Everyone Wins with Successful Teams!

The following is a conversation with John Wilfore, who recently retired from a long and distinguished career with GE. Most recently he was responsible for the GE Business Information Center (GEBIC), a front-door call center for customers and prospects seeking information about GE.

GEBIC personnel would link the callers to a person who could help: to a person in a GE business or GE field sales office, or to a local GE distributor. GEBIC services were unique because of the commitment to empowered and self-directed work teams.

These teams significantly increased cost-based productivity by 106% and increased customer satisfaction from 93% to 99.4%. John knows from experience that everyone wins with successful teams, and in this article shares his knowledge and "how to" experiences in order to encourage others to make that team commitment.

What happened to the concept of teams that was so popular a few years ago?

Today many businesses still have work teams, but corporate America should be investing much more money in developing teams. Why? The rewards far outweigh the investment costs.

In the past there were successes such as the GEBIC experience, but everyone learned very quickly that building teams is not easy; it is expensive and very time consuming. Management needs to know the payoff for the investment in team building. Based on ten years of experience in team building,

I firmly believe that the team concept benefits everyone involved — the customer, the business, the operations management, and the individual team members — and is well worth the investment.

What return should management expect from investing in teams?

If customer care and customer service are viewed as an investment, companies can obtain an excellent return on their investment in building teams. For instance:

(1) Companies with top-of-the- line "best in class" customer care can utilize people and teams to differentiate themselves from their competitors

(2) Companies can build stronger customer relationships and loyalty by simply caring for their customers in a more personal manner and

(3) Companies can retain customers, build repeat sales and dramatically increase customer satisfaction. These should be the objectives and the deliverables of any team building or customer care program.

What do you mean by teams?

By definition, one of the most important roles for management is to get work done by, with and through people. Many times we don't discuss that level of definition or explanation; we simple say we work with teams. Here are my three versions of teams.

1. The Directed Team: The directed team is driven by management, like a team of horses pulling a wagon. This type of team does not provide opportunities for individuals to contribute or learn, and not much is expected from the individuals. Team members are told to keep pulling, and if work doesn't get done, a whip is cracked.

2. The Managed Team. The managed team is like a baseball team where we have many team members who have different roles to play and need different skill sets. Members have different roles or positions to play from the pitcher, the home run slugger, to the outfielders. There are different skill levels required within the team, and there are certainly superstars. These superstars are individuals who many times have their own agenda and their measures of success are not necessarily the team's measures. Management directs the daily work, makes all the major decisions, and worries most about making the numbers.

3. The Self-Directed Team. The self-directed team is ideal in the business environment. The self-directed team understands its customers and business, focuses on achieving business results by learning from each other, has tools to monitor how it is doing, improves quality, and improves personal and team productivity. The team does the work and it takes on more and more responsibility. The team builds a culture where everyone is committed to continuous improvement. Everyone — management and the team — are now concerned about making the numbers. This unique team is truly appreciated and rewarded for its efforts.

What makes these business teams so efficient and effective?

Efficient and effective teams always have a clear and understood shared vision or mission that everyone on the team can articulate and commit to. These teams have informed leaders and managers who are committed to the team process. The leaders must provide resources to build skills and trust within the team. The team must be committed to the business and its customers and be focused on continuous improvement. There must be measurement tools in place that drive desired behaviors and performance. There must also be a rewards and recognition program that addresses "what's in it for me?" And lastly, these teams understand that their jobs won't be easy, and it will take time to reap the rewards.

What are some of the important team skills for customer service and customer care?

Team members need to:

- Build customer and team relationships through strong communications.

- Address group dynamics and build interpersonal skills.

- Know how to facilitate, promote active participation, and reach consensus within the group.

- Learn how to influence and support others.

- Look for opportunities to give and receive feedback that promotes business, personal and team improvements.

What are some of the important skills for management and supervision in a team environment?

Managers need to be able to coach team members, provide guidance, and help colleagues learn and grow. Managers should also model and reinforce effective performance. And they should take every opportunity to build collaborative relationships, encourage desired behavior and motivate for success.

What are the roles for leaders and team members?

Many times the leaders are thought of as strategists, idea generators, catalysts, facilitators, risk takers, diplomats, teachers, cheerleaders, peacemakers, and listeners. These are also many times the same roles of team members.

The roles for leaders and team members are also constantly changing as teams go through the evolutionary process and various team stages. In the beginning, the leaders are expected to provide direction and the team members are very dependent and fearful of the unknown.

As individuals get to know each other and learn more about the process and expectations, trust begins to grow and self-confidence builds, with more risk taking. Leaders begin to do more coaching, sharing and delegating responsibilities, and ownership begins to shift.

Eventually the team becomes confident and efficient. The leader lets go of more and more responsibility, continues as a role model to support and encourage the team, and provides the necessary resources and coaching as the team performs at higher and higher levels.

What are the biggest barriers to successful teams?

The literature states that one of the barriers to successful teams is lack of training. I would agree; however, that lack of training might simply be due to a lack of time or lack of funding which are also big barriers.

Another barrier is that the teams will initially exhibit lower productivity, but will eventually reach a high level of performance.

Business leaders sometimes want a return for their investment too quickly, and building teams is very time consuming. I would add that middle management can also be a big barrier to success, because either they don't understand the process for a variety of reasons, or they see that efficient teams can be a threat to their own job security.

Overcoming these barriers is challenging, but it is also well worth the effort.

What's required for building successful teams?

Without a doubt, a shared vision is most important — a vision that is easily understood and one to which people can easily commit.

Next you need to have management understanding and support to the entire process by providing the encouragement and needed resources over time.

You have to be able to answer "what's in it for me?" for the business leader, for middle management and supervisors and for all team members.

What will a successful team look like?

People will be energized and excited about what they are doing.

Everyone will be contributing and making improvements in everything that they do. Productivity will be steadily increasing.

Quality and customer satisfaction will also be improving and will eventually become the key drivers and key measures of success.

How should I get started?

1. Get leadership buy-in and commitment. The business must help build that shared vision with the ones that have to deliver customer care and customer service. The vision provides the direction for the team. The team must know where they are going in order to start the trip and stay on course.
2. Make sure that leadership understands that it will take resources and time to build skills and the proper level of trust in the people and in the organization.
3. If you are asking people to do more, it is important and appropriate to develop a meaningful rewards and recognition program, based on performance. One reminder — individual rewards foster competition, and team rewards promote cooperation! The behavior that you recognize and reward is the behavior that you will get!
4. Management and teams must understand that success doesn't happen overnight. Sometimes it's very difficult to tell how it's going. I can attest to this. In the early stages of our team building, I asked myself the question "If this is going so well, why doesn't it feel better?"

What are some of the lessons you and the team have learned about self-directed teams?

- Focus on people.
- Create a team spirit.
- Build a caring, sharing and trusting environment.
- Provide focus and direction.
- Take your time.
- Get management's support.
- Cultivate growth.
- Take meaningful measurements.
- Reward what's important.
- Enjoy the journey.

You mentioned "what's in it for me". Can you elaborate?

For the business, self-directed teams will pay for themselves by growing sales, creating a competitive advantage, by increasing customer satisfaction, and improving productivity.

For management and supervision, the entire work force will be excited about coming to work, and people will be truly committed to meeting and exceeding customer needs. There will be less absenteeism and staff turnover, and you will be coaching and encouraging people who really want to learn and grow and contribute.

For team members, they will gain skills, grow and become better prepared for additional responsibilities and their next assignment. They will be aware of their role in the organization and will be excited about their contributions to the success of the business. They will know their value, they will be appreciated, and their work will reflect that enthusiasm.

Any final words?

Team building is a big commitment, but it also has some very big rewards. If you want to increase:

Productivity and customer satisfaction

Differentiate your company in the marketplace

Create a true competitive advantage that will grow sales

Build customer relationships, you have to invest in people. And what better way to invest in people than building successful work teams.

Best of luck and good fortunes in all of your team-building endeavours.

John Wilfore