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Training People, Inspiring Growth

Building a Team's Emotional Intelligence

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The news from his boss was not good. The team's customer was not at all satisfied with the progress made to date on the new software design. To make matters worse, two of the ten team members had requested transfers to other projects. Martin, the team leader, knew the team was struggling.

He sensed morale was low. What was not obvious was how to get the team turned around.

What Martin failed to understand was the importance of building the emotional intelligence (EQ) of his team. Today, most teams face increasing pressures to meet high expectations with less time and resources. Team members must come together quickly and begin performing at a high level almost immediately with little to no learning curve. Operating in a high stress environment requires high emotional intelligence to create and sustain positive relationships within and outside the team.

According to TalentSmart, a leading edge research and educational firm on the subject of emotional intelligence, teams must develop four important skills: emotional awareness, emotion management, internal relationship management and external relationship management. Fortunately, these skills can be developed with great success in any team.

So Martin went to work. First, he asked external customers and internal peers who worked closely with the team to fill out an assessment. Each was asked to list five words that described strengths of the team along with five words that most accurately described the team's weaknesses. Customers and peers were reminded to focus on the team as a whole, not individuals.

At the same time, he asked his own team, individually, to complete the same assessment. Martin compiled the results so the team could compare their own perceptions with those outside of the group. It was interesting to see where the views were similar and different. The team discussed how some of the responses were predictable yet others were surprising. All felt it was helpful to increase their awareness and understood

that perception is reality. Most importantly, the team agreed on an action plan to capitalize on their strengths and make the necessary improvements to eliminate the weaknesses. A communication and follow-up plan was created with owners assigned to each action.

First, the team discussed their modus operandi or patterns of behavior at different times within the team. How did the team respond when they were under intense pressure or heavy workload? When there was conflict or disagreement, how did team members handle the situation? What patterns emerged when the team was being criticized by departments outside of the group? What happened when they encountered an obstacle over which they had no control?

Martin facilitated the discussion. The team came to see how they had developed a culture of blame and finger-pointing. There was a lack of ownership, focusing more on excuses than solutions. It was obvious how the team put up a wall when they felt attacked, becoming defensive and avoiding communication. Obstacles became reasons to quit and focus on something more productive. Interesting, these behaviors correlated completely with the dissatisfaction coming from the team's customers and peers.

Also, team members individually shared how each felt when stressed – frustrated, angry, defeated, challenged, exhausted. All were open about sharing how they behaved when they felt these emotions. One team member stated how she felt threatened when the team was under much scrutiny. As a result, she became very defensive and was more willing to throw her colleagues under the bus to protect herself. All came to see and understand how some of their choices were negatively impacting the team.

So, the team brainstormed new patterns of behavior to replace the old. Then, they discussed how to hold one another accountable for demonstrating the new behaviors. All agreed to begin each meeting by checking the "mood in the room." Emotional intelligence begins with being aware of how the team is feeling and making better, more productive and constructive choices in how to respond.

The team created fun ways to acknowledge when they were falling back into bad habits. For example, when a team member started whining or complaining, someone grabbed a miniature violin and began playing a tune. When someone was critical of a suggestion before exploring the idea, the team member was

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passed a small water pistol where he could soak himself for “soaking the idea.”

The team created expectations or “rules of engagement” for how they were going to confront one another and engage in robust dialogue around critical team issues. Members assessed and shared their conflict styles to see how they could best help everyone openly discuss difficult issues without having the “meeting after the meeting.” Team members used a simple technique of replacing the word “but” with “and” when responding to a colleague’s opinion. Also, “thank-you” was used anytime someone participated in the meeting, accepted responsibility for a task or received constructive feedback or praise.

Martin arranged for some training for the team on influencing and feedback skills. Many of the team members were uncomfortable calling out a colleague who was not meeting a team expectation. Some were unsure how to influence others to see their point of view or negotiate a change to a schedule or specification. As a result, team members were more confident and less irritated when encountering a challenging situation.

Immediately, trust grew within the team as transparency and loyalty became evident to all. The team learned how to become more aware of their own emotions and respond appropriately. Internal and external relationships became stronger and more productive. The team atmosphere was positive and forward-thinking. All agreed it was more fun to come to work.

The two members who had requested transfers decided to withdraw their requests. Martin’s boss recognized the team at an all-hands company meeting for the outstanding work they had done in meeting a very difficult project deadline. The customer was thrilled! Martin smiled knowing that his team’s EQ was stronger than ever.