Teams and Personal History

by Nancy Post, Ph.D.

Organizations employ teams to do the organization's work. Teams, then, employ individuals who do the team's work. So, if you understand how to work with individuals, you will always be successful working with teams. Right?

Not always. Why?

Because teams are not simply the sum of all the individual behaviors of team members. Teams are a social entity that take on a life of their own. They have a life-cycle, a personality, ways of behaving, tasks they love, work they resist and special ways in which they display leadership. No two are the same, even if many of the members of two teams are the same people. Each team is a social system which responds to the human needs of its members in addition to doing important work for the organization.

Many people join teams because they find the team's task compelling. You may think, "I want to do that piece of work because I believe in it or because I think I can add value by contributing my skill or expertise." If you feel this way, you are aligning yourself with the team's task.

There are others, however, who like the way the team works. "That group has fun and respect each other no matter what they do! I want to be on that team!" If this is your view, you are more attracted to the process in which the team engages, and you may want to affiliate even if your skills may not fit perfectly with the team's needs.

Typically, though, you will do your best work in teams in which your skills fit the task and your personality promotes the team's process. It is often the case, however, that the fit between teams and their members is less than seamless.

To understand how individuals and teams fit together, it is necessary to understand four dimensions that contribute to human behavior on teams: personal history, job history, team roles and teams as whole systems. This article will be the first in a series that will discuss all four.

Personal History

Whether we are kids trying out for positions on a basketball team, or teachers vying for supervisory positions, we arrive with assumptions. We believe that we deserve the role, are qualified for it and can be mentally tough if the going gets rough We feel confident; that is, as long as our upbringing gave us a sufficient sense of self-esteem. If not, we may apply for a position and have hidden, or not so hidden, doubts about ourselves. We may believe that we got the job through dumb luck or politics, or because we faked the interview and deceived the boss/coach into believing we are competent.

In addition to assumptions about ourselves, we bring beliefs about others. Some people believe that their boss should know more about their job than we do. Some people believe that their boss is simply there if you need her, but that you are ultimately responsible to sort out the work. Some people see their boss as a protector who shields them from organizational interference. Still others expect their boss to support them emotionally and bolster their sense of esteem.

It is likely that your expectation of your boss has been colored by the way your parents treated you. If your parents were very supportive, you may expect similar treatment from your organizational elder. Likewise, if your parents were punitive, you may come to

expect harsher than necessary treatment from your boss when you make a mistake.

Approaches to peer relationships parallel behavior with siblings. If you are the only son in a family filled with daughters, you may experience special treatment in the family. Later, when you start work, you may still expect special treatment, and it is likely you'll get it because you will treat the team n in as natural a way as you treated your sisters (who adored you but were always a little jealous.)

In fact, those women on your team probably came from families which taught them to let men shine even if it meant turning down their own light. So when you find yourself on a team with these women, you bring complementary sets of assumptions about yourself and each other. This occurs until the assumptions clash. Then your family conditioning may be at loggerheads with hers. You assume you are right, she assumes she's right, and the team's process becomes less harmonious.

Assumptions about behavior also come from your cultural background. This has imbued you with beliefs about success and failure, male and female roles, your place in society, your approach to leadership and your work ethic, to name but a few aspects.

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So when you work on a team, you bring conditioning that whispers strong messages to you about how to work, even if the people who first gave you those messages are in your distant past. Likewise, your co-workers are responding to the voices from their past even as they listen to you.

Many times, conflict on teams is a result of frustration caused by clashing of assumptions. If this is the case, it is useful to sort out (1) What assumptions are present, and, (2) Do the assumptions support the work? In other words, which assumptions are shared and can be acted upon by team members?

Human behavior is complicated enough without the added dimensions that come as a result of organizational complexities. To start, try to become aware of what you expect of yourself and others as well as where those assumptions came from.

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