



DNA, Pune – 21st March 2009

Good teamwork can work like music

A team can accomplish much more than the sum of its individual members; that is the magic of joint effort

By K Jayshankar



It is widely believed that sports teach teamwork and very early in life children are urged to participate in activities that are meant to teach them this value.

Yet, we find that after growing up, many of us need reminding of the tenet that a team can accomplish much more than the sum of its individual members. What are the components that go into creating the magic of teamwork?

Let's begin by understanding the difference between a 'group' and a 'team'. In a group, members think they are grouped for administrative purposes only, with individuals working independently, sometimes even at cross purposes with others. Given the inward focus, the tendency of members is to wait for directions, as they do not see themselves as a party to planning of objectives.

The lack of role clarity may well cause members to view others with suspicion as distrust of colleagues easily erupts. With extreme caution in group communication, 'games' with personal agenda are common. With conformity becoming the watchword, productivity is a natural casualty, as new ideas and assistance to colleagues is missing.

Teams are characterised differently. With the active participation of every member, it is evident that leadership responsibility is shared as the end objective of the team is collectively owned. So, with members truly enjoying companionship in the journey to a common destination, difference in opinions are not grounds of conflict, but are accepted well with the recognition that each person will contribute his unique knowledge and talent for accomplishing team objectives.

The most vital ingredient of success remains commonality of purpose. Defining a high performing organisation, celebrated management author Ken Blanchard, stresses that members can describe and are committed to a common purpose. The derivative, therefore, is that a team's goals are clear, challenging and relevant to the purpose. Building on this leads to development of strong, transparent strategies for achieving goals with clarity on each individual's role.

Besides a culture of collaboration, fostering teamwork also requires genuine appreciation of individual contributions. Celebrating a team's success is not just a ritual, but also a reinforcement of the essential ethos that provides members a special identity in the world.

Are there real life examples that illustrate these principles? The usual sporting teams come quickly to mind (the Brazilian football team, the Aussie cricket team in their heydays) but let's look at other fields. Two outstanding and unique illustrations are a symphony orchestra and Baba Amte's organisation.

Speaking of Zubin Mehta's teamwork with his symphony orchestra, a noted writer commented, 'here individual brilliance — after all, each musician is good enough to play as a solo performer — is submerged in collective excellence'. And, in the words of Roger Nierenberg, the former music director of the Stamford Symphony Orchestra, "I believe every organisation has a music to it. When you can get the music flowing, then the organisation gets to a higher level." Yes, when there is teamwork, it is music, otherwise, sheer cacophony!

The story of Anandvan is not just a tribute to Baba Amte's personal courage and vision. It is a concrete reality of how a high-performing organisation can be built on the principles of teamwork where the collective sense of purpose subsumes individuals who anonymously contribute to a higher calling.

Such an instance of synergy — the whole being greater than the sum of the parts — is rare, especially when you consider that in the interiors of India thrive a number of institutions created through the collaborative efforts of many average individuals. Truly, here lies a classic example that differentiates a team of stars from a star team.

(K Jayshankar (Jay) is an organisational consultant and management coach. He established Empowered Learning Systems Pvt Ltd in 1992, with the primary objective of facilitating learning and empowering individuals and organisations)