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Team Goals: What Leaders Need to Consider

Podcast Transcript

My name is Bob Parks and I'm the director for Training & Organizational Development here at the University of Florida. Our team has the privilege of working with leaders and teams across this campus as they strive to be truly excellent. In this podcast, I'd like to talk with you about an important and, at times, challenging issue for many leaders—identifying and achieving shared team goals.

We regularly hear that teams need to have shared goals. In fact, this is generally stated as obvious: teams are more effective when they have shared outcomes that they are working together to accomplish. But this is not just intuitively obvious. There's also a lot of good research and experience behind it. As one notable example, in their classic book called *The Wisdom of Teams*, Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith identified team goals as a fundamental differentiator of really effective teams. If it's so obvious, though, why doesn't it happen very often? A FranklinCovey survey of more than 50,000 employees across a range of industries found that less than 10% said they had clear team goals. Less than 10%! It seems like that number must be low, but from my experience working with leaders and teams across UF, that number seems, unfortunately, pretty darn close! Actually, I talk frequently with leaders and teams about the fact that they *don't* have a shared set of team goals. Again, if we know that team goals can drive higher performance and improvement (and we do), why does it happen so rarely that departments or teams identify shared goals and then work together towards making them happen?

Common Obstacles to Team Goals

Well, when we ask leaders, we tend to get a common set of answers. I'd like to talk to you about some of those and, even more importantly, about why, in spite of some very good reasons for not identifying and working on team goals, we should still do it.

Perhaps the most common answer given is **time**: we already have a lot on our plates, we are already busy “getting the job done,” and we just don’t have time to even get together to talk about team priorities or goals, much less work on them! This reason for not focusing on goals is very real. Most leaders and teams that we work with feel overwhelmed and overburdened by the amount of work to get done—the last thing they want is to add one more task to their plates! So, in spite of that pressure, why should we persevere as leaders and teams and *still* identify and work toward accomplishing shared priorities? Well, the simple answer is, because teams do not get better by chance. Getting better takes intentionality: we must decide how we want to get better and focus effort in that direction. It won’t just happen *automagically*! The authors of the book called *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* describe this with some helpful images. They note that our day-to-day busy-ness is the “whirlwind” of things that need to get done. This is what we do to keep our heads above water (so to speak)—we answer questions, meet customer needs, teach UF students, have meetings, respond to emails, and so on. This day-to-day business is important—it’s how we fulfill our mission and meet the needs of those we serve. This day-to-day busy-ness, however, rarely helps us get better. That is, it’s typically about meeting immediate needs and not so much about finding ways to continue to get better. Getting better is not just about teaching classes, it’s about doing a better job teaching classes. It’s about teaching more or different classes or teaching them in a different way. It’s not just meeting customer needs, but identifying ways to do even better at meeting customer needs. It’s not about simply doing research, it’s about identifying ways that we can do more or better research. As you can tell from these examples, if we give in to the idea that we are too busy for team goals, we run the very real risk of being so focused on getting the work done that we will never step back and take the major initiatives, adjustments, or improvements to really move our programs or services forward. In addition to this, it’s often the team goals that we identify (to improve a process, for example) that can help us reduce the amount of time we spend on the whirlwind. No team or department becomes great by doing a good job treading water; departments become great by challenging themselves to improve their work in real ways.

Another common response that leaders and departments will give to the question of why they don’t have clear, shared team goals—and I think this reason is especially relevant in the academic environment—is that some faculty or team members don’t want common goals. They **want to be able to do their own thing**! I recall one faculty member stated directly, “The whole reason I got into academia in the first place is that I wanted to be left alone and to be able to do my own thing!” That faculty member was stating something directly that a lot of faculty members (and often members of many other types of teams) feel: I want to be able to do my own thing. In fact, sometimes departments will argue, “If everyone achieves their individual goals really well, we’ll be a very successful department—we don’t

have to have team goals.” Well, this sounds logical. It’s actually quite wrong, though. Anyone who has led any kind of team or organization knows that having really great individuals working on their own thing, moving in slightly different directions, with slightly (or, greatly!) different priorities, impedes the overall success of a team. When talented individuals decide as a group to focus together on some important priorities, they can generate a movement and momentum that is simply impossible for the isolated individual—no matter how talented that individual might be. Even more important, we work in an environment of limited resources. When resources are tight, it’s especially important that we are thoughtful as a group about where we would like to focus our valuable (and limited) resources, including time, energy, and attention. We need to focus the resources we do have for maximum benefit. Our resources need to be aligned rather than dispersed, and this requires knowing and understanding our priorities. Finally, we all exist within a team or department. Our success is tied to the success of that department or team—whether we like it or not and whether we want to admit it or not. In the very same department retreat where the faculty member said that he got into academia to “do his own thing” another faculty member said that, yes, he definitely wanted to be individually successful, but he also wanted to be part of something special. He wanted to be part of a truly great department. Most people understand and can identify with that. Becoming a truly great team or department requires understanding team priorities and working together on those priorities.

A third reason often given for why teams don’t have shared goals is that the **priorities from higher-level administrators are always shifting**. Why go to the trouble of identifying team or departmental priorities if the dean, VP, or other higher-level administrator is just going to change them anyway? Shifting priorities is a reality of organizational life and—while frustrating—doesn’t necessitate the end of all priority-making for teams. If we have done the important work of clarifying our team or departmental priorities, then at least we are in a position to put the additional priorities that are given to us in a context. How do they relate to our other team priorities? What adjustments can we make to get the work done? Do we need to put some things on hold? If so, what? If we have to put our team priorities on hold, when will we return to them? Sometimes, individuals and teams will use their frustration with not having total control (over their time and priorities) as an excuse to give up the control or influence they *do* have. Being asked (or told) to do things that are not necessarily priorities for you or your team is probably a fact of organizational life, but it’s not an excuse to give up all control or influence. You and your team do the work, you and your team know it better than anyone else. You have a responsibility to identify and articulate your priorities—even if, at times, other institutional priorities take precedence. Doing so puts you in a position to exercise the influence you do have as effectively as possible.

There are other reasons why teams and departments don't identify and accomplish team goals, but I'm hoping that this gives you a good sense of the most common—many of which I'm sure you've experienced—and why it's still important for teams to invest time and effort to identify and accomplish shared priorities.

Guidelines for Identifying and Achieving Team Goals

Next, I'd like to offer some simple guidelines for moving forward in identifying, setting, and working on team goals. This is based on some real examples of what we've seen work for leaders, teams and departments here at UF.

First, remember one basic principle of time management which will apply throughout your work on team goals. That basic principle is this—the time to do important things is not given to you, you must take it. In other words, time to create goals or move forward on team priorities typically won't just show up on your calendar. You must have the discipline to find, make, and take that time.

Second, identifying priorities works better if you can have that discussion as a team or department. Sometimes leaders think they should be solely responsible for identifying priorities. As a leader, it's vital for you to have a perspective. However, you are likely to identify better priorities and have more team buy-in if you've had the discussion as a team. As a department, what do we think we need to do in order to get better? In order to facilitate this type of discussion, it can help to anchor (or begin) this conversation by talking as a group about what's working and what's not working. What are your strengths and weaknesses as a department? That can at least ground you in the reality of your current situation as you consider what you would like to change.

Third, identify a few key priorities (not twenty or even 10). Why? Because, as we noted above, people already have a lot on their plates. That work won't go away just because your team identified a goal. People will have to make time to work on the goal. That's much more reasonable (and likely to be accomplished) if there are only a few key goals.

Fourth, have the discipline (and courage) up front to really get clear on what success will look like if you achieve this goal. We've seen teams spend a significant amount of time identifying goals and then, just when they need the discipline and courage to force themselves to be clear, they settle for vague language about priorities. This hampers them from the start because if it's not totally clear what we're trying to

accomplish, it's very difficult to figure out how to accomplish it! When there are so many other pressing things that demand our attention, that lack of clarity often just means work on the goals gets put off.

Fifth, and following on the previous, create clarity on the steps that need to be taken to move forward on the goal. This is often referred to as action planning. You don't always need a full, detailed action plan. But you do need to identify concrete steps that will be taken by individual team members to move the goal forward—as well as a date by when those steps will be taken. This is another place where some teams get stuck—they haven't agreed on who will do what by when and so everybody waits for someone else to do something. And, since everyone is already busy, this usually means nothing happens.

Sixth, check in on progress. In *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* this is called creating a “cadence of accountability.” This is critical for sustaining momentum. Remember, team members will need to practice the discipline of taking time to move these goals forward. By checking in regularly on progress made on the concrete tasks, you (as a leader) and the team as a whole create extra incentive to take the time to get those tasks done.

Finally, take it one step at a time. Teams are often surprised by how much can be accomplished when everyone on the team takes just a small amount of time over the course of a week, month, or semester to work on goal-related tasks. Really significant accomplishments often occur over the course of a year, thanks to each person on the team finding small chunks of time to work on the goal over the course of that year. From our experience working with teams, it really is amazing how much can be accomplished in this way.

Our experience working with teams across this campus for many years has convinced us that great teams consistently work together to identify and accomplish team priorities. As Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*, states, “Greatness is not a function of circumstance. Greatness is largely a matter of conscious choice, and discipline.”

Thank you for taking the time to listen to this episode of Reflections on Leadership. Please also review our job aid and podcast on the 4 disciplines of execution. Those materials complement what we've covered in this podcast and will help you and your team move forward on your important priorities.

Works Cited

Katzenbach, Jon R. and Smith, Douglass K. 1993. *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Collins, James C. 2001. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap—and Others Don't*. New York, NY: Harper Business.