Understanding Teams, Part 3: Leading the Team You Inherit

“You’re looking for players who care more about the name on the front of the jersey than the name on the back.”

• Herb Brooks

[Author’s Note: This issue of The Beacon is the third installment in our four-part discussion on successful teams.]

Sometimes we have the good fortune to be able to build a team from the beginning. In those instances we can take the steps, and the time, to construct the team as we want it to be. But it is far more likely that we will be asked to step in and lead or manage an existing team, with team members already in place, track records built, strengths and weaknesses apparent, and mindsets established. The ability to immerse ourselves in an existing team, engage with members in a positive way, and draw a great performance from them will determine how we are viewed as the leader or manager. And while some of the steps required for success here are similar to those outlined in our last issue of The Beacon, there are certainly some additional things to think about when taking the helm of an existing team.

Here are six things to consider when assuming a leadership role with an existing team:

1. **Be Clear on Goals… Yours and the Team’s.** Goals are paramount to reaching any successful outcome. We always need an idea of where we want to go and what we want to achieve. While it’s not always possible to have complete clarity on these things, we should still aim to have some clarity. In the early stages, it may take some time for appropriate goals to materialize. Be patient and maintain focus until they come into view. In this case, you need to think about goals on (at least) two levels: your own goals and the team’s goals. Are you trying to achieve a quick turnaround, reach a short- or medium-term milestone, and then move on to another assignment? Or are you planning to lead the team for a while? Will you need to build things in a more durable way? Your personal
goals may dictate how aggressively you should refashion the team. And as with any team, it’s important to understand what the group’s goals will be so that you and others can gauge success and progress. Perhaps you will consult with others on these goals. Perhaps you will design them on your own. That will depend on your style and the situation, but a little collaboration with others never hurts.

2. **Detail the Skills, Behaviors, Rules and Expectations You Have for Your New Team.** Every time we lead or manage a team, it’s important to be clear about a few things above and beyond goals. We need to understand the qualities we’d like on our team: the skills team members need to possess, the behaviors we expect them to exhibit, and the rules and expectations we intend to instill. These things will create the structure for the team and will also provide a road map for conduct, decision-making, problem resolution and structure on the team as needs arise. (*For a more thorough discussion on these points, please see the last issue of The Beacon.*)

3. **Focus on Trust and Credibility.** Trust and credibility… these are the keys to the castle, ladies and gentlemen. When we are building our team from the ground up, we have a major opportunity, and requirement, to establish rapport. When building a team from the ground up, we can bring people on with whom we have a positive relationship. We can build something together and allow team members to contribute to the design of the project, the team or their roles. We can grow together as a team. But when we inherit an existing team to lead, trust and credibility are much harder to establish and maintain. Perhaps the people on the team don’t know you. Perhaps you are new not only to the team, but also the organization. Perhaps someone on the team wanted the leadership position for himself or herself. Perhaps there was dysfunction or underperformance prior to your arrival and the esprit de corps is low. There are many possible roadblocks to your ability to build trust and credibility with your new team. But you must, must, *must* focus a great deal of energy here. How do we build that trust and credibility? Well, that’s an entirely separate newsletter topic, but here are a few things to think about for now. It’s always good to ask questions and actually listen to the answers. Let people tell you what they think. Don’t be “all talk.” Match your actions and your words. Do what you say you will do. Speak *with* people, not at them. Again, this is a big topic, and we’ll return to it in a future issue of *The Beacon.*

4. **Build as Much Consensus and Ownership as Possible.** In many ways, this point is a natural offshoot of points 1, 2 and 3 above. And it’s just as important. You should always think about ways to build consensus on the goals of
the team and the plan for the future, and in the process create ownership. You want the members of your team to own what happens, because when they feel a sense of ownership they will be more engaged, more passionate, and more effective in their work. I often quote Warren Buffett when discussing teams: “No one washes a rental car. Nothing motivates more than honest to God ownership.” We need to get our teams to own the outcome, own the process, own the future of the team. We need them to care. It’s easier to create this with a new team, but it’s just as critical, if not more so, with an existing team.

5. **Create Your Plan for Change.** One of the common denominators of our first four points is the need to understand the team you have inherited and then maximize your output with that team. But with this understanding you may come to realize that some pieces of the team that you inherited are not a fit. You may see people who don’t want to be a part of the team you are trying to create, who don’t agree with your vision, who don’t play well with others. Depending on the length of time you plan on being in this position, you may need to map out your plan to upgrade the team around you. Who fits your vision, meets the criteria, and should stay? Who adds some value, but is not a perfect fit? Can that person have their role adjusted within the team? Who needs to be moved on entirely to something else? And over what time frame do you want or need to have these changes made? It’s important to have a plan in place to restructure and improve the team around you.

6. **Play the Hand You Have Been Dealt.** Finally, while you map out your upgrade plan, you need to also be thinking about first starting to play the game with the “cards you have,” so to speak. Sometimes we are simply stuck with certain aspects of our inherited team and need to learn to lead and manage and maximize output with less than ideal resources. And in almost all cases, you won’t be able to make massive change immediately. Your new team will have to begin to function and be productive, with change happening over time. So you should be thinking about maximizing the team’s productivity in the short-term, while change emerges over the medium- and long-term.

Teams are always a fascinating study in human behavior. While leadership is about many things, at its most basic level, it is about getting groups of people to work together and do the things you or your organization needs them to do. When we can create our own team from the outset, it is often easier to achieve this. But when we inherit bits and pieces from previous leaders and previous situations, the work becomes much harder.

Perhaps the ultimate test of good leadership is motivating a team, which someone else has assembled, to be productive with you.
The Best Team I Have Ever Been On

In the last Spotlight I wrote to you about the “worst” team I have ever been a part of. Well, I’ve been on a lot of teams over the years, on the field, on the water, and in the conference room. Since I’ve shared some thoughts on a bad team experience, I’d like to balance it out with some thoughts on a good team experience… because over time I’ve had a lot more good team experiences than bad.

In this month’s issue of The Beacon, I write about how to lead an existing team that you inherit, rather than one you build yourself from the ground up. And early on in my sailing career, I had a team experience that beautifully illustrated how to lead an inherited team.

Here’s some quick context: I spent six years as part of a three-person crew training for the 2000 US Olympic Sailing Team. We started off as unknowns in 1995, but with some hard work and one significant personnel change became legitimate competitors by early 1999. At that point, however, we hit a major roadblock, as a health issue caused a teammate to have to step off our team. So my other remaining teammate, Tom, and I looked for the best possible candidate. We found him in a well-known sailor named Ed. Ed was, and still is today, one of the most accomplished sailors in our sport. Tom and I were younger than Ed and relatively inexperienced compared to him. So it was quite a coup for us to bring Ed onto our team.

Ed was automatically going to be the leader on our team. On top of his age and resume, he was the helmsman, which is historically the leadership position in sailing. There was no question that he would lead us, but it was the manner in which he led us that was exceptional, and that is my focus today.

When Ed joined our team, he made it immediately clear that his status within our sport would not affect the way he treated and communicated with Tom and me. There were several things he did from the outset that set a tone for this leadership style:

- **He asked us a lot of questions.** Early on, Ed did not make very many declarative statements. He spent time asking us about our boat, why it was set up the way it was, why we had made the decisions we had made earlier in our team’s campaign. He was fact-finding, trying to understand where we were as a team.

- **He actually listened to our answers.** Enough said.

- **He made it clear that he would modify certain aspects of his style to fit into our team.** He did not expect us to completely mold the team to him, as the new guy. Even though he was far more experienced and well known, he was interested in fitting into our system in several important ways. This made it easier for us to go along with certain things that he felt strongly about because he had already set a tone of collaboration.

Stepping into a leadership position on an existing team that is not working is difficult. But I’ll submit to you here that stepping into a leadership position on a successful team is even harder. And that’s what Ed had to do. Our team had been enjoying some success and we were already ranked in the top ten in the world. Ed recognized that, and instead of trying to take total control, he looked for ways that he could fit into our successful team and use his skills to take things to an even higher level.

In the end, our team did not achieve its ultimate goal. We lost in the final selection trials and did not earn the right to represent the country at the Olympic Games. But we achieved a great deal of success along the way and the experience provided an excellent model for good teamwork.

Dean Brenner, Wallingford, CT
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