building event" Jim said as a dozen of his employees listened in disbelief. For nearly six months Jim's direct reports had told him about the lack of synergy among team members at their New Jersey location. There had been many changes in their department and like most organizations, everyone was called upon to do more with less. The whole team was feeling burnt out and now more than a few people were beginning to speak up. Something had to be done to address the poor morale and lack of synergy among the team.

Despite a growing frustration among his team, Jim refused to believe that there were conflict and collaboration issues with his team. Finally, after repeated requests from his most senior team members, Jim decided that he would address the team building issue. During one of his routine monthly visits to the New Jersey office, he announced that he was taking everyone out for pizza and beer after work. He went on to say that he had heard that folks were not working well together and that this type of social activity would be "just the thing they needed" to get along better. While this type of activity is not a bad thing, no reasonable person can expect that it solves a conflict and collaboration issue that had festered for six months or longer. To make matters worse, Jim made his pizza and beer announcement just 90 minutes before the end of the work day. Even if people had wanted to attend, it would be difficult, given the very short notice. The net result, only 4 of the 27 members on Jim's New Jersey team showed up for pizza and beer. The rest were left frustrated by Jim's lack of leadership. In not digging deeper and being more mindful of the issues, Jim's pizza and beer team building event did more harm than good.

Knowing that Jim's failed team building attempt had created even worse working conditions, one of Jim's team leaders made a point of talking about it on the weekly, managers conference call. "That was a real missed opportunity" she said to Jim referring to the impromptu pizza and beer team building event. When are we going to do a *real* team building event she asked? "That <u>was</u> your team building event and nobody chose to come so you obviously don't have any issues," Jim replied. What a missed opportunity indeed.

Unfortunately the story doesn't end here. After repeated requests for some type of team intervention, Jim finally agreed to get the whole team together for a team building event. His solution was a paint ball adventure where team members formed small groups who then hunted the other team members. I have heard of some ridiculous team building ideas over my career but this one takes 1st prize. How shooting each other with a paint ball builds collaboration and trust is totally beyond me. Jim would have gotten far more out of the event if he simply let everyone shoot him with paint balls. At least then they would have been doing something in concert, toward a common goal.

Building the Foundation

Like many teams today, your team is likely multi-tasking at a very high level. The white-water pace of your work environment rarely affords the opportunity to take extended periods of time away from the business at hand. Even a half-day away from the office can add more hours to your team's individual and group workload. The truth is that because of your hectic work pace, <u>you can't afford not to take time out</u> for team development. The further away your folks get from a common ground or shared sense of community, the greater the potential for breakdowns in communication, collaboration and teamwork.

Harnessing the collective talent of your team requires that you build from a solid foundation. In this case, a very important building block of the foundation is linked to the team's shared values. One of the best ways to guide your team through the values exploration process is to engage them in a discussion about your own values. If your team doesn't know what your values are they are less likely to be open about their own values.

As you might imagine, only your team can define their shared values. The best you can do as the leader is help guide them through the exploration process. That's not to say that your values shouldn't be part of the shared values, they should. To make it more meaningful the emphasis needs to be on the collective group and not any single member of the team.

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Building Linkage

Helping your team stay connected to any team development activity outcome does not have to be complex or time consuming. One of the best ways to create linkage is to include focused discussions related to the activity in periodic staff meetings. Even one, 20-minute discussion per month will allow your team to stay connected while building momentum toward the accomplishment of their shared goals.

Soliciting input directly from your team is another way to create linkage. So often, we allow our own leadership distractions to get in the way of finding bigger and better solutions for more than just the team synergy issue. You can bet that not only does your team have some good solutions for creating linkage, they also would like to share them with you.

Just like helping your team to stay connected doesn't have to be complex or time consuming, the whole process for team development doesn't have to be either. Beyond acknowledging the need to do related activities more often than once a year, it helps to engage the resources of your Human Resources or Talent Management team. If by chance you don't have that function at your organization, don't despair. There are many external resources that can support your efforts with team development. In addition to local universities and professional associations that might offer assistance, there are numerous books on the subject. One of my favorites is *Quick Team Building Activities for Busy Managers* by Brian Miller (AMA Publishing). In it, Brian offers over 50 team development activities that help leaders improve team collaboration, communication, problem solving and creativity.

Regardless of which resource you tap, it helps to have a high degree of clarity around where you need the help in your team development efforts. The following is a team development survey that I use in my consulting work which is designed to help build clarity for me and my clients.

Team Development Needs Assessment

1. What is the level of trust among the team?
2. How does the team handle conflict?
3. What is the level of participation among the team?
4. How does the team deal with change and ambiguity?
5. What motivates the team?
6. What leadership gaps can you identify relative to this group?
7. How do these gaps impact the business unit?
8. What is the team's perception of this?
9. What is the CEO's perception of this?
10. What behaviors would you like to change?
11. What theme or principles need to be incorporated into the event?
12. What are your desired outcomes?
13. How can we measure these outcomes?
14. How much planning time do we need?
15. What resources are available to help with the event?

Completing the Team Development Needs Assessment is a good first step in planning for a meaningful team development activity or event. It also helps to be mindful of the time allotment for each segment of the overall event. I remember getting a call from a colleague of mine not long ago who was deeply frustrated by her client's desire to do a strategic planning and team building event in a half-day format. They expected to get a team of 20 senior leaders together who had a history of not working well together and were convinced that a half day event would accomplish their objectives. It is hard enough to do a strategic planning activity in a single day let alone a few hours. The whole point here is that quality always beats quantity, at least with team development and probably leadership too. Trying to harness the collective talent and synergy of your team only once a year or in a few short hours is a sure way to keep the *synergy myth* alive.
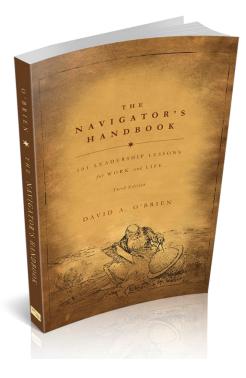
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About David A. O'Brien

David is President of WorkChoice Solutions, a trusted provider of leadership and team effectiveness training, coaching and consulting services founded in 2000. He works with a wide range of corporate, nonprofit and public sector clients to help bring about sustainable improvements in organizational effectiveness. His first book, *The Navigator's Handbook, 101 Leadership Lessons for Work & Life* is available on-line and in bookstores nationwide. His second book, *The Navigator's Compass 101 Steps Toward Leadership Excellence* is also available wherever books are sold. To learn more about the scope of David's work in helping leaders and teams to be more effective or to arrange for David to speak at your next conference or other special event, please visit WorkChoice Solutions on line at:
 www. workchoicesolutions. com or call him directly at 860. 242. 1070.

Read more of David A. O'Brien's formula for leadership excellence in his popular book, *The Navigator's Handbook, 101 Leadership Lessons for Work & Life.*

[Order the book here](#).