

Speedbump #14: A Lack of Shared Values

In many ways, building a successful team is like constructing a building. While most of us aren't engineers, we understand the basics of their work. We know, for example, that constructing a building requires basic resources, fasteners to hold the pieces together, protective elements, and more – but it's all built on a firm foundation, proceeding from the bottom up. We have to trust that the foundation is stable before building on.

A Solid Substrate

In my Christian Bible, Jesus Christ once declared to the Apostle Peter, “You are the rock upon which I will build my church.” (I'm sure you can share similar examples from your faith.) I didn't fully understand this statement until I was in college, when I learned Jesus had a sense of humor: Peter's Greek name would have been Petros, the Greek word for “rock.” But Christ used this statement to make the point that you must build a structure on solid ground, whether it be a church building or the team comprising the congregation. Elsewhere in the Bible, we're warned to build our houses on rock, not shifting sands.

This advice applies to team building as well. Clearly, we've held this advice as part of our collective Western cultural wisdom for thousands of years; too often, however, we fail to take it into account in business. You can't succeed as a team, much less excel, if you can't construct a solid foundation upon which to erect the framework that supports and strengthens you, both as individuals and a group. It takes careful exploration and testing to find the solid ground upon which you can build your solid foundation.

This solid ground is cemented by the Core Values of the group, which lead to the Mission and Vision underlying everything a team or organization does, creates, or becomes. Sometimes the Core Values rot from within; when this occurs, the entire structure suffers damage or destruction, as we've seen repeatedly during the turbulent years since the turn of the 21st century. When we don't trust our team members, the very foundation is shaky.

Creating Your Foundation

Success may sometimes happen by accident, but it reaches true heights when it's deliberately planned and structured. The largest, most successful corporations have implemented this concept quite well; their corporate cultures leave little to chance. They may go about it differently, but in each case the structure contributes to their success. McDonalds, for example, has systematized everything so well and educates new employees so thoroughly that it can turn groups of high-school students into highly efficient teams with a speedy throughput of product and cash flow.

As a knowledge worker, you're on a different level than fast-food employees, but you do have things in common with them. The best work groups in both categories begin by establishing a solid foundation as a team. When you've found your solid ground and designed your structure, it's time to get together and make plans for how you'll mesh, so your workflow allows high performance and excellent service.

Your Core Values are critical here as anchors for your foundation and subsequent structure, but let's face it: how often do you find a group of more than a few people with identical values? In a team, you *create* a slate of Core Values. You don't just stumble over them; you have to get together, hammer them out, and agree to take them to heart. For example, as a productivity enthusiast, two of my core values are responsiveness and accountability. For our team, that shows up in the behaviors of always responding to inquiries within one business day and doing what you promise the client you'll do.

As your new team comes together or an older team reconfigures, conduct a series of meetings to create a team philosophy centered around the Core Value of the team. They will differ depending on the industry and existing company culture, but some of these examples may work for you.

- Act with urgency.
- Be accountable.
- Trust yourself & others to make decisions.
- Say it like it is; be direct, open, and honest.
- Keep it simple.
- Focus on priorities.
- Streamline and simplify.
- Call out unnecessary complexity.
- Work together. Collaborate.
- Rely on each other.
- Share resources, information, and best practices.
- Always think of the customer first.
- Be caring. Think about impact of action on others' feelings.
- Simplicity is genius.
- We'll figure it out.
- Focus on WHAT is right, not WHO is right.
- No excuses.
- There's always a better way.
- *Can't* isn't in our vocabulary.

You may have seen statements similar to these used as mantras, catchphrases, or slogans. Some may serve as the basis of a company's Unique Selling Position, or USP.

The organizations that really take their philosophies to heart and follow their standards closely tend to succeed, while those that don't are more likely to fall apart. Build a solid foundation by working out your differences and explicitly defining what you believe and how you will act. Only then can you construct a solid structure leading, ultimately, to a towering success.