

What Game is Your Team Playing?

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Team-building facilitators at Lockheed Martin have had significant success with new processes to improve the performance of teams in a variety of group settings. Facilitators in the company's energy and environmental sector are using a process known as reflective practice to create opportunities for work groups to identify and improve behaviors that contribute to the teams' excellence and to identify and address behaviors that are inhibiting performance.

Reflective practice was pioneered among adult educators to create new learning about life situations. As a learning tool, people use reflective practice to critique the presuppositions on which their beliefs about a situation have been built. Educators employ a variety of tools to stimulate reflective thinking, such as group discussion, structures interviewing techniques, role playing, and workshops. Team-building sessions that employ reflective practice methods have been used by Lockheed Martin to improve team performance of such groups as the production factory management team, senior management groups, human resources staff, quality management teams and corporate public relations managers.

A reflective practice team-building session starts with exercises and ideas that help people to use out-of-box thinking to find new revelations about how the team functions on a daily basis. To do this, Lockheed Martin uses a sports metaphor in its sessions to encourage participants to look at their current behaviors from a different perspective.

A look at sports

The world of professional sports is very different from everyday work world of most employees. Professional athletes are paid very high salaries for performing publicly. Coaches prepare these athletes to perform using a disciplined set of specialized skills, but this type of guidance rarely exists in the workplace.

Lockheed Martin has found good reasons to use a sports metaphor to open up discussion within its organization. First, most organizations can relate their work to a particular sporting event. Second, many people are sports enthusiasts and will relate to a sports metaphor once they understand

how it connects to their work. Third, the use of a sports metaphor encourages creative thinking as employees use the metaphor to redefine their working relationships. Fourth, it is a nonthreatening, fun way to look at the organization. By using this kind of open dialogue, some tough truths are allowed to surface in a healthy manner.

There are also obvious similarities between work and sports. Both activities involve rules or boundaries that must be observed. Team sports, like work, require an understanding of who will do what and when. Team sports and the workplace both have a roster of players who exercise certain skills and others, such as owners, referees, the media, and spectators, who also have a stake in the performance outcome. The sports team's performance is recorded and analyzed for improvement opportunities, just as the performance of work teams can be recorded and analyzed for continuous improvement.

Planning a reflective practice session

Most organized activities that are designed to improve the functioning of a group fall under the category of team building. Unfortunately, when people talk about having a team-building session, odd images are often conjured up; many think that it is time for the group to stoke up the fires, walk on the hot coals, and perform the tribal dance. But many forms of team building that effectively engender trust and understanding within a work group exist. At Lockheed Martin, the design of its reflective practice session is relatively calm but highly effective.

To develop a reflective practice session using a sports metaphor, event planners first need to determine what sports metaphor fits the organization. For example, most factories, or manufacturers can identify with the football metaphor: the production group on its offensive lines and human resources, environmental, and health and safety groups on their defensive lines. Staff organizations, on the other hand, tend to relate with the basketball metaphor: In staff groups, the ball is often moved around to set up a successful play. And in large corporate structures, people in similar positions can identify with the metaphor of playing golf, because the course is the same for everyone, but the individuals understand that it is their individual skill that will show progress.

After the facilitators work with management to select the right sports metaphor and determine who should attend the team-building session, questions that need to be addressed by the team-building leaders include:

- >Why is there a need for this reflective practice session?
- >Who are the key players on the team?
- >Can this session be scheduled on a date and time that is acceptable with all of the key participants? (This is a must. If one person is missing, the session will not be effective.)
- >Where should team-building sessions be held? Do the sessions need to be held in an environment away from the office, or would that pose a problem? (Getting away from the office is recommended.)

Next, team-building facilitators need to prepare a thorough list of discussion questions that are designed to stimulate the group's imagination. The discussion questions must not be given to participants prior to the session, and team-building leaders should discuss only one question at a time.

Also, facilitators should make a special effort to foster a sense of teamwork. A small token, such as a golf tee, a wiffle ball, or a sponge football, that represents the theme of the meeting and is presented by the team-building leader, will serve as a reminder of the team-building event for participants.

The kickoff

The football metaphor works well to stimulate reflective thinking in factories and production-related organizations since they function similar to a football team. For example, they have an offensive line---production, maintenance, planning and scheduling, and marketing groups—and a defensive line---human resources, health and safety, and environmental protection groups.

To conduct a team-building session around the football metaphor, the facilitator should ask key managers to define the similarities between their organization and a football team. The facilitator needs to have a series of questions that will get the process rolling, such as:

- >How is the organization similar to a football team?
- >What position does each employee play on the football team? Who plays offense and who play defense? Are there any special teams? Who is the quarterback? Does everyone know what position he or

she is supposed to play? The facilitator will then use other questions that will encourage participants to discuss the real issues of the organization within the football metaphor:

- >If our organization was a football team, what would be our version of clipping? Of intentional grounding? Of unsportsmanlike conduct? Of holding? Of face masking?
- >When we watch our game film, what are the three examples of excellent plays we have run that achieved major yardage or a touchdown?
- >What are three examples of plays where we have thrown for a loss, fumbled the ball, or suffered interceptions? Why did they occur and what will we do to keep them from happening in the future?

The football metaphor encourages people to talk about issues that might not be easily discussed by approaching them from the perspective that to win, the way in which plays are being run must be examined. The review of the game film encourages team members to express positive observations about the group that would often have been unstated. This process also provides an important opportunity for critical evaluation of the group's performance and encourages participants to confront their problems in a caring manner, in which everyone is committed to making the team a success.

The tipoff

The basketball metaphor has worked well to stimulate reflective thinking in staff organization. Staff groups function like a basketball team because staff members have to coordinate with each other to be successful. Staff groups often work at a constant running pace that resembles basketball, and they often must know how to perform each other's duties to function smoothly.

Again, the facilitator asks the participants to identify similarities between their jobs and the game of basketball and allows them to elaborate on the similarities as much as possible. Then, the same types of questions that were asked in the football example are asked. The questions allow the group to discuss the types of fouls that harm teamwork and to review the best and worst plays that the team has recently made.

Lockheed Martin has had excellent results using the basketball metaphor with groups in the human resources field. Team members discussed how they move the ball around to score, the fast pace of the game, and fouls. Staff participants identified examples of where they played as well as a team and developed a list of attributes of high-performance teamwork. They also critiqued situations when their teamwork was insufficient and developed ideas that will keep their team focused on effective teamwork.

The tee off

The golf metaphor stimulates reflective thinking in the company's branch organizations, such as public relations. Branch organizations are compared to golf because they have the same course of action (or work) as the organization and use individualized skills to accomplish their missions.

To conduct a team-building session around the golf metaphor, the facilitator should prepare a series of questions that will encourage discussion:

>What is the course in our organization? Are there similarities or differences between the courses of various organizations within the corporation?

>What obstacles have kept us from completing the course? What is our version of a sand trap, the rough, or a water obstacle?

>What do we need in our individual golf bags? Examples of this could be cellular phones, pagers, and facsimile machines.

>What events correspond to pairs, birdies, and aces? How can the team members better publicize these successes when they occur?

>What can team members do to turn a bogie into a score of par or better?

>How can we become more of a team, rather than individual players within the corporate structure?

This reflective practice using the golf metaphor encourages open discussion so participants team with other corporate professionals.

Reflective practice brings out potential solutions to problems and can enhance communications and the corporate image.

The starting gun

Quality professionals at Lockheed Martin often find themselves working together in the same organization but in specialized functions such as auditing, corrective actions, or quality management. Teamwork and communication between these functional areas might be low, and, as a result, stress builds up regarding how these functions work or do not work together.

Lockheed Martin has had success improving teamwork among quality professionals by employing a reflective practice session built around a track-and-field metaphor. In track and field, each individual competes (or works) as an individual, often in specialized capacity. The overall success of the team, however, depends on the sum score of all individuals. If the team is weak in one area, the overall perception of the team by its customers is diminished.

The track-and-field metaphor has given quality professionals a new and interesting way to look at how they work together and how they address issues that pertain to their work, such as being in proper condition, achieving a personal best, and having confidence that someone else on your team is not about to put a javelin in your back.

Coaches' corner

Based on your experiences at Lockheed Martin, here are a few coaching points:

>Not everyone in the reflective practice exercise will understand the details of the sport you are using as a metaphor.

Make sure a diagram that outlines the key positions of the sport and rules of the game is provided for everyone.

>A few people will be enthusiastic about the sports metaphor right away. Let them take the ball and run with it, and bring the rest of the group along by asking specific people to add their thoughts.

>Humor goes a long way. For example, if you are using the football metaphor, use a bloopers tape that shows some amusing plays. Movie rental stores usually have a wide range of comical sports videos.

>Supplement the amusing plays session with some serious videos that support the sports metaphor. For example, use Lou Holtz' video "Do Right" to reinforce the football metaphor.

>The object of a team-building session is for the participants to answer the questions, not the team-building leaders. Collect all thoughts on an easel pad and display them throughout the room.

>It is extremely important to stay focused and be patient. The team will not succeed when the group is fragmented. Combine the team's thoughts into a workable solution for all, but remember to let the ideas flow.

Why use reflective practice methods?

Employees often become complacent about issues in their organizational cultures that are unhealthy or dysfunctional. They may have become lax about reporting problems or are reluctant to offer suggestions for improvement. There might be systematic problems with the manner in which people communicate or confusion over the roles that people are expected to play. Reflective practice creates a sudden, often unexpected, opportunity for people to express their feelings about issues that usually go unaddressed. Instead of denying that problems exist, concerns are safely brought to the surface and can be addressed within the established framework of the sports metaphor. Reviewing the game footage requires everyone to acknowledge both the strengths and the weaknesses of the team and offers an opportunity for people to pull together.

There are several goals that can be achieved by conducting a reflective practice session:

>Participants will identify the examples of where they have worked well as a team. The attributes of effective teamwork will be defined by the team members based on their own behaviors and experiences.

>Situations where team effort has been less perfect will be reviewed in a supportive setting. By comparing good team experiences with the problems that the team has encountered, people can identify the changes in communication, expectations, and support that are necessary to operate as a successful team of the time.

>The sports metaphor will clarify role expectations and clear up any confusion that may have existed concerning who is to do what. The interrelationships of team members will be improved by discussing who plays what role on the team.

>Reflective practice helps drive fear out of the organization. Fear is reduced when people can talk about their concerns in a caring setting that reinforces the need to work together for common success.

Reflective practice encourages dialogue that builds teamwork

Effective team building often comes from opening up the channels of communication and encouraging people to share their experiences, wins, joys and frustrations. Most people have difficulty opening up and sharing their thoughts, particularly when it means discussing things that hurt, such as performance problems, unmet expectations, and dissatisfied customers.

Reflective practice offers a new approach that encourages the kind of dialogue that builds teamwork. There are many approaches to reflective practice that can help groups work on task and maintenance issues. The use of a sports metaphor is one method that jolts people out of their daily thinking about work and offers a new model to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of the team's performance and increase its ratio of wins to losses. Teams perform better when all the members agree on what game the team is playing.

References

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