Making the Most out of Teamwork.

BY KENNETH A. “BUZZ” SHAW

I bet you have said that at some point in your career. Even my grandchildren do. One, 10 years old at the time, lamented to me that his group science project was a waste of time. “What did you learn,” I asked. “I can do things quicker and better by myself,” he responded.

I have heard the same from college students and those in the workplace. It doesn’t have to be that way. Since we spend so much of our work and personal lives in groups, let’s make them effective.

Groups can be enormously productive, creative and even courageous if correctly led. But just putting people together and expecting the best won’t get it done. In this and future columns you will learn how to make groups productive, focusing on the importance of group purpose, size and function. Future offerings will deal with positive and negative group roles, the ABCs of running a meeting, and leading very large groups. Let’s start with the basics.

Why Are We Here? All involved must know why the team has been formed (its overall purpose) and what it is to accomplish at each specific meeting. If confusion exists, the team will never deliver. Good teams serve a number of purposes.

To give information. The word is given out, participants ask questions, clarification is provided, and the meeting is over. A face-to-face setting is quite useful at times, but it is often overcome. Modern technology is often a more productive way to get the word out.

To give and receive information. This a good way to keep lines of communication open, allowing the group to share what is most important, often leading to a determination of how best to achieve individual and group goals. Here, also, technology can minimize over-reliance on “show and tell.”

To make decisions or to advise a decision-maker. Alas, many well-intentioned meetings never get to this point as it takes good planning and group skills to lead to better decisions. Focusing on decisions is how team time should be spent because many decisions are best made in a face to face setting.

To develop new ideas. Groups can be very creative if led properly and if participants can avoid making premature judgments about out-of-the-box ideas.

To resolve differences. When conflicts occur, often they are best resolved by getting everyone together (but not always).

These five purposes are not discrete entities. Many groups have several purposes but all participants need to be on the same page. It is your job as leader of the group to see that it happens.

Group Size. Group size should be determined by what it takes to get the job done and to obtain buy-in. Your team must be large enough to have all core competencies covered but not much larger. Too large a group leads to a few people talking and many watching. For me, the optimal size is between five and 10 members. This allows for input from everyone and, under the right conditions, a quality product. If the group must be much larger, the leader must use a more controlled approach. This will be the subject of a future column.

Group Function. Some groups exist to make their participants feel good. We call them socio-emotional groups. A traveling dinner party or a church sewing circle would be examples. Most business groups are task-oriented. A job needs to be done and the group works together to make it happen. However, even the most dedicated task group spends some time on socio-emotional concerns. Honoring birthdays, recent achievements and talking about Saturday’s football games often occur during “task” time. Let some of this happen but not too much. I try to shoot for 75 percent to 80 percent task in my groups. If it drops below that, I get nervous.

So, to get to first base in making your team effective, you must clearly define the team’s purpose, determine an optimal size and determine how much task time to allow. Next time we will look at the group skills a leader must have. This will get you to past second base.

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