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Create a Winning Team-Building Strategy for your Firm

I was taking a group of new associates from a major law firm in New York City through an experiential team skills session, when one of them turned to me and said, “if we really wanted to do things like this, or to work with other people, we would have gone to business school instead.”

This remark caused me to stop and think. Was a law firm really different from other business organizations? Were team skills truly unnecessary? Did something in the nature of the work, or the structure of the firm, preclude the need for people to work together as efficiently, smoothly and effectively as possible? This did not ring true for me. The very nature of legal work and the structure of the organization seem to call out for effective team skills.

I spoke with a friend of mine who is a lawyer, and I asked for his thoughts on what skill was most needed in the law firm environment. Without hesitation, he replied “stress management.” “Because of the pressures inherent in the work,” he continued, “everyone is under a great deal of stress. There are deadlines, clients, long hours – all the things that build stress. And I have seen stress released, with negative results, in relationships – especially relationships with support staff. We need to find a way to relate to one another more effectively – to manage our stress.”

Stress management is an essential skill. However, rather than simply focusing on this specific skill, I have found that one can address this topic, along with other related and necessary topics, with essential team skills training. A good experiential team skills session arms participants with tools they can apply to their everyday situations and issues – to better work with their coworkers and to avoid flare-ups that result from too much stress.

What exactly are team skills, and, for that matter, what is a team? There are many definitions of teams, and many of them do not seem to necessarily apply to the legal environment. However, when one looks closely at the reasons to work as a team, it becomes blatantly clear that this approach can help a law firm. According to C. Harry Eggleton and Judy C. Rice, in *The Fieldbook of Team Interventions*, there are basically two reasons to have a team – when mutual dependency is necessary and when enhanced quality is essential.



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These two characteristics apply to practically all, if not all, organizations – including law firms. In fact, these days it is highly unlikely that any organization, or any legal issue, is so simple that people working alone can get the job done. Getting things done takes more than one person. While a large percentage of legal work is independent, alone at the computer or researching past cases, the final product is generally, if not always, the result of combined expertise and efforts.

Not only is it necessary for people to work together to produce the final result, but, as my friend explained, those final hours can be long, tough, late and conflict ridden. Stress is inherent in this system set up – long hours, looming deadlines, all-nighters, hierarchical office structure, and potential last minute inclusion of the staff that actually delivers the final product. This system and these pressures can result in conflict, employee dissatisfaction, loss of productivity, and general poor company spirit and enthusiasm.

What a difference it might make if all employees, the whole “team” to use the word loosely, were working together and pulling together. What if we not only acknowledged mutual dependencies, but also supported them? What if we actually gave employees the tools with which to work together? The process itself would be better and the outcomes would improve as well – quality would be enhanced.

When employees work as an effective team, the benefits to both employees and the organization are many. Employees learn to trust each other and to effectively rely on each other – knowing and using individual strengths and bolstering individual weaknesses. Communication becomes easier and more effective. Employees learn how to effectively plan, to make decisions, and to problem solve. Organization goals become clearer, and the firm culture becomes stronger. Employees become more loyal and more committed to the organization’s goals. This leads to increased job satisfaction, greater employee effort, increased productivity, less sick days, and, thereby, increased revenue for the firm.

If effective team skills are the goal, how does an organization get there? The first step is understanding what an effective team is and how it works. The elements of an effective team are rather simple. The **goals** and priorities of the team are clear and all members are pursuing these goals. Individual **roles** are also clear, and these roles support achievement of the teams’ goals. Responsibility is clearly distributed among team members – taking advantage of individual strengths and supporting weaknesses. All team members know who is doing what by when, and people are competent to fulfill their roles.

Team **processes** work efficiently – team members know how to communicate effectively and easily, how to manage and resolve conflict, how to problem solve effectively, and how to efficiently make decisions. Lastly, **interpersonal** relationships are smooth and easy – although team members have different individual styles, they have learned how to combine their styles in a way that works.

These four effective team elements – Goals, Roles, Process and Interpersonal – are often viewed as a pyramid through which teams must work. The pyramid base is interpersonal relationships, with process next, then roles, and lastly, at the pinnacle of the pyramid, goals. Interestingly enough, problems often appear in the interpersonal base of the pyramid, especially under stress. As the stress level increases at your firm, do you find that employees can not get along? Does gossip increase? Do personality conflicts interfere with productivity? Human beings tend to take out their stress and discomfort on others and to blame their discomfort on personal relationships.

The root of these problems, however, is generally in one of the other three areas. Goals and priorities are not clear or supported. Role distribution and responsibilities are neither clear nor appropriate. Team processes – how they do the work they do – are not effective. In order to enhance the abilities of a team, it is important to address problems at the root cause, not just at the level of “all getting along.”

It is important to make certain that the top three areas of the triangle are problem free – or as problem free as possible. Priorities need to be clear for all employees. Time must be spent deriving goals that all employees can and do support. Roles and responsibilities need to be clearly delineated so that everyone knows what they need to do and on whom they can rely. Work processes need to be evaluated – is communication effective? Is conflict managed? Are decisions made appropriately and efficiently?

These skills are desirable – even, or especially, for a law firm. But how do you increase these skills throughout the organization? How do you ensure that employees have the knowledge and tools to approach these issues? Are these things that can be taught? Luckily they are.

All of these issues are addressed through “experiential learning” – the type of work session that the new law associates were experiencing. Experiential learning is a chance for employees to learn about and practice necessary skills in safe, risk-free, supported environments. Simulations or exercises highlight learnings in such a way that participants have personal “a-ha” moments – moments of seeing the results of effective (or ineffective) skills in practice.

These exercises work because adults learn best when they learn actively – when they engage in and experience a task or skill. Practicing a skill enhances understanding and proficiency, especially when the skills are behavioral. Practicing a skill in a safe, risk-free environment allows participants to try out behaviors they might normally avoid. By lessening consequences, participants feel free to experiment.

Experiential learning takes active practice one step further. Participants take time to *reflect* on their experiences, to *plan* future applications, and to *adjust* their behaviors based on observations and results. Facilitated discussions and targeted questions provide opportunities for further understanding, and, most importantly, for skill transfer to the work environment.

I often think back to the new associate who bluntly told me that he had no place for team skills in his work. And I think back to the “a-ha” moments that he and his colleagues later experienced. The issues that drive the need for effective team behavior – mutual dependency and enhanced quality – do exist in the law firm. In fact, the stress inherent in this environment seems to actually increase the need for effective team skills. It is up to firms to decide how and when to give employees the direction and tools they need to best work together and to best achieve their goals.

Chatsworth Consulting Group, based in New York and Pennsylvania, helps individuals and organizations articulate and realize their goals. By taking a holistic approach to consulting and coaching, CCG uncovers the often-hidden opportunities for success so that clients move forward with greater focus and purpose. Learn more by visiting www.chatsworthconsulting.com or calling 1-877-405-7288.