

Taking Your Performance to the Next Level: Creating Stretchpoint Teams

If you subscribe to the Jim Collins of putting the right people in the right jobs then you are half way there. How do you get all the way there? The answer is to create stretchpoint teams. What are stretchpoint teams? They are teams that are capable of producing breakthrough results. How do they constantly produce breakthrough results? Well the answer is a little more complicated. Let me explain.

Cross functional collaborative teams are indeed replacing the once deeply rooted bureaucratic top down management lines. This change requires a commitment to build teams that are rich in diversity, experience and knowledge. The world collaborative is derived from the Latin "laboro" meaning to work and the prefix "col" meaning together. Sounds simply right working together as a team? The truth of the matter is that it is very complicated but must be mastered. In fact, in a world where change is the norm only capitalizing on collaborative teams will separate the successful from the unsuccessful.

In today's economic pressured environments, everyone is expected to do more with less. Doing more with less requires innovation and a new approach to the business. Today's leader must be equipped and committed to developing collaborative teams. The leader has to be able to shape a framework that facilitates buy in for continuous change and for continuous team evolution. Communication and emotional intelligence skills will become more and more important as we embrace the global economy. Leaders of the 21st century must be capable of helping teams to generate new understanding in ways never previously considered. Take the example of Blockbuster opening walk by locations in national airports. Who would have ever thought that this idea could translate into higher visibility for the organization and profitability? This is the kind of breakthrough thinking that collaborative stretchpoint teams will have to produce day in and day out. It is not enough to just show up for work. Today's workforce is expected to produce and perform at higher levels than was expected of employees in the past.

Stretchpoint teams are learning teams. Each member of these types of teams is committed to excellence. This According to the latest Watson Wyatt WorkUSA Survey, highly committed companies outperformed low commitment companies by a whopping 200% as measured by three year total returns to shareholders. Very few organizations or teams engage themselves in brainstorming about the future. Most organizations go about the business of doing the daily business without thinking about what will be needed to be successful in the future. Each individual has to anticipate where the company or team is going and find their rightful place in creating that new world. Staying engaged is critical for business success.

Every team has a culture. In fact, within an organization you'll find as many cultures as they are leaders of teams. The culture of a stretchpoint team is unique. It is rooted in several critical elements. These elements include:

- Respect for the experience and expertise that each member brings to the table
- A sense of family-they connect with each other and are willing to take responsibility for the other person's success or failure
- They believe in building on each other's ideas instead of tearing them down-they live in a world of possibility
- They have a burning desire to make a difference
- They adopt a philosophy that screams "it's not about me, it's about we"
- They trust each other
- They empower each other
- They hold each other accountable
- They are willing to be vulnerable

A recent article from the Washington post dated August 12, 2003 that friendlier employees are more productive employees. This is the determined made after research conducted by the University Michigan. The purpose of the research was to compare US work environments with international work environments. What they found was that Americans are keen on keeping things impersonal at work. In fact the research found that rarely are people with other cultural backgrounds as impersonal as mainstream Americans. While other cultures throughout the world were not. In other cultures become friends first then working together is the norm, as in the example of Latin Americas. Pompous Americans dismiss this kind of activity as inappropriate.

One of my clients is a brilliant Latin America. She speaks five languages. She has worked in several different countries. She is an outgoing vivacious woman. She greets everyone with a hug and she wears her heart on her sleeve. There is no hidden agenda to be found around her. In fact she is dedicated to serving other people. Despite her extensive background, multiple languages and experience she feels "less than" in the company where she works. Consequently her ability to contribute at the highest level of her potential is compromised.

Stretchpoint teams are great at having one eye on the current and one eye on the future. Creating learning teams requires behavioral changes. These teams are different than regular good or even great teams. What's the difference? These teams are capable of harnessing the greatest of the diverse backgrounds, experiences and thought processes and approaches to the business. According to ---- teams that have diverse components they are --- more productive.

In today's competitive fast paced environment, effective team performance is increasingly important to the success of any organization. There is an emotional energy

that either builds up or drains the output of the team. After researching many teams to determine what common thread lie within breakthrough teams, I have discovered the following:

- Stretchpoint teams share a common vision
- They have a common set of guidelines that serve to foster an inclusive environment
- They have a burning desire to achieve something that no other team has before
- They value innovation and creativity as a critical part of the strategic planning process and traits that are brought to the table by everyone
- They are willing to learn in “real time” understanding that there is no book that will guide us through this territory that has never before been explored
- They understand that everyone brings something to the table and each and everyone should be respected for their individual contributions. They have processes to leverage all this unique power
- They understand that setbacks are the foundation of resiliency
- They believe in fun and celebrating small achievements

So what’s up with this vision thing?

Your mind stretched to a new idea never goes back to its original dimensions. – Oliver Wendell Holmes

Have we not heard it enough: if you don’t know where you are going you will end up somewhere but where is anybody’s guest. As much as we have been told about the power of creating a clear vision, most managers and leaders have not done so. They have rested on the corporate vision and they think that’s enough. Wrong, absolutely wrong! A team that achieves breakthrough results can connect their own team vision into the bigger vision. The best teams connect to the organization vision by defining how their work increases value to the ultimate customer.

The vision for the team has to be simple and teachable. Organizations and teams have spent thousands perhaps millions of dollars with expensive consultants to come up with just the right wording for their vision statement. But then they can’t repeat it. No wonder there is a disconnect between the team’s performance and the expected outcomes. If you don’t believe in the power of setting a “real” vision, do we me a favor ask your five people on your team a simple question. The question is this: what’s team’s vision. You’ll discover what a lot of managers and leaders have discovered you’ll get five different answers. Some of the answers might be close but not close enough to ensure that every team member is acting from the same page.

Take a look at these examples of vision statements for stretchpoint teams:

- Achieve consistent breakthrough performance year after year
- Become the number one team in the company by year's end

Vision statements at the team level should be fluid enough to accommodate business changes but solid enough to provide clear direction on the importance of the work. Staying focus on achieving the vision also helps to reinforce accountability.

Empowered To Reinvent the Rules

Empowerment is such an overused word. But, it is exactly how I would describe three kinds of teams. They are truly empowered. Empowerment to a stretchpoint teams means autonomy plus accountability. This combination is what creates ownership. Noel Tichy the Harvard Business Professor and author of many books including his latest "The Teachable Organization" puts it this way. "The way people get aligned is by having ownership together". Empowerment also paves the way for the team to engage in creating problem solving.

Now of course to empower a team the organization has got to provide the team with the needed resources with which to successfully execute. Some organizations have proven themselves to be more adept at creating ownership climates. Whole Foods is an example of an organization that has been able to create "employee entrepreneurs". Whole Foods rejects the traditional top down management style in favor of decentralization. Each employee but they don't call their employees "employees rather than call them "team members" are encouraged to make good decisions, be innovative but they are held accountable for their actions. To help employees make good decisions, the senior leadership provides financial insight, trends, margins and other business information that really serves to drive that entrepreneurial spirit. Team members have access to salaries. There is total transparency and no hidden agendas. And guess what Whole Foods is the fastest growing supermarket chain in the country. Maybe this empowerment with accountability thing works!

Stretchpoint teams create inclusive cultures

Creating inclusive cultures has been a challenge for organizations since the early 80's. As the demographic composition of the workforce began to change, it became obvious that the environment that was created for "white men" would need to be adjusted. Companies are still trying to find the right formula even as we begin the 21st century. You would think that it would be so simple. Can't we call just work together in peace and harmony? Can't we celebrate differences instead of seeing them as a negative?

Progressive leaders understand that in order to foster an environment where innovation and creativity can thrive there needs to be diversity. Given that stretchpoint teams are fundamentally teams that can collaborate it makes absolutely logical sense that these teams would be able to establish meaningful relationships. In environments where

individuals are empowered to be their “true” self these types of relationship can support and respect for different ways to approach and think about the business.

Creating a place that each employee can thrive and perform at their best is what inclusivity is all about. Employees want to be respected and valued for the contribution that they make to the performance outcomes of the teams. If an employee feels rejected or put down because of differences they disconnect from the team and the ultimate impact is negative. In the research conducted to complete First, Break All the Rules by Marcus Buckingham of the Gallop Poll, several key substantiate the importance of keeping employees connected or engaged. M. Buckingham’s research suggests that as high as 70% of all employees come to work and are disengaged. These employees are physically present but are emotionally detached to a commitment to the team.

It is the leader’s responsibility to set the tone so that an inclusive environment can thrive. Once he or she sets the tone they need to continue to find new ways to block the team from settling into subgroups or mini power partnerships. The leader needs to be the catalyst for implementing ground rules that reinforce positive communication between team members and supports best practice processes. These two elements will not only enhance the team’s ability to create an inclusive environment but it will help to identify pockets of flexibility. These pockets of flexibility enable the team to be quick and agile. These two elements are critical for success in today’s fast paced environment.

“Real Time” Learning Requires Change

We are living in times that history didn’t predict. Does every generation believe that history wasn’t a valid predictor for them? Perhaps each generation could find a rationale to support this belief but the truth of the matter is that the 21st century is unlike anything that has ever happened before. What are some of the significant trends and drivers?

- The global economy
- The most diverse workforce in history
- Technology
- Emerging trade channels
- Changing and unpredicted consumer purchase patterns (24/7 purchase options)
- Non traditional work cites -redefining of the workplace
- New ways of obtaining education (on-line, distance learning)
- Self led work teams
- A Contingent Workforce
- No retirement

These are just a few of the trends and changes that are forces today’s leaders and teams to practice “real time” learning. Real time learning is just that: it is the ability to draw on your skills, values and beliefs to make quick decisions in an environment of constant change. Real time learning stretches blows the traditional organization hierarchy to the moon. Why? Because the CEO’s don’t have all the answers, neither do senior vice presidents or leaders in general. Someone in the mail room might just have the next big idea that will make the company millions of dollars.

To optimize real time learning, leaders must recognize that what worked yesterday will probably not work tomorrow. Unless we position ourselves to quickly adapt by not holding onto hold thought patterns, old ways of approaching the business, then opportunities will pass us by. This is why stretchpoint teams are always in "test" mode. They aren't afraid to try something new.

Organizations that are not willing to redefine themselves will be left in the dust by the competition. Think about the growth of Wal Mart. For years the retail industry was dominated by Sears Roebuck. Whatever you needed Sears had it. Obtaining a position of dominance caused this organization to get locked into thinking that the consumer would never change and therefore they didn't need to change. Then a little company called Wal Mart came to the table and began to redefine the shopping experience. Wal Mart's management created "one stop shopping". They took the Sears model added efficiency and low prices and whola a new way of doing business was born. Wal Mart didn't wait for the model to be established so that they could follow it. They created the model that everyone else is now trying to follow. How did they do it? They optimized real time learning. Wal Mart is relentless in its pursuit of redefining the shopping experience. Even today in 2003 they are engaging in test activities throughout the world looking to create the next new model.

When Wal Mart embarked upon redefining the shopping experience, they were not the industry leader. It's important to understand that there was nothing that was in place to suggest that the Wal Mart model would work. After all Sears and to some degree Montgomery Wards had the market locked and loaded. Yet through innovation, creativity, problem solving and risk taking Wal Mart was able to refine the model.

This phenomenal continues to emerge as more and more retailers are building alliances to redefine their offerings. Think about the gas stations that once only provided car service. Now you stop for gas and you can pick up wine, lottery tickets, bread and anything else. 7-Eleven is taking its turn at redefining itself placing locations in airports. Dell is now getting into the real action places kiosks in airports as well. The bottom line is that companies who are willing to extend themselves and adopt a permanent learning and testing mentality will be the winners. Those organizations who do not heed the warning are at risk of being put out of business.

Work Hard; Play Hard-Celebrate

Since I am a recovering work-alholic, no article would be complete if I didn't talk about the value of a team pausing to engage in celebration and fun! Com on life is short. People want work to be fun! Where do you spend the majority of your waking hours? Yes, you got it, at work! So then why should we give ourselves permission to celebrate and play once in awhile? Most employees now realize that there is no such thing as "job security" that doesn't change their need to feel valued. There is even evidence that suggests that teams are more productive when they give themselves permission to make work fun.

There is enough stress going around to stress the world out. Why not counterbalance all the stress with fun. People think clearer when they take a break from being in the middle of a problem. Have you ever had the experience where you putting something together and you just couldn't figure out what you were doing wrong? When my kids were younger my husband and I experienced our annual "putting it together" frustration at Christmas. We learned from trial and error that the best thing to do sometimes is just to take a little break. To pause long enough to look at the progress that you have made and then to offer someone else an opportunity to take a shot at the problem. When you give yourself permission to insert a little humor every now and then you will find that you'll be more relaxed and your performance will actually improve.

I think that fun and humor can be a great support mechanism to help individuals and teams overcome setbacks. Fun and laughter is part of one's ability to be resilient. Maintaining a positive outlook and a great attitude are critical components of successful teams that are able to deal with the daily pressures that affect us all.

Stretchpoint team leaders encourage laughter because they realize that laughter cross all cultures, all experiences and both genders. Laughter and fun can create wonderful memories that provide your team with a sense of connectivity and belonging. Laughing at yourself gives others permission to laugh as well. Just because you are a professional doesn't mean that you have to walk around looking like you are constipated. Nor does it mean you have to sacome to the serious disease. Let go. Let your natural talents and gifts come out. That includes the humor emotion.

The next time that you go into an office, notice if people are smiling. Check out the noise level. Do people even talk to one another? See if you can feel the tension that covers these kinds of teams like a haze. Then find a team that you know enjoys expressing themselves in a humoristic way, notice the difference. What you'll find is that the team who shares ultimately cares. And teams that care are able to achieve breakthrough results. It seems so obvious if you are happy about coming to work; then you'll engage more and produce more!

Stretchpoint teams must be created. Once they are; an organization can multiple them and break down silos that hold the organization back from achieving breakthrough results. If you want to experience higher levels of performance create a stretchpoint team.

About the Author

As a former senior corporate executive who broke the glass ceiling while working for a Fortune 100 Company, Trudy Bourgeois has the credibility and knowledge needed to address key issues and opportunities in today's business environment. The depth of her expertise comes from twenty years of front line cross functional experience. As President/CEO of The Center for Workforce Excellence, she is living her passion to help others achieve greatness. The company provides business coaching, experiential learning summits, business tele-classes and organizational performance improvement consulting. Her company specializes in developing next generation leaders that are capable of developing and executing strategies and solutions that optimize the 21st century workforce.

She is the author of *Her Corner Office: A Guide to Help Women Find a Place and Voice in Corporate America* and "*The Hybrid Leader: Blending the Best of the Male and Female Leadership Behaviors and Traits*"

The Center for Workforce Excellence is a coaching and training and consulting company located in Plano Texas. They specialize in developing next generation leaders, creating stretchpoint teams and strategies and solutions to take individual and team performance to higher levels.

You can get more information on how they can help your organization to improve its performance by logging onto the website www.workforceexcellence.com or www.trudypresents.com contact them 866-505-6555