Build Team Unity with these Simple Exercises

Championship Performance interviewed Advisory Board member Toni Zimmerman, an expert on family therapy, on ideas how to build team unity.

Team building is a continual process and is different each year. What are some good ways to get team building started in a positive direction?

At the beginning of your calendar year, have team members write down a list of every thing that has helped build team unity in their past experience. Then have employees list issues or things that have really gotten in the way of team unity.

On a chalkboard, have a manager draw a line down the middle and list the positives on one side and the negatives on the other.

Involve the team by asking them about their past experiences when team unity has been a problem or you felt frustrated by it and times you felt like things were going really great.

Let the employees define what team unity is for themselves. Create an operational definition of things that work and don't work.

An example of a negative might be that team unity was destroyed when there was gossip, separate coalitions or cliques on a team. It might have been a team where a few members are kept on the outside of the circle.

After the list is completed, start at the top and address the issues raised. Take gossip, for example. The leader should ask the team members "how can we stop this from happening?" or "how can we keep certain cliques out of this team?"

One idea might be to establish a team policy about worker interaction. If a conflict occurs between two people, they should try to resolve it first between themselves. There may be a need to go to the coach. The coach can then decide if the situation is important enough to talk about openly to the entire team. Otherwise drop it and move on.

On the positive side, there could be a team policy to always encourage and point out the best in somebody instead of picking on their faults.

When team members have input in making up their own rules and team philosophy, based on what they have experienced, they are far

more likely to carry through with them. When you involve the team in trying to build team unity, you make it a very overt process. Trying to follow a certain five step team building plan usually won't work because each group of individuals involved in the process is different. But if certain procedures have worked in the past, certainly stick with them.

When should the team review how things are going? Have another major meeting in two months to see what has been working or not. Point out what has gone right. For example someone might say, "Man, I really thought it worked great when we took time to review the high points of the presentation, even after we lost the bid. We pointed out who did well in a losing effort. That built up team unity.

Re-visit that original chart frequently. Ask: "How are we doing in our weak areas? Are we keeping them under control? Where do we need to improve?"

Can you describe one or two exercises that all teams can use to build up team unity?

Gather in a room in a circle and have each person on the team to tell one unique thing about themselves that no one else would know. Do this exercise twice a month so you get to know sides of a person that you wouldn't otherwise.

This brings out the personal side of people - they aren't just worker X or Y, but there are other aspects of their personality they feel comfortable in sharing. These are great icebreakers at the beginning of the year to do at meetings throughout the year.

Here is a variation on the same exercise. Find out all you can about the person sitting next to you and then you introduce that person to the team. This exercise is best done with new hires during one of their first meetings. It can be a really fun way to get to know one another.

What are some ways to handle "problem" employees that don't seem to fit in?

I compare the situation to family therapy. In families, there is a tendency to give everyone an assigned role - the hero, the mischievous one, the smart one, or the whiny one. It's important to keep away from putting people in really defined boxes. You don't want to reduce people to a cliché. Instead get to know the person as far more than a one-dimensional characterization.

If someone is on the outside of the "circle" and doesn't seem to blend in, get the team to brainstorm. If they aren't part of our family, how can we bring them in?   One idea is to give them another job or role. Ideas include asking them to mentor new employees, or getting them to assist the manager for an upcoming project. Come up with creative ways to help them blend in. These are involvement devices that help that employee feel he or she is part of the team. The mistake that we make with people who don't fit in is to push them farther and farther outside the circle so they don't bother us anymore. This only causes further alienation.