

Teamwork and Cooperation

Most of them lived on my street and many within five doors of my house. They were the kids I always played with when I was in kindergarten: Gary Oien, Harold Comstock, Brian Williams, and Duane Takota.

We had our own established unwritten neighborhood rules, relationships, and considerations. Not everyone liked to do everything I liked. Harold could care less about baseball, so when we felt like playing “over the line” he had other things to do. You didn’t ask Harold to play baseball more than once. Nor did you “rag” at him because he didn’t like baseball.

Gary liked to draw and watch television when we were inside, but didn’t care for “make believe” or board games. Brian had a clubhouse in his backyard and when we tired of playing outdoors, that was a ready place to play. We knew each other’s interests. We knew each other’s skills and abilities, like what position everyone preferred when choosing sides for baseball.

We didn’t pressure anyone to play and we naturally formed teams when the time came to play certain games. These were guys you could trust to play with you the way you wanted to play.

When we started kindergarten, we didn’t play my favorite games while at school. We played other games that were either conducive to small places (such as the playground in the kindergarten area) or large spaces (like the big kids playground, where we would play kickball and where ball getting by the outfielder meant it would go for “miles”). We played games that involved the girls more frequently at school.

I made new friends who had different interests and played games I had never seen before. For some of the games that we did play, they introduced a never-ending

variety of new rules. I wasn't sure how some of these rules were fair, but we learned to compromise, adapt and create new teams.

I am still compromising, adapting and creating new teams. The rules are still changing around me.

B2B creates new models of customer and supply interaction. As we straighten out the supply and information chains at our companies, relationships have to adjust. No longer do we live in a world where I am insulated and just do “my portion” of the process. New collaborative models have shaken the foundations of business and have challenged what “my portion” really is. With frequency customers show up on our doorsteps to see why we are doing some things in certain ways. Their creativity is boundless and they challenge our thinking. Sometimes they just want to pass cost or responsibility to someone else. Other times, they want to look at the overall process flow to see if there is a better way of doing work.

In either event, going back in a collaborate fashion to look at the business model is healthy and helpful. This requires teamwork and honesty. That honesty extends inwardly into our companies as well as out to our trading partners. Sometimes you will recognize that “nobody” is able to solve the problem that befuddles you. Other times you will find that what you thought was the problem isn't the root cause. Sometimes you will walk away without making a change or coming to agreement on what should be changed. But there are those “golden moments” when you can make a fundamental breakthrough.

The accomplishment feels different when you have done it honestly, openly, and in a collaborative fashion. Your pride in what you have done extends beyond your own walls. Now your partner is happy with the situation and this can lead to future efforts and new directions.

Playing with new partners. Learning to “play” with new partners parallels the first weeks of kindergarten. With B2B we continually have new vendors and new “customers.” Sometimes the external customers are the same, but we deal with new names and faces at those customer locations who have responsibility in the B2B domain. This can strengthen the overall relationship in a very complementary manner. For example, where we have traditionally worked with order management and over the

years have built relationships and trust, we can sometimes use those relationships to break through problems in B2B. Sometimes it works in a reverse fashion as well.

Many times when we are having trouble getting to a key contact in a retailer's purchasing or supply chain operations, for example, we can go through their EDI team. Those groups command attention in most retailers, as they play a pivotal role in the smooth running of their operations.

The point is this: crossing through boundaries has a multiplication effect. The relationship can be more than doubled in strength.

B2B can also bring forward brand new trading partners and relationships. In businesses that previously resisted EDI as too costly or complex, for example, they may be more willing to look into XML. They don't see (and don't need to see) that there is not a great deal of difference in cost or complexity between the two, contrary to the trade literature. The issue, however, is making a relationship breakthrough, not a technology choice.

Teamwork and cooperation is king. It requires a steady management hand to steer the B2B ship. With the frantic pace of development required and the need to keep a clear eye out for competitive changes, resources need to continually be shifting. This requires cooperation among the team members so that they don't too narrowly focus their skills in one area. But it also requires a commitment to train and nurture people in areas that may be foreign and threatening to them.

All members of the team need to be valued for their individual contributions. But the team needs to recognize (and be recognized for) their ability to fill the voids that will inevitably be recognized later in the project. The phase "not my job" should be outlawed on B2B projects. It needs to be "our job" to fill the gaps.

How do we get there? What gets measured gets done-- that includes soft skills, such as teamwork and cooperation. Establish and continually assess the ability of the team to work together. Encourage members to play together outside work in social activities as well business settings. The establishment of trust among team members is essential. Don't be overly critical during the early stages of team building when we often have to "storm" to create a team. Allow a healthy amount of conflict, as long as the

intention is to bring the team together. When the conflict becomes “personal” or divisive, nip the problem in the bud.

Sometimes you will need to take unorthodox steps to bring team members together. I had two members of a team who were continually complaining about each other. What I recognized is that they had complementary skills and that they were really not sufficiently aware of what the other did. This was a team of around twenty-five people and, over the years, the two people had moved further apart physically, to the point that they eventually were on opposite ends of the office.

What was the fix to the problem? I made them cube mates! People thought I was crazy. I heard more that one remark about “being an accomplice to murder.”

When they started to show up on my doorstep to complain about one another, I turned them around and told them to try to make it work and that I was counting on them as a team to work it out. Soon (actually, remarkably soon) I had one come to me to comment how valuable the other person was and what a great job they did. I about fell out of my chair! I retained sufficient composure to complement them on their team effort. Soon they were lunching together and they were able to handle their pet peeves in a lighthearted way.

B2B brings about change-- sometimes at a furious rate. Teams need to form and dissolve quickly. Cooperation needs to be a badge of honor. We need to respect and honor those who can collect us together and give us cohesion toward a single goal. Don't confuse this with management-- teamwork takes leadership.

"The important thing to recognize is that it takes a team, and the team ought to get credit for the wins and the losses. Successes have many fathers, failures have none."

-Philip Caldwell



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