



Article from

The Stepping Stone

February 2016
Issue 61

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

A Road Map to Team Clarity

By Brian Pauley

A key responsibility of a leader is providing clarity to the team. This may seem obvious, but it is frequently overlooked. When the team members are clear on items like purpose, strategy, priorities and roles, they are in a strong position to perform.

A key barrier for leaders in tackling these items is the busy trap. Creating clarity is a time-intensive exercise for leaders. But, if you make the necessary investment to do this, you arm your team with critical information it needs to execute. The result is getting more of the right things done in both the short and long term, and this can actually save you time in the long term.

Another barrier for some is that visionary and strategic thinking isn't a strength. Some leaders are just more suited for tactical execution. Unfortunately, the higher you rise in leadership, the more visionary and strategic thinking is required of you. You will need to close this gap and/or partner with someone to provide assistance. Regardless of how it gets done, the key is to recognize the need and importance for clarity and ensure it happens.

My focus here is on *teams*, small and large, that roll up within organizations. I emphasize this point of view because most readers are not members of their organizations' executive teams, which seems to be the emphasis of most business books. Executive teams have the responsibility of setting clarity for the *organization*.

With some groundwork set, let's go through several questions that, if answered and aligned around, provide the foundation for team clarity. Depending on your situation, you may think of other questions that need to be answered on your team. But, if you tackle these, it will take your team performance to the next level.

WHY DOES OUR TEAM EXIST?

Some teams call this a purpose or vision statement. This is where you, as the leader, make it clear where your team fits into the bigger picture of the enterprise. Team members want and need to know how they align to the overall organization. For an actuarial pricing team in a life insurance company, it could be as simple as "*to price financially sound annuities that enable our company to grow profitably.*" Simple and clarifying.

If this alignment is not established, then you risk leaving the team members un-energized around their work. Resist the temptation to use buzzwords and platitudes here. Remember the goal here is *clarity*, not winning a literary award.

WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Teams need clarity around what you consider to be success. Without definition, team members might:

1. Guess what success is. *They could be wrong.*
2. Have varying views of success. *This creates confusion.*
3. Never think about team success. *This creates stagnation.*

All of these erode performance.

Defining what success looks like is linked to the following question around the team scorecard.

WHAT IS THE SCORECARD?

Have you ever heard the phrase "what gets measured gets done"? This is why every team needs a scorecard. By having this, the team is clear on where it stands relative to where it needs to be.

There is no magic number of items to measure for a team scorecard. However, it needs to be simple and clear. An additional thing I encourage here is to make sure the scorecard reflects the things over which you have control. For example, a basketball team's scorecard may be turnovers, deflections and free-throw percentage—clear, tangible things that the team controls and can work to improve over time.

Notice that I didn't put "wins" on the scorecard. A team does not necessarily have direct control over wins and losses. Using the basketball analogy, a referee may make a bad call or the opposing team may make every shot that night. Wins and losses are perhaps important, but your scorecard should be set up to give your team the best *chance* of winning.

WHAT BEHAVIORS WILL MAKE US SUCCESSFUL?

Some teams call these values. At the team level, I prefer to call them behaviors because your organization probably already has stated values. The need here is twofold.

1. It is important to clarify how team members should act and treat one another.
2. When considering adding people to the team, these are attributes that need to be demonstrated in order to determine fit. If you source your team purely on skill set, you risk infesting your team with cultural misfits—and this deteriorates performance.

Critical here is accountability. In order for this to work, every associate on the team must not only model the behaviors, but also



hold others accountable to them. This is every person’s job—not just the leader’s.

WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT RIGHT NOW?

Most teams are not overstaffed and able to work on anything and everything. Reducing operating costs is an initiative at most companies. Thus, your team needs to know what is most important for the coming three to six months. You probably cannot afford to have the team working on whatever it feels like or whatever is clamoring for its attention. With laser-like focus, your team needs to be aligned around the most critical initiatives.

As a leader, you must be very careful about large lists of things that are most important. One of my favorite quotes is “*if everything is important, then nothing is.*” Delivering clarity to your team means distilling everything down to perhaps the top one to three things. If a prioritization issue emerges, then the team will have the information and empowerment to act accordingly.

WHAT ARE OUR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES?

Last, but not least, is bringing clarity around the roles and responsibilities of team members. This might appear on the surface like something for high school kids working in fast food, but it needs to be done. A frequently used excuse of leaders here is: “*They are professionals; they should know what their job is!*” You should not utilize such clarity-sabotaging excuses. Left to their own devices, yourself included, team members

1. Gravitate to what they *want* to do, instead of what they *need* to do.

2. Misunderstand how their job differs from superiors, peers and direct reports.
3. Have dangerous leverage in the event of performance issues.

Be wary that defining roles and responsibilities should not be limited to executing technical functions of the job. Behavioral and “good citizen” responsibilities are important too.

For additional resources on this topic, I recommend books written by Patrick Lencioni, who has been very influential to me on the subject of team clarity. ■



Brian Pauley, FSA, MAAA, is an actuary with a passion for leadership and personal development. He can be reached at bepauley@gmail.com.