

Preface

Some years ago, my boss and I took a long ride from Pittsburgh to Cleveland to meet with a contingent of management and union representatives at a major steel manufacturer. The topic was how to introduce teams into a new cold-rolled steel plant they had just completed. They had never had teams before, they had a history of labor-management difficulties dating back generations, and they were still in receivership, with profitability only a dream.

Though the conditions were not ideally suited to a positive first encounter, the meeting went worse than I could have imagined. It was held in a conference room with a long table. There was not enough room for me and my flip charts and transparencies. The union reps lined one side of the table. The engineer-managers sat on the other side.

The new plant manager took us on a blueprint tour of the new plant from a wall chart at the back of the room, which was covered with schematics. He walked us from station to station along the new line, describing with pride how few operators were needed at each station and how they wouldn't have to interact with each other but could be assigned at the beginning of each shift and left in place until the end. He pointed with glee at the computer control center and called up images of white-coated lab technicians with two-year degrees who would control every slightest movement of the steel. From his description, it seemed like the steel was one long piece of silvery taffy, rather than a near-molten belt of iron.

In an effort to sound intelligent, I tried to punctuate the plant manager's talk with questions that sounded reasonable. He would pontificate about the duties of employees sitting in catbird seats high above the rivers of steel flowing below them and I would ask, "Well, how much time have you built in for team meetings and problem-solving?" or "How would house-keeping duties be shared among different job categories?"

Each of my interruptions he treated like a personal slight, until, exasperated, he finally shut me up, saying, "Please hold your questions until after I finish my tour." It was clear that this meeting was going to be a little more one-way than I was used to.

When the plant manager finished, he called for a break—probably so the union representatives could have a cigarette in the hall instead of in the meeting room. I tried to chat it up with a few of them, but they seemed as surly and suspicious as a herd of buffalo.

I suggested to my boss that we make a run for it during the break. But though she was reasonable and empathized with me, she reminded me that we were billing the entire day and had an obligation to hang in there to the end.

When we reconvened, I had little hope of leading a stimulating interactive discussion, but I was even less prepared for what did happen. As they were all taking their seats, we waited a moment for the union reps to get fresh cigarettes going and for the engineers to complete what seemed like secret calculations they'd been working out on napkins in front of them. Then the plant manager leveled his steely gaze at me.

"All right," he said. "What do we do?"

"Well," I said, "let me begin with a few questions." I had prepared ten questions that I hoped would get us into long, drawn-out discussions and bring us to the end of the day. But not even my thoughtful, open questions, probing queries into the nuances of their production design, roused them from their stony silence. They were out to get the most of the per diem fee they'd paid for my time.

“We can discuss some of these things later,” the plant manager said. “What we need is this,” he pointed his finger emphatically at me. “We need to know how you go about starting teams.”

Now I was really on the spot. It seemed to me that what they wanted to do was simply declare teams, as if they were just adding a new policy to the company employee manual. Once they did that, then they could go on to do all the other mechanical things, like having meetings and managing inventory—familiar things they felt comfortable with.

“How many teams have you decided to have?” I asked.

“We don’t know,” the plant manager said. “That’s why you’re here.”

Needless to say, I felt a little antagonism in the air. It was clear that someone had told the plant manager to bring in some consultant, that he wasn’t doing it out of his own deep search for meaning. It was an unfair situation, both to us and to the union reps, who continued smoking and staring down at their steel-ravaged hands.

It was a setup, though neither I nor my boss realized it. Neither management nor labor really wanted to explore teams, nor did they even have a clear picture of what they were, but both were committed to some form of cooperation and teams seemed a concrete way to go. What they needed to make them feel better was some fool of a consultant standing up and assuring them that teams were basically a no-brainer and that they were already doing just exactly what they were supposed to do. Nobody wanted to hear about the slow process of culture change, or the role of leaders, or the massive investment in training and personal development that was part of a team start-up.

When they realized they weren’t going to get anything out of me otherwise, they reluctantly let me make my pitch about culture, team development, barriers, land mines, potholes, and all the other terminology I used to characterize team progress and hurdles.

But they had no taste for mysteries: they had steel to roll out. We muddled through the rest of the meeting, relying on several dozen prepared overheads and a videotape we'd brought along. But we were fooling no one. We simply didn't have the goods.

Later on, back at the office, I wrote myself a short note. In it I spelled out the kinds of things I needed and had to have to enable me to do my job. That list included:

1. A reasonable background, with several examples of empowering work strategies and some detailed knowledge about them.
2. A process for creating empowered teams that went from A to Z. I wanted a method to identify teams, articulate what they do, assign duties, train them in their new roles, and provide them with the support they needed.
3. Answers to commonly asked questions. This was a little trickier. I wanted to have a pretty good idea of the questions people would tend to ask and I wanted to be able to answer them, not glibly, but honestly and thoroughly.
4. A way to express, in understandable terms, the massive change in culture and even personality that is needed to empower individuals and help them emerge from more traditional organizational designs. I needed a way to explain what needs to happen in the hearts and minds of managers and employees alike in order to achieve the trust and respect needed to be successful in this kind of participation at work.
5. Finally, and perhaps most important, I wanted a set of tools to use to help teams, team leaders, and managers create empowerment strategies. These would have to be tools that were simple and easy to use but that didn't oversimplify a complex task.

Well, I haven't gotten all the answers I need yet, but I have gleaned a few. Success at creating and nurturing teams is only partly determined by the tools and techniques you as a consultant, either outside or inside, bring to the picture. The rest

has to do with the organization, the leadership, the team members themselves, and the overall readiness of the critical success factors to work together in harmony.

What are those success factors? Mostly they have to do with planning and addressing the right questions:

- Why do we want teams?
- What are they supposed to do?
- What changes will we have to make to ensure their success?

Wherever you are on the road to teams—just starting out or well down the path—you must boldly ask and answer some tough questions. No consultant can answer these questions for you; you have to do that yourself. Saying, “I don’t know” is OK—for a while. But saying, “I don’t care” is not OK. These questions, if unanswered, unconsidered, will turn into problems sooner or later.

Let’s start this book, then, with a little self-examination. Do you really want to get involved with teams? Have you got the stomach and the pocketbook for teams? Do teams make sense for your business? Is management committed to teams?

If you’re part of a design team, work with your team to answer the questions posed in Chapter One. If you can’t come up with the answers right away, don’t worry—but don’t forget to return to the questions before some irate team member asks it in an open forum, and you’re caught unprepared. But don’t give up hope.

Read on. This book will provide you with alternatives, if not answers to the questions in Chapter One. Stick with the program, and you’ll soon know more than most consultants.

Special Features

The idea behind the books in the Briefcase Series is to give you practical information written in a friendly person-to-person style. The chapters are short, deal with tactical issues, and include lots of examples. They also feature numerous boxes designed to give you different types of specific information. Here's a description of the boxes you'll find in this book.



These boxes do just what they say: give you tips and tactics for being smart in managing the team-building process.



These boxes provide warnings for where things could go wrong in the team environment.



Here you'll find best practices you can use to make the process go more smoothly.



Every subject has its special jargon and terms. These boxes provide definitions of terms used in building teams.



Want to know how others have successfully implemented teams? Look for these boxes.



Here you'll find specific procedures you can follow to facilitate the success of teams.



How can you make sure you won't make a mistake? You can't, but these boxes will give you practical advice on how to minimize the possibility.