



TEAM BUILDING

The Importance Of Team Building

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Introduction

Big corporations spend a lot of time, money and resources on team building. And for good reason. It's been shown to increase productivity, loyalty and help with problem solving. But when it comes to small businesses, particularly those that work with virtual teams, we tend to forget everything to be gained from team building.

It's time to change that. In this short report we'll talk about how team building can benefit you and your team, what you can do to strengthen your team bonds and we'll wrap it all up with some things you can implement right away. While much of this will work in a local environment, the focus will be on virtual teams.

I think you'll be surprised how team building will help you and your business. Not only will you notice an increase in productivity, it's also going to be a lot more fun to work with your team members once you get to know them a little better. Team building will also foster more cooperation and collaboration.

It's easy to blow this whole idea of spending time nurturing the relationships with and between your team members off as a waste of time. That would be a big mistake though. Spending a little bit of time being proactive in the beginning will reap all sorts of benefits for months and years to come. Not the least of which will be that this is a job your team members enjoy, making them want to stick around and help you grow.

Read on if you're ready for happier employees or independent contractors, happier customers and clients and a happier version of yourself. All it takes is a little bit of team building know-how.

The Importance Of Team Building

Let's start by talking about the benefits of having strong teams in the workplace. At this point you may not be sold on the idea of setting aside time for team building exercises and encouraging your team members to get to know each other better. Once you do, there are a couple of interesting shifts that take place in your operation.

Since we don't spend time chit-chatting in the break room or hanging out at the water-cooler, the effects will be particularly obvious in a virtual environment. Here's what you can expect to see:

It Increases Motivation

We are social creatures and we like to see that we're making a difference. We need to know that we have an impact on someone else's live. It's what motivates us and keeps us going.

Giving your virtual team members a chance to get to know each other invests them in the rest of the team and the company as a whole. Knowing that Debbie from accounting is waiting on your time sheet so she can finish processing payroll is a great motivator to get things done in time.

It Increases Productivity

Once your team members feel part of the team and start to talk to each other instead of just you, you can see fair spike in productivity. Part of that can be attributed to the fact that they are more motivated and invested in the business.

Increased productivity will also be a result of team members working more closely together. Not every request needs to be run through you anymore when Anne can email Tanya to get a graphic for the report she's working on for example. And if Danny knows Marie is waiting on the sales

copy for the latest product so she can write and schedule the email marketing campaign to go with it, he'll be more likely to not only get it done in time, but also provide her with enough information to get her started writing emails while he finishes polishing the sales copy.

And productivity increases because the whole process doesn't break down when you drop the ball. If you give team members a forum and the opportunity to talk to each other, it makes it easy to realize that while you told Danny that the product launch was pushed up by 3 days, you forgot to mention it to Marie. If your team "talks" regularly, they'll catch your mistakes and adjust accordingly.

It Promotes Problem Solving

Do you know the old saying "two heads are better than one"? There's a lot of truth to it. Sometimes all it takes is a second (or third) pair of eyes to see why something isn't working.

Working on team building and allowing everyone on the team to get to know each other (and you), allows that to happen. If we don't know the other party, we're a lot less likely to point out a problem or error. Give your team a chance to interact and you'll be surprised how quickly problems will be recognized and solved.

It Promotes Loyalty

Once your team members get to know you and the rest of the team on a more personal level, they will feel more invested in you and the business. This promotes loyalty. And it doesn't take a whole lot of personal interaction.

You don't have to become best friends or talk on the phone daily. Just knowing a little more about each other and occasionally hanging out on a conference call or in a video chat together will make a huge difference in

how your employees and independent contractors feel about you and your company. Getting personal promotes loyalty.

It Encourages Creativity

There are a few different ways that team building will encourage your employees, independent contractors and virtual assistants to get more creative. The first is that getting to know each other on a more personal level makes everyone feel more comfortable. When we're feeling comfortable and secure in our work place, we're also more comfortable sharing creative ideas.

Encouraging team members to get to know each other also gives everyone a much better understanding of how different parts of the business work and how what they are doing affects their coworkers or the overall process. That allows them to see bottlenecks and solutions or different and more creative approaches to a problem.

It Encourages Growth

As you start to see more motivation, productivity, problem solving, loyalty and creativity, you'll also start to see a lot of growth - both personal growth of team members and growth of the company as a whole.

This shouldn't come as a big surprise. As your team becomes more involved and personally invested in what you do it's only natural to see growth. As your team becomes stronger and more able to work independent of you, two things will happen.

- 1) It frees you up to focus on growing different areas of the business, do more marketing, attract new clients etc. The end result: Business Growth.

2) Since your team consists of more than one person, they will be able to get more done than you could by yourself. The end result: Business Growth.

It's not hard to see that investing a little bit of time in growing and strengthening your team will be a very worthwhile investment. In addition to helping you be more productive and profitable, it will also help make work a lot more fun for everyone involved - particularly you.

Micromanaging a group of people who don't know anything about each other isn't a lot of fun. And working in an anonymous environment where you know nothing about the people you're working with isn't nearly as pleasant and interesting as working with acquaintances and friends. This even holds true for independent contractors you only work with on occasion.

No matter how big or small your "team" and how much time you spend with them in person or virtually, you can benefit from team building.

The Characteristics of a Strong Team

Before you can start to strengthen your team, it helps to know exactly what the characteristics and principles of a strong team are. It's hard to improve something if you don't know exactly what it is you should be working on. That's what this section is all about. We'll take a look at eight different characteristics and how they impact your team's performance. As you read through this section, think about where your team's strengths lay and what areas need improvement.

Communication

The most important feature of a strong team is good communication. It only makes sense, doesn't it? If your team members don't talk to each other, and do it in an effective way, nothing will get done. A good team leader will make a big difference here. As the owner of the business, that's most likely you. Make sure everyone on your team has the information they need to get their job done.

Encourage your employees to approach you with any questions or concerns. Make it easy for them to get in touch with each other, so communications don't have to run through you each step of the way. This can be difficult if you're a bit of a micro manager. In that case, have the team members copy you on all messages, but don't make them wait on you to pass messages through.

Encourage your team members to share what they are working on, what's going well and what's giving them a bit of trouble. We talked earlier about how a good team is good at problem solving. That can't happen unless there are open lines of communication.

Respect and Appreciation

Good team members understand that they are part of a bigger piece and that each team member plays a particular role in that puzzle.

Appreciating each other and the roles we play is important any time, but a lack of respect and appreciation will really start to show its ugly head when things get stressful.

When you're in the middle of solving a tricky problem, your server crashes or you're under a tight deadline for a client, you don't want to spend time playing referee or soothing over hurt feelings. Instead, you want your team to buckle down, focus and get the job done. That's why respect and appreciation are such an important part of a strong team. As an added side benefit, they will also make the work environment a lot more fun and enjoyable any day of the week.

Cooperation

This one should be pretty self-explanatory. The point of a team is to work together or cooperate. A strong team is good at cooperation. Each individual member (including you) understands that they have a job.

Something that's very helpful when it comes to cooperation is to see things from the other person's point of view. It's much easier to work together (and show mutual respect) when we have a pretty good idea of what the other person is working on and what it takes to get that done.

As the head of the team, you should be familiar with each task. For most of us small business owners and online entrepreneurs, that's pretty easy since we've done it all.

For the rest of the team it may be helpful to have each team member share what they are working on, what's going well and what's one issue they've run into recently. We'll go into more detail on specific things you can do to strengthen your team in the next chapter, but this may be a good starting point.

Shared Responsibility

In the past, a team would consist of a team leader and team members. Much of the responsibility of getting things done in time and getting them

done right fell to the team leader. His or her head was on the line when things didn't work out.

In recent years there has been a shift to more shared responsibility. Yes, you may still have a team leader (or be the team leader), but each individual has a vested interest in the success of the project.

If you are working with a team of independent contractors, this is usually not much of an issue. They know that in order to get paid, they need to do their job well and in a timely manner. It's the only way to grow their own business and make sure you continue to send work their way.

With employees it can be a little harder, but it is just as crucial to have them share in the responsibility. Not only will it give them a vested interest in doing a good job, it also results in a sense of pride and accomplishment as each project is launched.

Willingness To Ask For Help

A good team player is willing to ask for help. We all run into situations where we're in over our head. Things happen. We get sick, or for one reason or another we end up with more work on our plate than we can handle. Part of being on a team means that there are others we can ask for help.

Of course this doesn't mean that it's ok to take advantage of other team members and making them do part of our job for no particular reason. It's a fine line, and it can be tough to determine when that line has been crossed.

Unless it becomes a problem, encourage your team to ask for help when they need it, not only when they are overwhelmed, but also when they come across something they're not sure how to handle. Another team member may be much better equipped to deal with the issue.

A strong team will take advantage of the skills and strengths of individual team members.

Reliability

A good team player will be reliable. They will show up on time, have everything they need to get the job done and get it finished in time. Yes, there will be exceptions. People get sick, family emergencies pop up, other urgent projects get in the way, but overall you want your team to be made up of reliable people you can count on week in and week out. Once you find them, do what you can to hang on to them.

Able To Play Any Part

A good team is very flexible when it comes to leadership. Different team members have different strengths and areas of expertise. As a result, leadership will change and shift. You may be team leader on one project, but take a more subordinate role on the next. Being able to play any part as it best benefits the team and project is an important part of being a good team player.

Adaptability

A good team adapts to changes and does whatever it takes to get the job done. In our fast past world, things change, deadlines change and sometimes the entire focus of a project shifts. Being able to adapt to any changes is an important skill that your team needs.

It's not always easy, but a good team leader will set the tone for the rest of the team. Don't complain about the lost time and wasted effort. Instead refocus your team and get back to work.

Having a strong team will make the work go so much easier and smoother. You'll get a lot more accomplished and make progress at a fast pace. Spending a little time each week to work on team building exercises is

time well spent when you benefit from those efforts the remaining work hours.

Team Building Best Practices

A good team doesn't just magically appear. It is something that you grow and build over time. And there's a lot you can do throughout the work day to encourage team growth. Fostering the characteristics of a great team is one of the best things you can do for the productivity and success of your business as we have already established. In this section we get down to the best practices you can employ to grow your team and turn it into a well-oiled machine that works reliably and under pressure.

Set Clear Expectations For Your Team

The most important thing you can do for your team is to set clear expectations at the onset of every new project. It only makes sense, doesn't it? Think about the times when you are at your most productive. It's when you know exactly what you're doing and you're working under a deadline. Suddenly the work just gets done and the hours fly by without you even noticing you've put in a full 8-hour workday. The same holds true for your team. It's much easier to dig in and get the job done when they know what needs doing and what their part in the project is.

Let's break it down.

What's The Scope Of The Project?

Start with a team meeting where you discuss the scope of the project. What is involved? What hurdles do you anticipate? It helps your team to have an overview of the entire project so each individual member gets an idea of how their job fits into the bigger whole.

Why is this important? If you give your team an overview and how they fit into the puzzle, they can make sure things get done when they need to be done and also anticipate how what they are doing may affect (and possibly cause problems for) the rest of the project. Your team will be

more effective and efficient if they see the entire scope of the work to be done.

Expectations and Responsibilities of Individual Team Members

Next it's time to divide up the work and assign individual tasks to members of your team. Be clear about what they are responsible for and what you are expecting from each team member. This can be done during the team meeting, or you can get on the phone with each team member individually. If there's a lot to be covered, this may be the better option.

It's also helpful to put the responsibilities and expectations in writing. Shoot each team member a quick follow up email, or keep the information in a document on a shared file folder. Some business owners find it helpful to use a collaboration program like Asana or Basecamp to keep everyone on task. You may find a Google Spreadsheet or a Dropbox folder works just as well.

Talk About Deadlines

Along with expectations, you should also talk about deadlines. As team leader, it's your job to plan things out and decide what needs to be done by when to meet the final deadline.

For example, let's say you're launching a big new course 3 months from now. When should your ghost writer have the content finished to give the editor plenty of time to do his work? When do you need to have the finished project delivered to your copy writer so she can create the sales page and promotional material?

Breaking the project down and figuring out what tasks you are assigning to what team member will also help you determine when the deadlines need to be. Then be clear what you are expecting when and how much (if any) flexibility there is with those dates. When in doubt, assume that there will be some delays and plan accordingly.

Be Timely in Communicating Changes in Scope And Deadlines

One of the big advantages of being an online entrepreneur is that we are flexible and can change projects around as needed. Maybe we find out that our next project would make the perfect upsell for the project of a colleague that launches in 6 weeks. Suddenly the deadline for our project needs to change from 12 weeks to 6 weeks and as a result we decide to break it down into two parts. Part one of the new course will be launched in 6 weeks, part two a few weeks after that.

When you do these kinds of changes, both in scope and deadline, make sure you talk to your team about them right away. Even if you don't have everything worked out yet, give them as much information as you can. Taking it a step further, give them some guidance as to what they should be working on for now until you can get back to them with the revised schedule. Take advantage of the fact that we can work incredibly fast as online entrepreneurs. We don't have to run changes by three committees and collect five department head signatures. Shoot off an email while you figure out back-end logistics and make sure your team is ready to run with those changes.

As a side note, it helps with morale and team work ethic to let them know why those changes were made - particularly when you ask them to turn they own work schedule upside down. Don't let them think you're doing this on a whim, share your reasoning with them and how this will benefit the company and their job security in the long run.

Keep The Lines Of Communication Open

Since we're on the topic of communicating with your team and how this will benefit moral, make an effort to always keep the lines of communication open. And remember communication is a two way street. Here's what I mean by that.

Have A Virtual "Open Door" Policy

The first part of keeping the lines of communication open involves having an "open door" policy. This simply means that you welcome team members to get in touch with you regarding any questions and concerns they have.

This could be as simple as having them email you, or exchanging Skype usernames. Encourage your team members to send you a quick note whenever they need to. Or if you prefer, exchange phone numbers and have them call. Personally, I prefer the communications to be via email since this allows me to get back to my team members quickly, but I can also do it at a time that's convenient for me. I don't have to stop everything I'm doing to take a phone call.

Another option is to have a weekly check-meeting. You can schedule a short 15 minute conference call and go around asking each team member to give a short update on where they are at and encourage them to voice any concerns or hold-ups. The disadvantage of using this system is that you may be wasting 15 minutes out of your day if there is nothing new to report or there are no questions. Plus team members may be less likely to talk to you about concerns in front of everyone else.

Again, having team members get in touch with you via email or instant message seems the most efficient method. You can always get on the phone with them once you read the message if the situation warrants.

Point Out Problems and Concerns Early

Of course you should communicate with your team early on as well. If you are starting to see problems arise, or you have concerns about a deadline being met for example, you should point it out early.

How you communicate with your team members is up to you and depends on your particular management and communication style. Keep in mind that “talking” to a team member individually as you address the problems and concerns is usually a good idea.

Be kind and always give your team members the benefit of the doubt (at least initially) to ensure they continue to communicate well with you. You don’t want to foster a climate where your team hides issues from you until it is too late to fix things or do whatever it takes to get back on track.

Encourage Team Members To Communicate, Cooperate and Collaborate

In the last section we’ve focused on the relationship between you and your various team members. Now, it’s time to take you out of the equation. This can be a scary thought - particularly if you tend to micromanage. The idea is to encourage your team to communicate, cooperate and collaborate amongst each other without having to use you as the team leader or middle man.

Why is this important? Because it frees you up to focus on other, potentially more important tasks.

How To Encourage Communication

Start by encouraging your team to talk to each other. Make sure everyone knows who’s involved in the project and what their tasks are. Then make it easy for members to communicate. In an office environment this is

easy. You simply walk over to your co-worker's desk. How can we translate this into a virtual environment? Here are some ideas.

- Create a private / secret Facebook group that allows everyone to post and collaborate.
- Set up a group text chat with everyone on the team.
- Have all team members exchange email addresses so they can reach each other as needed. If you want to make sure you're in the loop on everything, request that you are Bcc'd on all communications.
- Set up a Skype group so members can message each other and get on a Skype call as needed.

Talk to your team and figure out how they would prefer to communicate with each other. Then decide how involved you want or need to be in those communications. Find a system that works well for everyone involved. Yes, it's hard to make every single person happy, but technology is making virtual communication incredibly easy these days.

How To Encourage Cooperation

There are a few different things you can do to encourage cooperation in your team. The first is something we already covered - encouraging communication. The second is to give everyone on the team at least a rough overview of what's involved in a particular project.

Let's look at an example. Let's say, you and your team are working on an ongoing project publishing Kindle books. You're doing the research and are coming up with the topics, but your team also includes a writer, an editor, a graphic designer and a Virtual Assistant that handles uploading the files, creating descriptions and keeping an eye on reviews.

With everyone aware of who's working on what for the project, your writer can forward finished chapters to the editor for editing and formatting, your graphic designer can get the finished graphics to both the editor and the virtual assistant and toward the beginning of the process, your graphics person and VA can hash out the best size and layout for the kindle covers. All without you having to orchestrate it all.

To encourage this kind of cooperation, make sure everyone on the team knows what the end goal is and also that it's ok for them to chat amongst each other and help each other out.

How To Encourage Collaboration

Speaking of helping each other out... let's take it one step further and encourage team collaboration. Instead of deciding what part of the project to assign to what team member, consider letting your team talk it out and come up with a possible more efficient process.

If you're not feeling quite that adventurous, assign different parts of a larger project to a small team of people. Going back to our earlier example about publishing kindle books, you may send the topics of the books you want written to your VA and have her forward them to the writer and editor, as well as order graphics for the covers. The writer and editor can collaborate on the writing, editing and formatting process and send it back to the VA who adds the cover and sends it to you for final approval before uploading it to Amazon.

It's easy to see how encouraging this process of collaboration can make everything run smoother and free you up a lot of time - particularly if this is something you do month after month.

Share in Successes and Failures

A big part of team building is making the people on your team feel part of the business. A great way to do that is to have them share in both of your successes and failures. It shows them how what they do directly affects

the business and thus their bottom line and job security. Even if you're working with independent contracts, they will quickly realize that if your projects are ready on time and are profitable, they end up getting more work down the road.

Celebrate Your Successes

Let's start with what to do when things go right. Acknowledge that your team was an integral part of the success you're seeing. Share some stats and numbers with them. Don't brag, but share what this means for your plans for the future. For example, the launch of product B and the money you made there, will allow you to go back and have your graphic designer redo the graphics you originally did for product A.

Keep the focus on what's in it for your team instead of how well you're doing. It's a fine line between sharing your success with your team and sounding like you're bragging. You don't want to make them jealous, instead stay humble and thank them for their hard work.

You may also want to consider rewarding them financially. Offering your team a share of your profits is a great way to build loyalty and keep them highly motivated. Crunch the numbers and see if that's something that will work for you.

Share In Your Failures

Of course not every venture is a success. Don't be afraid to share your failures as well. Talk it out and see what you could do different next time. Ask for your teams input and feedback. They'll have a different perspective than you do and could give you some valuable input.

While you don't want to come out pointing fingers at the editor for proofreading errors, or the writer for not getting things done time to take advantage of a collaboration with another marketer with a big list, you do want to share how the performance of your team (yourself included) affects the overall launch and bottom line.

Be nice about it, but don't be afraid to share constructive criticism. Call a (virtual) team meeting and talk about what went wrong and what went right. Schedule follow up calls individually with team members as needed to discuss mistakes they've made or things you need them to change for the next project or launch.

By sharing both the good and the bad, you're showing your team how their work has a direct impact on your business and thus their job... even if that job is contracted work.

Give Them The Big Picture

Is your goal to grow a loyal team that will grow with you and share in your success for years to come? That's the real end goal, isn't it? To find just the right people that can anticipate your needs and make work almost seem effortless. You won't find them on the street or on your favorite outsourcing website. Instead, you grow them as you grow your team.

And the best way to make that happen is to give them the big picture right from the get-go. Share your vision for this online business with them. Involved them in the plotting and planning and have them grow with you. Encourage team members to learn new skills as you need them. Help them pay for courses and software and grow your team right along with your business.

Maybe you're starting out with a VA that helps handle customer service issues and anything else "office work" related, and a writer that helps you with content creation. Eventually your first VA will grow into your main project manager who handles dealing with a team of writers, editors and graphic designers and that original writer is now your main copy writer. By growing your team right along-side you and sharing your vision all along, you will cultivate relationships where the work seems effortless. You don't have to go into a lot of detail to convey how you

want the sales page for your latest product to flow. Your copy writer has been working with you for months or even years and has learned the craft of writing compelling copy right alongside you. He or she knows your style and knows your target audience as well as you do. And your project manager is keeping everyone on track so you don't have to worry about all the little details.

Remember, that's the end goal. It won't start out that way, but if you treat your team members right, involve them in the business and help them grow right alongside you, this can be your future.

Help Your Team Grow Closer With Team Building Exercises

Let's wrap this up with a little bit of information on traditional team building exercises. The reason large corporations use them again and again is because they work. They help bring the members of your team closer together, form relationships both with you and each other. And that builds the loyalty, cooperation, collaboration and appreciation we talked about earlier in this report.

Since most of us work with virtual team members, these team building exercises are designed to work virtually. You can easily adapt them to a regular office environment or do a quick Google search for Team Building Exercises or Team Building Games to find more.

3 Things About Me

This is a great ice breaker and perfect for a first virtual team meeting. This will work well on a conference call but is even better on a video conference. Schedule a group Skype call or set up a Google Hangout for your meetings.

Ask each team member to prepare 3 out of the box statements about themselves (they can be completely unrelated to work), one of them true, the other two made up.

Take turns making all three statements and having everyone else on the team guess which one is true. You can keep score if you like. The idea is to get to know a little something about each team member and just have a bit of fun together.

Hobby Show & Tell

Here's another simple activity. Taking turns at each meeting have one team member bring an item, or picture of something they enjoy to do outside of work. This could be a craft, a picture of them out hiking or fishing, a favorite book... you name it.

Before you start your team meeting have the person whose turn it is take a few minutes to show and tell. Encourage them to share what they love about the hobby. As with the activity above the idea is to create connections that go deeper than "just" work.

Story Time

Here's a fun little activity that encourages communication and cooperation. It's also another great ice breaker to start a team meeting with. You start the team off with a sentence. ("It was a sunny Sunday morning and we were headed to the zoo" for example). Then each team member takes a turn adding another sentence to the story. You can go around as many times as you'd like.

Encourage the team to be silly and have fun and most importantly, keep the story going.

Virtual Office Tours

Let's wrap this section of virtual team exercises up with a virtual office tour. Have each team member take a picture of their desk or work space

and share it with the rest of the team. This could be shared in an email or keep the pictures in a shared folder in something like Dropbox.

Think of it as the virtual equivalent of stopping by someone's office or cubicle. It's fun to see where everyone else works and how they have their desk set up. As with the other activities the goal is to get to know our team members on a deeper and more personal level. If you (and your team) feel really brave, include yourself in your typical "work attire" in the pictures.

Conclusion

Improving how well your team works together is one of the best things you can do for your business and yourself. As we discussed in the benefits section above, strengthening your team will increase productivity and it will make working together much more enjoyable.

While it may have taken quite a bit of time to go over everything in this report, it doesn't take more than a few minutes here and there to work on team building best practices. Yet, the rewards are better communication, more loyal employees or independent contractors, higher quality work and quicker turn-around time.

Focusing on Team Building is a good idea for any business owner and just as applicable in the virtual world as it is in a "regular" office.

Take another look at the team building best practices:

- Set Clear Expectations For Your Team
- Keep The Lines Of Communication Open
- Encourage Team Members To Communicate, Cooperate and Collaborate
- Share in Successes and Failures
- Give Them The Big Picture
- Help Your Team Grow Closer with Team Building Exercises
- Delegate Authority Properly to Build Responsibility
- Clarify Roles and Responsibility
- Take It Out of The Office - Team Building Exercises Outside the Office are a Breath of Fresh Air
- Spend Time Learning What Team Members Truly Need

What are you doing already? What could you do better?

Pick a few of the suggestions and start implementing them with your team. If you don't do anything else, start meeting via video with your team. Being able to see each other face-to-face has a big impact in how well we feel we know each other. And that's what team building is all about... forming closer connections so we can work better together - as a team.