

Background

The company, one of the nation's largest producers of construction materials, has a history dating back to the turn of the century and employs 7,000 workers nationwide. Typical of a manufacturing environment, the overall corporate leadership style is best described as "tell/do". Yet, the company consistently wins awards as an employer of choice and for social responsibility. When a forward-thinking, lifelong executive was promoted from within to a divisional leadership role, he handpicked a team of long-time managers and several outside hires, all of whom had excellent credentials and, on the surface, excellent rapport. After two years, however, the leader concluded that this "dream team" was not performing as effectively as anticipated. It took an inordinate amount of time, for example, to execute new initiatives. Politics were getting out of control. In-fighting was common. The team simply was not ready to carry the standard for cultural change as their leader intended.

Objective

By the time we were engaged, the leader had identified two dynamics that were undermining his efforts to have a high functioning team: (1) the majority of the members were conflict-averse while (2) one team member sat squarely and dominantly at the opposite end of the conflict spectrum. Knowing that the dysfunctions of his direct reports would inhibit efforts to transform the culture of the entire division, the leader's primary objective was to manage the conflict and get the team functioning collaboratively, and as a "real team."

Process

Initially, resistance was high because of an earlier failed coaching attempt and because this team of mostly engineers had little prior experience with a process that required introspection and openness. Human Resources and Corporate were also not supportive. Therefore, the leader's willingness to put his reputation and career on the line to drive this initiative demonstrated exactly the type of vulnerability that effective teams need to practice and paved the way, with him as a role model, to a successful outcome.

Results

The impact was dramatic as it was clear that much of the conflict was not due to inherent disagreement but rather rooted in misalignment. Conflict was not about actual issues but the manner in which individual team members reacted to those issues. As process-minded engineers, the team responded well to taking concrete action steps such as dividing responsibilities more equitably so the dominant executive no longer felt imposed upon to "carry the load" for the rest. This minimized the polarizing conflict that had previously paralyzed the team. Tangible proof of success was in the division's safety record – they quickly rose from last place to winning awards.

Keys to a Successful Project

Our extensive work with teams constantly reaffirms our beliefs that trust is integral teamwork and requires certain behaviors from leaders, as well as from all individual team members.

Leaders, who are absolutely pivotal to the process, must:

- Demonstrate a certain level of vulnerability
- Recognize that trust is built one interaction, or conversation, at a time
- Model authenticity at all times by matching words to actions
- Act with the highest integrity
- Be clear about expectations and practice effective decision-making

All team members must:

- Allow themselves to be vulnerable
- Be committed to the team's growth and success
- Pledge to open and honest conversation
- Let go of hidden or individual agendas
- Always focus on what is good for the organization, not the individual
- Recognize that building trust takes time and it must be maintained over time