

How to Build Effective Teams

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Building effective teams is imperative if you want to create the best possible working environment in the fire station. The concept of how to build effective teams does not change from one organization to the other. Yes, there are differences in the fire service, but the fundamental concepts of teambuilding remain the same. You simply have to apply these principles in the fire service more often because you spend so much time together when you're on shift.

Whether you are a team leader (like a captain or a battalion chief), or a team member (like a firefighter or engineer), applying the four tips below will help you to establish great teams in the fire station and any other area of your life that you have to work with groups of people.

1. Create a vision that the team members can buy into and share and take action!
2. Facilitate motivation for the team
3. Foster and continually cultivate trust
4. Have some dang fun!

1) Create a Vision and Take Action!

Great team leaders understand that teams not only need a leader, they need a leader with vision. (By the way, there is no such thing as a "leaderless team!") Many team leaders get a lot of stuff done, but there is no real vision for the team. Christopher Hegarty once said "Action without vision is nothing more than random activity." There needs to be a sense of purpose and direction for the team. Your fire department has a mission statement or maybe even a vision statement. This establishes the purpose and objective of the entire department. Your team should also have a mission or vision statement that tells the team how their existence fits into the overall purpose of the department. It should answer questions like "Why are we here? What is our purpose? How do we go about fulfilling that purpose?"

It doesn't do much good to have vision, goals, and objectives if you don't take action on them. Christopher Hegarty also said, "Vision without action is nothing more than hallucination." All the vision in the world won't get anything accomplished without action. Teams need to have an action plan to reach the goals and objectives they have established.

2) Facilitate Motivation

If you'll notice, I did not say "Motivate your team." You cannot motivate others. Motivation is internal and people can only be self-motivated. What team leaders can do is create an atmosphere and environment that allows people to be self-motivated.

When you drop a mouse into a maze with a piece of cheese, it is not the cheese that drives the mouse—it's hunger. Team leaders need to find out what makes their team hungry and then help provide the food. Some people are driven by accomplishment. Some are driven by money. Some are driven by public praise. Every team member is different and great team leaders will know their team members well enough to know what motivates them.

So how do you create an environment where people can be self-motivated? First of all, you can set the role model example and let your actions inspire others. When people see leaders who love what they do and have a strong work ethic, it inspires them to work harder and better. When

people hear leaders talk about their vision, dreams, and purpose with passion, it inspires them to strive for a higher standard. Enthusiasm is contagious and team members want to belong to teams where they can be inspired to be the best they can be.

3) Foster and Continually Cultivate Trust

Without trust, teams are completely ineffective. Team members need to trust each other and trust the team leader. An old Chinese proverb puts it succinctly: “Trust, like fine China, once broken can be repaired, but it’s never quite the same.” Trust is such a fragile thing that you don’t want to screw up! However, people do make mistakes, and sometimes trust is broken. If that happens to you, the best thing you can do is admit your mistake, ask forgiveness, and start re-building trust through your consistent behavior choices. Here are four effective ways of building and continually cultivating trust:

1. *Be honest!* Always tell the truth, even when you think people don’t want to hear it. I’m not saying be “brutally” honest, because I don’t think you need to add the brutal. As hard as the truth may be, most people always prefer the truth over some distorted version of the truth. If you want to build trust, people need to believe you and believe that you will always be honest with them.
2. *Be dependable!* Do what you say you’re going to do when you said you would do it and how you said it would be done. This builds trust. If you have a habit of not following through on things, people will start to mistrust you. If you say you will be there at 3:00 pm, then be there, and be there on time! If you say you will have it done on Friday, then make sure you get it done, and you get it done right! Teams suffer when any member of the team stops being dependable.
3. *Be accountable!* Great teams share a common thread: all of the team members make themselves accountable to the entire team for their actions and decisions. Additionally, everyone makes themselves accountable up and down the chain of command. Effective teams will hold themselves and other team members accountable to reach the goals and objectives of the team while maintaining the integrity of the team values.
4. *Be humble!* Great team leaders will give away credit to the team for successes and will accept blame for failures. Every team member should be willing to be humble enough to share in the glory of team accomplishments and step up to accept responsibility for team mistakes, setbacks, or failures. Teams unite together to correct mistakes instead of hanging one person out to dry. John Wooden is known as college basketball’s most successful coach. He was a true team leader who believed in team players. Because he built successful teams, players like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar put his own personal agenda aside for the benefit of the team. Instead of the team building their game around Kareem where he could have become the all time leading scorer in college basketball history, Kareem played the game as a team and refused to play any other way. John Wooden believed the team as a whole was the key to success, not any particular player. As a result of this mentality, UCLA won an unprecedented ten NCAA championship titles under John Wooden’s leadership.

As you can see, trust is a huge element for building effective teams. Teams will always function better under a stable environment of mutual trust.

4) Have Some Dang Fun!

Teams require hard work, diligence, and perseverance. But there is also a time to just have some fun. California is the most litigious state in the union with more than 1.5 million civil suits filed every year! Organizations all over the country are trying to buckle down. Fire departments are doing the same. Firefighters are discouraged from playing practical jokes because it might result in a harassment lawsuit. It may even appear that some city attorneys and HR personnel live to hunt down any resemblance of fun and beat the living hell out of it. This is hurting the morale of your teams in the fire service. You need to have fun. Let me say that again: **YOU NEED TO HAVE FUN!** Your teams need to have fun. It just needs to stay within department, city, local, state, and federal policy.

You may not know this, but only 1.8% of your time is spent on emergency calls. That's a lot of left over time back at the station. When all of the station chores are done and you've spent some time working towards your team goals and objectives, engage in some fun activities that will help bring the team closer together.

Teams need to laugh and enjoy their working environment. Tell jokes (clean and PC of course), watch funny movies, make fun of yourself (the safest form of humor, I can assure you!), lighten up and laugh at life. It is a physiological fact that stress and laughter cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Laughter is healthy and stress-reducing and should be a fundamental part of any team!

Whether you are a team leader or a team member, you can take responsibility to make your team more effective. Help create a vision that others can buy into and share. Encourage others to join you as you take action on that vision. Help facilitate motivation for the team by being a role model example in your attitude and work ethic. Help cultivate that environment of mutual trust by being someone who is trustworthy. Help lighten the mood in the station and facilitate some fun with some good clean humor. Life is tough at times, and effective teams make the journey much more bearable!

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