The "Me" In Team

By Kenya McCullum

Remember the teacher that warned you that "there's no 'I' in 'team'" when you weren't sharing with your classmates? From a young age, we are told we should be a "team player" by being cooperative, thoughtful of other people's needs and unselfish.

But things change when we enter the world of work. Bonuses, raises, performance incentives and promotions all stress the importance of individual accomplishment. And although there are instances when we are required to work in small groups, it's difficult because there is usually so much emphasis on individual success and personal excellence in the workplace.

However, working in small teams also has a number of benefits, including lightening your load on an individual project and infusing the work with more ingenuity. Since two or more heads are better than one, a group is able to generate more ideas and solutions than an individual can. The benefits of working in a team can also extend past the life of a project by expanding your network and building camaraderie with the co-workers you already know.

Even if you don't regularly work in small groups, remember your individual accomplishments still contribute to a larger team— your company. And for the times when you do have the opportunity to work in a small group, there are several strategies that can make the experience a success while not losing your own voice in the process.

Getting To Know You

Although you may already be acquainted with members of your team, you may not really know much about them beyond their name, rank and serial number. Learning about team members' strengths, weaknesses and even quirks can help ensure that they are all placed roles that make them comfortable and allow them to excel. Everyone brings their own unique resources to the table and getting to know your team members well allows you to tap into them.

Put It In Writing

When you begin work in a small group, you may already know what your project is but you may not necessarily know what your team's goals are. If members of the team write out a mission statement— usually no more than a paragraph long— it ensures that everyone is on the same page and clear about what you're working to accomplish.

Likewise, whenever there is any communication between group members outside of scheduled meetings, it should be documented in writing and sent to everyone on the team. This keeps all group members informed about what's going on while creating a sense of accountability among team members.

Generating Ideas

The best way for a group to generate new ideas about a project and to solve problems is through brainstorming. This process is an opportunity for each team member to throw out ideas until a solution is agreed upon. The best way to proceed with a brainstorming exercise is to:

• **Allow members to say whatever is on their mind.** Remember there are no wrong answers and no ideas too absurd to mention when you're brainstorming.

• **Refrain from evaluating ideas until everyone has had their say.** Commenting that an idea is good or bad can stifle creativity and dissuade group members from speaking out.

• **Vote on ideas once they have all been presented.** Once the group decides on which ideas are good ones and which ones should be scrapped it is easier to come to a consensus.

Conflict Is Good

Although we have a tendency to avoid conflict at all costs, especially in the workplace, it's actually counterproductive for members of a small group to always agree. When there is no debate among team members, there is a risk of engaging in groupthink which occurs when the fear of conflict is so great that everyone in a group agrees with anything and everything in order to keep the peace. While it may seem like a more harmonious way to work with others, it actually renders the group stagnant because it sucks all of the creative energy out of the team.

That's not to say that people should have battles either. There are a number of strategies that group members can employ that will allow room for conflict without the discussion becoming too heated.

• **Express your ideas without monopolizing the conversation.** Let everyone have a say and encourage them to speak up, even if they disagree.

• **Don't get personal.** If you're concerned about something another group member has done, discuss the behavior, not the person. Don't make value judgments or assumptions about another team member's motivations. And whatever you do, don't denigrate other people in the group when you don't agree with them. You can keep it real, but you should still keep it civil.

The only time it's appropriate to make personal statements about someone's behavior in a group is when it's your own. Taking responsibility for your own actions and feelings will build trust and respect among your team members. If you make a mistake, own it and don't make excuses.

• **Actively listen to your team members.** All too often when we communicate in meetings, we are too busy thinking about what we're going to say next and not actually listening to what others are telling us. You should turn off this internal chatter, face your teammate, and wait for your turn to formulate a response.

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