

BUILDING PEAK PERFORMANCE TEAMS

Even if you are not a classical music fan, there is something exhilarating about being in the presence of a world-class orchestra. There's the riveting force of the conductor, the concentration on each player's face, the grace with which solos slide into place, the river of sound that surrounds, enters and becomes part of you. All the musicians, at the height of their abilities, know exactly where their piece fits into the overall sound. Inspiring one another,

playing off each others' strengths, they reach inside themselves, further than they've ever been before, knowing that together they are creating something larger and more powerful than they possibly could alone. This dynamic ability to work together as a team is where philharmonic performances are made or fall apart.

Businesses, in these demanding times, can learn a lot about building peak performance teams from these ensembles.

"Whether companies are large or small, success often depends upon forming a cohesive group out

**"EVERYTHING
IN OUR
BUSINESS
CAN BE
COPIED BY A
COMPETITOR—
EXCEPT OUR
TALENT."**

of people who, in other situations, might not necessarily get along together," relates Harold Weinstein, Ph.D., Chief Operating Officer of Caliper.

It used to be enough for companies to concentrate on simply hiring the best people for each position. But that alone is no longer enough to stay ahead of the competition in today's marketplace. Now, the most successful companies are those that can create



synergies, sparks and a sense of purpose among divergent team members.

Such companies are able to foster environments where managers are keenly aware of their own strengths and limitations, and are able to identify and develop the potential of their staff. These companies have a special fire, a mission, that keeps them pulling in the

same direction.

Weinstein adds, "Peak performance teams are able to bring out exemplary talents in each player, create efficiencies, prepare for eventualities, synchronize activities, almost read one another's thoughts, tap into each other's abilities, and operate with a unique single-mindedness of purpose."

Ricardo Moncada, Vice President

of Human Resources for xpedx, a division of International Paper and one of the leading distributors of printing paper, supplies and products, says, "Teamwork is becoming increasingly important. And, in some ways, it's becoming more difficult to bring about. With the ongoing mergers and acquisitions, and the need for companies to become more diversified, adding new products to their inventory daily, scores of people from various backgrounds are being required to pull together like never before. Everything in our business can be copied by a competitor—except our talent. That's what sets us apart. It is a very competitive environment. There are fewer and fewer of us. And those who are left have to be very good at what we do."

Creating peak performance teams is what separates the best companies from the rest. And it begins with understanding what makes each member tick—realizing how to use people's differences to add to the success of the team, rather than have them become stumbling blocks. Success is measured by keeping conflicts down and performance up.

John Beattie, Vice President of Human Resources for GMAC Insurance, explains, "Understanding people's innate nature is fundamental to getting people to work together effectively. This is especially true when solving problems. When we began conducting team-building sessions with Caliper, there was a deep and immediate recognition that people in different roles bring different traits to the table. As people became aware of each other's characteristics it was easier to get things out in the open and resolve issues much more quickly. Team members have learned not to take behaviors personally and have also become more self-aware, tempering their own behaviors to become more effective at communicating their thoughts and ideas. It's win-win for everyone, rather than having team members be in competition with each other."

Similarly, Allen Salikof, Chief Executive Officer of Management

Recruiters International, the world's largest executive search and recruitment organization, brought a group of Caliper consultants in to conduct a team-building exercise with his senior management. "The insights we gained into ourselves and each other were incredibly valuable," he says. "Caliper's consultants helped us step back and evaluate our styles, strengths and areas of concern—as individuals and as a team. Since then, we've learned how to work together much more productively."

In order to be effective, team building needs to start with a clear vision of the team's goals and a well-defined strategy on how to attain those goals. According to Weinstein, regardless of the nature of

"CONFLICTS AMONG OUR TEAM MEMBERS WILL LEAD CUSTOMERS IN ONE DIRECTION— DIRECTLY TO OUR COMPETITORS."

the business or the size of the company, peak performance teams typically share a number of common characteristics:

- *They have a unified understanding and vision of the company's goals, objectives and future.*

- *Each team member is keenly aware of his or her own skills, precise role and value to the team, as well as those of all the other team members.*

- *Members of the team derive as much satisfaction from the performance and achievements of others as they do from attaining their own milestones.*

- *Communication among team members is open, informal and ongoing.*

There are, of course, many tools available to help management move a team forward. Attitude surveys, valid personality profiles, employee productivity workshops, and team-building activities are just a few approaches worth considering. Which combination of these activities would be appropriate depends on an understanding of the gaps that exist between where the team is and where it could be.

The touchstones for developing a peak performance team are: having insights into the strengths, limitations and potential of each of the members of the team, starting with the leader; developing a clear understanding of the chemistry among team members; resolving possible areas of conflict; and knowing how the team fits in with the company's overall goals.

Mary Jo Yafchak, Chief Executive Officer of AccuData, one of the fastest growing providers of media and telemarketing lists, says, "Our growth definitely depends upon our teams working well together. If there is an unresolved conflict that lingers, it will affect productivity. And our customers will sense it right away. No question. Some people just work together better than others. If need be, we'll transfer people among teams to find the right balance. Ultimately, smooth running teams provide the best service for our customers. And conflicts among our team members will lead customers in one direction—directly to our competitors. For our team leaders, the challenge is to keep our teams focused, positive, working well together, pulling in the same direction, and productive."

Whether in entrepreneurial firms or Fortune 500 corporations, most managers today succeed not because of their talent, knowledge or ability alone, but because they are able to recognize potential in others and turn their staff into a productive team. ■