

An Invitation to Rethink Teambuilding



An organization leader recently asked me to work with them on teambuilding. They had created a mission statement, identified goals, and had communication training. From outward appearances, everyone engaged in the teambuilding work – and had even enjoyed the activities. Yet, there was little impact on the organization. The next day, everyone went back to doing things the way they'd always done them. So what was the obstacle? I asked, "Is this organization a team?"

A team is defined as a group of people on a project with a common task and deadline. They depend on each other to produce successful outcomes, communicating constantly and usually informally. They need each other in order to "get it done." When completed, the group has the sense that "we" did it! Examples of a team include a basketball team, a project team, or an ambulance crew. Organizational research demonstrates that teams increase their effectiveness and efficiency through "teambuilding" interventions.

An organization is more often a tribe or, in the case of a large organization, a federation. A federation is defined by a collection of groups that work together to use common resources or promote common interests. The managers of individual groups protect the interests of their own group whether budget dollars, resources, or objectives. In meetings the group managers bring their own aims and perspectives. They promote their own group. A federation is often full of political lobbying and conflict, leading to a lack of consensus. It is easy to see why federation managers would ask for "teambuilding."

A tribe is a group with a shared identity and a sense of shared mission and purpose. They may have a functional "head" and a "team spirit." There may be smaller groups or individuals with independent responsibilities that support the larger goals. There are formal procedures and processes. Communication is a combination of formal and informal. There is an overall structure that allows work to get done. While work is judged individually, few people would put the organization at risk so that they could be successful. Usually emotional ties are strong; people care about each other and the organization. Can a tribe benefit from "teambuilding?"

Most managers are not managing teams, but rather federations or tribes. So, what do managers really want when they ask for a "teambuilding" intervention? In my experience, they want people within the group to forge a strong sense of belonging, to be willing to take the needs of the whole organization into account, to be willing to sacrifice for the good of the group. They want to be a group who attracts others to join.

Simple activities that help to forge a sense of belonging include sharing meals together and participating in community service (outside of typical EMS activities). Informal activities could be a time of storytelling around a specific topic such as, "how I chose to become a part of EMS." Formal interventions like a World Café or Appreciative Inquiry can increase individual's sense of belonging and identifying with the group. Discover ways to share the inspiration that comes with increased personal connection and commitment – inspiration and energy attracts others.

I invite you to rethink the need for "teambuilding" in your organization. Remember: while teambuilding activities may be fun, unless the participants are a team, the activities are just that – fun.

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Kathleen can be reached at kkfriesen@friesengroup.net.

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