

THE BIG EIGHT TEAMWORK TRAPS

BY ERIC PERKUNDER AND HENRY KUTARNA

We all aspire to be great leaders. We also see value in assembling a great team around us. Yet, whether we are a team member wishing simply to make a positive and honorable contribution, or lead a team wishing to exhibit great and proven leadership methods, we have undoubtedly faced challenges. Why is teamwork so challenging? Why can't people just know how to be part of a great team? What's the secret? Why isn't it as easy as it looks?

We assessed our past experiences with teams and have identified certain traps and pitfalls. What should we do to avoid these traps? What should we do to inform others about them? Here are selected short, true-life vignettes from executives who have personally faced these traps – and lived to tell the tale. In dealing with numerous corporations as consultants and owners, we encountered eight major traps. The good news is we believe overcoming them is possible. We also believe traps are readily recognizable. Think of your own experience as you consider our eight questions.

1. Do I give or take?

This is a trick question. Great teams are dynamic. Information is exchanged freely between players, enabling best choices, and smart decisions. At any time you may be a giver or a taker. Do not depend only on the work of others. Contribute continuously to idea exchange. Ask questions. Seek insight. Use learning to inform choices. Feed results to the team to facilitate forward momentum, or to improve daily operations. Give and take!

2. Do I respect deadlines?

A deadline is your commitment to the team. Failure to meet deadlines signals powerful negatives around how seriously you take your work, and how much you respect team members. Even if you claim to be busy, the message is one of disrespect. View your deadlines as contractual. Consider them carefully before committing. Ask questions ahead of time. Once you say yes, keep your promise.

3. Do I have a secondary agenda?

Getting on board with the goals of your team is an essential leadership characteristic. Help by fully participating in project planning and course-setting discussions. Collaborate. Listen. Share ideas with the team. Once direction is defined, give

full support to implementation. Harboring resentments after being overruled and then taking a neutral position toward the project is undermining behavior. It can short circuit your career potential. Get over it.

4. Do I procrastinate?

Procrastination can signal disorganization or time mismanagement. Learn to schedule time efficiently. Allocate enough time to complete assignments within deadlines. Keep track of projects and commitments systematically. Do not count on others to remind you when tasks and assignments are due. Taking heed of this asserts professionalism, adds great value to team efforts, and enhances your reputation as an executive who gets things done.

5. Do I speak up too late?

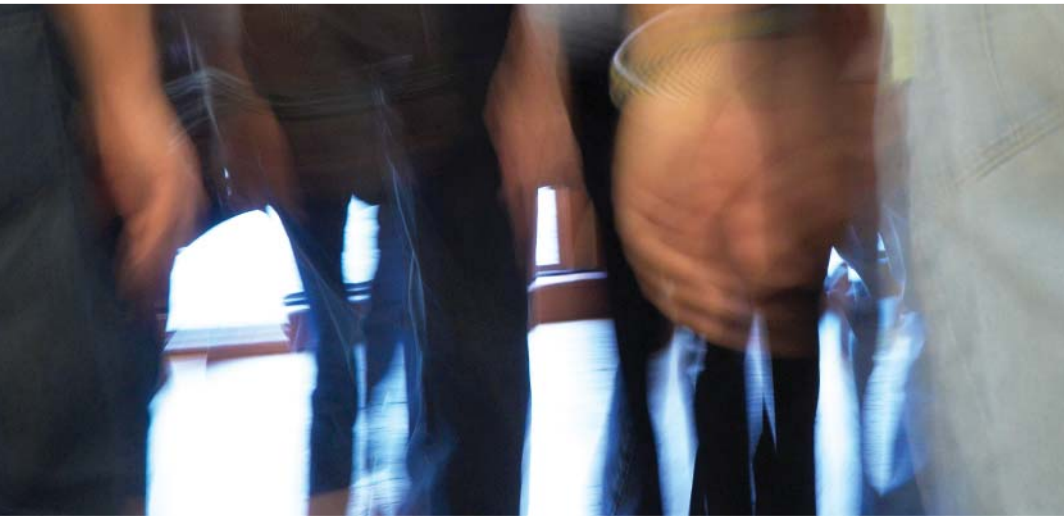
There is a well known consulting vignette (The Abilene Paradox) in which a family decides to make a trip that none desires because no one questions the decision, thinking there is consensus among the others. Avoid this. Contribute actively to discussion around goals by voicing ideas or concerns freely and honestly. Participate openly in defining project structure and timelines. Support team efforts. Learn from success and failure, thus taking credit and responsibility for outcomes.

6. Do I see wide screen or “picture in picture”?

Lift your head up. Leaders look for the big picture. Leaders illuminate issues. Leaders consider how decisions affect other parts of their organization. Make well-informed decisions by not becoming mired in distracting details. Focus on essentials. Learn to see this way, and the quality and intelligence of your work will improve. You will become a valued source of insight on opportunities and challenges confronting your organization.

7. Do I create a swirl?

Some create a sandstorm of details around every question or discussion. This can be unintentional. It can also be an intentional ploy to hide problems or avoid disclosing important information. Such behavior is destructive because it obfuscates and deflects attention from real issues. Swirling kills meaningful discussion. It makes reaching well-informed choices extremely difficult. When you uncover swirl, take immediate corrective steps.



8. Do I support my team?

Teams fail when their leadership does not support them. Failed teams lack creativity and show little enthusiasm or ownership for projects. Support your team by collaborating on goals and assignments. Encourage open discourse and creative problem solving. Provide the high level air cover required to get projects and assignments finished without interference. Encourage personal and professional growth in team members. Most importantly, share credit for success openly with your team.

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