

Unpacking Team Identity

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As part of the launch of the Expanded TESI 2.0, every month we will look at a new team competency and where the challenges lie in developing it. We begin this month with Team Identity!

In some ways *Team Identity* is the most fundamental competency of teamwork because this skill set incorporates the desire of the members to include each other and work together as a team. Many of the teams in existence today were assembled by others and told to work as a team but by itself that will never accomplish the goal – especially in national and organizational cultures where competition is so highly rewarded. If members are not compensated as a team in some fashion (bonuses, etc.) the disincentives for collaboration will be hard to overcome, but that doesn't mean they *can't* be. This is a good thing, because in the U.S. it is the exception rather than the rule to see employees compensated for the productivity of their teamwork.

Being assigned to a team does create a real degree of interdependency, and this is the glue that holds it all together. If your boss or your bosses boss expects you and several others to get something done together, that expectation can hardly be dismissed or discounted. Unfortunately it's not enough incentive to cause people to make the kinds of adjustment in their behavior that genuine teamwork requires. There is a constant tension between my need to be recognized as an individual and my need to belong and be recognized as a productive contributor. Let's consider some of the targets we need to be moving toward.

Effective *Communication* (another of the seven TESI competencies) is the critical, bare minimum requirement for any team to be productive. This means *all* information needs to be shared freely and equally among all members and this is not so likely to happen on its own. Everyone enjoys some degree of special recognition when they figure out how to solve a tricky problem. One reason that it's still a problem is because no one else has figured it out so far. The shift that needs to occur here is in the recognition that *the team* can provide sufficient praise and recognition to fully reinforce the members' achievements – if it knows how, and makes the effort *every time*. (In other words everyone's achievements must be recognized not just the most assertive or the most drama prone members.)

The way to recognize individual's contributions includes making sure that *all team members* are present at that meeting when the recognition happens, then ask the problem solver to tell their story-- when did they first recognize the problem, what alerted them, what steps had to occur in what order to move from the problem to the solution. Teaching the team to tell these kinds of stories can provide some of the best instruction through experiential learning that the team is likely to receive, so get the full value by taking your time. Ask questions. Teach team members to recognize and describe the significant details. This helps to explicate their internal problem solving



process and makes it a much more conscious, obvious one that everyone (even the problem solver) can observe more objectively and reflect upon. The trust that is demonstrated when someone openly shares their strategy for problem solving with everyone empowers the team as a whole, and builds each person's identity with the whole group through sharing and appreciating even a small success.

Trust is such a huge part of effective teamwork that every team can benefit from regular practice in developing it! Trust grows as a result of people keeping their word to each other, but you don't want to wait to develop this team skill until there is a pressing need for it – that doesn't work! Applying the emotional intelligence skill of empathy is one of the fastest ways to build trust. Use a lot of reflective language in your team meetings like, "I think you're feeling pretty frustrated because you can't get a quorum together to approve this change to the project you're running."

The meta-message behind this kind of communication behavior is – "I notice you and I'm paying attention to the challenges you face and how you feel about them." Just paying this kind of attention to each other on a regular basis helps people feel included and lets them know it's safe to share what's important to them at a more personal level. Without this, Team Identity cannot grow strong enough to support the team in dealing with the even trickier issues that come into play when serious disagreement and conflict occur. We'll look at it all as we cover the seven competencies and the cool new features of the Expanded TESI 2.0

Next month we will be discussing Motivation and how the presence or absence of that energy is influencing all the team's members all the time.