Build a Foundation of Trust

By Sue Dyer

Have you ever worked on a team where it seemed that everyone was working against each other? Trust erodes into a war. It is no surprise when such a project or initiative fails. Sometimes you just wish there were a way to get everyone on the same page.

This was the case on one highway-widening project. The team had to calculate how much asphalt would be required to fill the holes left when it dug out the failed areas of the road. The owner and the contractor's superintendent measured the area to be filled. Time after time, they could not agree on the measurement of the square area. They disagreed on many other areas as well: how long the project would take, how far the work should proceed in a day, what work had been completed, if the work had been completed correctly or what time of the day to meet. They could not agree on anything. Finally, in frustration, the superintendent blew up and was kicked off the job.

Such was also the case for an IT project team. The team included 13 members from three different departments: information technology, human resources and finance. The team was working to install a new enterprise-wide human resources program. The CEO had been told that the new program would improve his ability to make strategic business decisions by allowing him to "slice and dice information" in almost any manner he chose. Each team member felt that his/her department should be able to get what the department wanted. Further, each department was reluctant to change its way of doing business, which they all did differently.

Over time, distrust built. Meetings were heated as team members lobbied to get their way. Soon, people stopped attending the meetings altogether. After a year of fighting, the team and project failed when the entire payroll for 30,000 employees could not be printed. A lack of trust prevented people from getting their paychecks.

How often have you been involved with a project that is going south, and you know that trust is not there? The following concepts help create a foundation that allows for trust and partnerships to grow.

> Measure the level of trust on your project and you will have a good idea of how successful the project will be.

The Foundations of Partnering

Concept #1: Take Ownership of Problems

What is your first reaction when a problem occurs? Is it:

- "I thought Bob was supposed to do this";

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- "I paid a lot of money to get this right";
- "These numbers are just wrong"?

If so, the next logical step is to figure out who is to blame for this problem. Most of us are skilled at analyzing who is to blame. Meanwhile, what is happening to the problem you uncovered? Who is trying to resolve it? No one.

When blame-seeking starts, all communication between team members stops. And whether it takes the team 2 days, 2 weeks or 2 months to begin to talk about the real problem, that time can never be recovered. It is lost forever. This is a huge risk to project success.

It does not matter who created the problem. What matters is that you understand and resolve the problem quickly so the project (or team) is not damaged. Taking ownership of problems means that everyone owns the problems. Seek solutions, not blame.

Concept #2: Commit to Full Disclosure

Committing to full disclosure means telling everyone on the team everything you know. How can the team possibly create plans or know where the inherent problems are if it does not have the best information? Often, team members hold their cards close to the vest, not revealing everything they know. They think that this somehow gives them an advantage. But in fact, when working on a project or on a team, team members are interdependent: everyone needs each other to succeed. By keeping information to yourself and causing other team members to not make the best decisions or plans, you are also hurting yourself and the potential success of the project or initiative.

Honestly discussing all problems up front can help ensure success. Research shows that problems that occur after a project is underway have a greater impact on the project than those identified and worked out during the planning phase. So, at the start of a project or initiative, take time for the team members to share potential problems they foresee. This way the team will have time to mitigate the impact.

Committing to full disclosure means sharing what you know: the good, the bad and the ugly.

Concept #3: Empower Others

Team members often become frustrated when they are not allowed to make the decisions that they feel are critical for a successful project. Even

worse is when a decision they have made is overturned by someone higher up in the organization.

Pushing the power and decision making down to the project or team level is critical for the success of the project or initiative. When issues leave the project level they tend to grow in both cost and time. You will generally get better quality decisions from workers closest to the issues. Empowering team members is the best bet for success.

In many organizations, power resides away from the project, which may cause team members to feel that they cannot make decisions. Before starting a project or initiative, it is important to figure out ways to empower team members to do whatever they feel is required to succeed. Many teams are doomed before they start.

Empowering others means pushing decision making down to the project level from the start.

Concept #4: Partnering Requires Commitment

Partnership does not happen by itself, it takes commitment to build and grow. Many things that occur along the way will work to divide you and your partners. You must keep together despite them. There will be times when it would be easier to simply walk away rather than sit down face-to-face to work things out. Sometimes the best commitment you can make is to tell each other the truth, then deal with it constructively.

If legal agreements exist between you as partners, do not let those solely define your working relationship. The judicial process is adversarial by design. This can undermine the ability to build the partnering relationships required to succeed. You cannot be both partners and adversaries, they are mutually exclusive.

Commitment to partnering means doing whatever is necessary to keep the partnership alive and well.
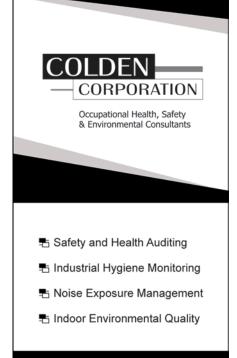
Concept #5: Be Fair & Build Trust

Projects are built on a foundation of trust; trust is the keystone of partnership. A partnership will be as good as your ability to create and grow trust between team members. It allows for open, honest communication. Each of us has more power to create trust than we might think. The first interaction sets the tone for the relationship. If you begin a relationship by trusting and seeking to cooperate and work together, you will likely get that attitude in return. On the other hand, if you begin by protecting your interests and are unwilling to be open, you will probably get the same in return. Game theory shows that cooperative relationships produce larger wins than those in which participants are protective and self-serving.

In the author's experience, for a team, fairness is the underpinning of creating trust. When someone feels that something is unfair, trust erodes. When encountering a problem or issue, always put fairness on the table and discuss it first. What is a fair way to resolve the issue? Most teams can figure it out. Measure the level of trust on your project and you will have a good idea of how successful the project will be.

Conclusion

By using these five concepts, you can build the attitude and atmosphere that allows partnerships to grow. For most projects and initiatives, working together rather than against each other is the only way to succeed.