

Two plus two equals....?

Ruby Tomar

Well, two plus two was lesser than four for this project that I was assigned for a team of engineers involved in delivering towards a crucial part of the companies' install base. This paper describes how I have stitched the fabric of the team together and the frameworks used.

The Situation

Tasks were getting ticked off from the To-Do lists, without the knowledge of the Whys, the engineers were delivering on what was requested, with little knowledge of the big picture. There was uncertainty about the future and the group lacked cohesion. There was little motivation to aim for the extraordinary and to put in that extra effort to ensure robustness and scalability of the solution. Mediocrity prevailed and was the norm, most operated safely within their boundaries. There was little merit in developing one's skills or increasing competency and most focussed toward doing the minimal to survive. The "team" had fragmented into islands of information with no cross-pollination between them.

The Transformation Journey

I started with some understanding of the business and the dynamics of the team. Slowly began to connect with each one individually, beginning with warmth, hearing each one out with a genuine desire to understand. Being sensitive to their current situation, making them feel comfortable in it, accepting them as they were in a non-judgemental way.

Staying attuned to their feelings; acknowledging the emotions they go through so they feel understood and cared for created a mutual comfort level and a sense of belonging towards each other.

Every 1:1 focussed on creating a culture that is transparent and honest; and is focused on rigor and results. Being like a coach taking real interest in what they want from their career and job, rekindled the zeal for putting in their best. Slowly people started to affiliate with each other and I was regarded as a member of their group. [1] [2]

Using the framework laid out in "The 5 dysfunctions of a team" [3] gave a structural approach to solving the problem, especially the personal histories exercise helped bond the group better.

Working together through several workshops we derived a set of shared values and guiding principles which were consistently reaffirmed with every action and decision. Team and individual goals were set acknowledging the current state and sharing the vision of the desired state from "What is" to "What could be". By making them mutually accountable to one another, and encouraging accountability conversations between peers (especially when one is missing the commitment), interpersonal conflicts reduced

as now they shared accountability towards a common goal. They discussed all viewpoints, choose the best one, they may disagree BUT they committed.

Aligning the work done by the team with the larger picture, regularly sharing organizational updates, product roadmaps, and replaying the All Employee Meetings helped connect them to the larger whole and brought pride and meaning to their day to day work.

Converting team meetings into fun activities/learning workshops helped them learn/polish their soft-skills while bonding with each other. Getting team members to facilitate sessions; encouraging healthy debate, creating team rules collectively so that everyone's voice is heard, helped in creating action plans with everyone's buy-in.

Saying "I am sorry" when something wasn't done right by me, apologizing on behalf of my team for a goof up, helped build my credibility with the team, and they started realizing that asking for help taps into the natural human impulse of cooperating with others.[4] Soliciting feedback in 1:1s and anonymous settings helped me correct my course in real-time.

Providing recognition in public after a goal had been met or for the process followed (for even a failed effort), went a long way in building trust [4]. Giving them discretion in how they do their work, brought in new ways of thinking and the team started delivering on complex programs.

Being transparent, direct and consistent while communicating at all levels – team / peers / partners / management and explicitly mentioning the rationale for every action helped in freely sharing information and fostering open and honest communication.

Opened up various avenues for the team to showcase their work to the entire organization by way of open houses, newsletters, tech talks, project monthly reviews. Tackled performance issues head on – poor performers were managed out of the system replaced by lateral hires (hired according to the principles outlined by Laszlo Bock [5]) which helped raise the average performance of the team.

The current situation

Gradually as we started delivering increasingly on complex deliverables, we started taking up more strategic and complex programs while continuing to deliver on the current programs.

Driving the team's competence development using a home grown tool is ensuring that the team's productivity is increasing quarter by quarter.

The team has a lot of fun, with everyone being accountable for their piece. There is increased leverage within, folks collaborate well, and the risk appetite and confidence levels have gone up. They are now venturing into areas never attempted before, with an ever increasing pride in their work.

Who says two plus two equals four?

References

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- [2] What Makes a leader by Daniel Goleman; Best of HBR 1998
- [3] The Five Dysfunctions of a Team; Book by Patrick Lencioni
- [4] The NeuroScience of Trust: management behaviours that foster employee engagement: Harvard Business Review, January–February 2017
- [5] Interview with Laszlo Bock <http://www.businessinsider.in/Google-HR-boss-says-asking-these-questions-will-instantly-improve-your-job-interviews/articleshow/46936039.cms>
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About the Author



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Ruby Tomar has worked in the print, automotive, consumer, networking, and telecommunications industries as a Project Manager and is with HP for over 10 years. She is an avid reader of the latest management research and leads various initiatives within and across her organization. With two patents filed and four disclosures to her credit, Ruby is process and technology savvy with a strong inclination towards innovation and process optimization. She can be reached at rubytomar.sps@gmail.com.