The Team:
A Cast of Characters

by Nancy Post, Ph.D.

My husband and I were watching the academy award presentations last month. This year, the choices for winners in the best picture, best actress and best actor categories favored small, independently made films whose starring roles were played by lesser known actors. Movie critics and film connoisseurs alike commented at the unusual nature of the choices made by members of the Academy. Individuality, uniqueness and artistic spirit were more highly prized attributes this year than conformity, popularity or even box-office appeal. Relatively unknown actors, directors and producers were recognized by their peers even though they diverged from popularly accepted standards.

Teams face this challenge. How can we, as members of teams, harness the power, strength, creativity and individuality of our members while at the same time moving in the same direction and accomplish a collective goal. Team members and their leaders are faced with the paradox of wanting to foster individuality while, at the same time, building team spirit. Organizations spend countless time and resources attempting to find creative and effective ways to **simultaneously** develop individuals and teams.

There are two fundamental schools of thought to explain human behavior on teams. The first focuses on individual dynamics while the second focuses on the behavior of the team as a whole system. The first school of thought believes that we all are highly conditioned beings by the time we start work - that our previous life and family experience have conditioned us to behave in certain ways. By the time we arrive at our first job, we already have created a set of beliefs about ourselves and other people that guide our behavior with them. In addition, we unconsciously coach other people into treating us in the way we are conditioned to believe we should be treated.

For example, I recently worked with a teacher who was taking my class in team dynamics. A very bright, articulate and somewhat driven woman, she was recently assigned a special project in her school: to develop a computer center and link the school to the Internet. She was trying to finish her project but was awaiting a decision from her boss before she felt she could act. Before becoming a teacher, she had been a captain in the military and her father was a retired colonel. This woman had internalized notions about authority and how it should be used in organizational settings. She believed, as she had been taught both at home during her childhood and during the first part of her career while she was in the military, that she should not question her superiors. Her role on her team, as she defined it, was to support the leader by implementing his or her commands.

Unfortunately, her supervisor in her school had a different notion of authority. She was the middle daughter in a working class, Catholic family with five children whose father was a construction worker. Her parents, who had immigrated to the United States, did not expect any of their children to pursue higher education or to become leaders. The family was focused on survival, not higher level achievement. Thus, this woman was not encouraged to become a leader. She was, however, a quiet and studious pupil who excelled in school. Through support from guidance counselors and teachers, she was encouraged to go to college and ultimately became a teacher.

But her notion of her role was not one in which she considered herself an authority nor

expected other teachers to follow her "commands". Despite the fact that she had an authority role as a supervisor, she played the role as if she imagined herself a support to her team, not like a military leader who makes decisions and expects her team to enact her wishes.

Needless to say the expectations of these women clashed when they worked together on a team. The result was that our military trained teacher felt stunted because her boss wasn't making certain decisions that she expected her to make. In fact, our loyal Captain was obsessing about the inadequacies of her mild mannered boss - which reinforced the rift between them and also reinforced her boss's natural meekness.

Adopting the second approach to team behavior, we would step away from this battle between individual histories and expectations and would look at the dynamic between these team mates from a **systems** perspective. Instead of trying to understand their behavior by analyzing their histories and how they unwittingly coach the other into behavior that reinforces their assumptions, we could look at these women as a team which was conflicted about what to expect from its leader. Each member of the team would then be considered like a voice of the team. In one case, the team would be saying, "

we believe in collaboration and there is no distinction in the value of a team member - despite the presence of hierarchy." Simultaneously, the team would also be saying, "we expect our leaders to make final decisions and we can't move until they do so." We could then say that the team was conflicted about how decisions should be made.

At this point, we would have identified a team problem with a decision-making issue rather than an interpersonal problem between a teacher and her supervisor. In most cases, people feel more skilled solving a team problem than they are in confronting one another. The problem can usually be solved while preserving the dignity of the individuals.

This is not to say that the individual system dynamic is not true or useful to understand. Leaders must understand individual dynamics in order to properly and accurately assess motivation. But the additional use of a systems approach often leads to solutions for teams, while enhancing the uniqueness of their members. Organizations can find a good example in the Academy which expanded its notion to include the diversity of its members. As a system, it will be stronger while its members will feel enhanced.

© 1997, Nancy Post

Post Enterprises
616 West Upsal Street
Philadelphia PA 19119
[215] 438-8590