Establishing Positive Team Climate

Overview

> ### *Purpose*
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> The purpose of this module is to develop participants' ability to promote a positive team climate
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> ### *Objectives*
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> At the end of this module participants will be able to:
>
> - Identify techniques that will promote a positive team climate.
> - Ask questions to assess a team's climate.
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> ### *Content*
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> - Characteristics of a Positive Team Climate
> - Assessment of Team Climate

Positive Team Climate

As a team develops, informal rules (norms) that influence the members' behavior quickly become established. The precise guidelines under which the team operates rarely are written down but are understood by the members. After a while, these rules become habitual and are communicated (by a process that sociologists call *socialization*) to new team members. The combination of traditions, habits, relationships, practices, rules, beliefs, and attitudes that characterize a group is called its *climate*. Much of the responsibility for establishing a group's climate belongs to the team's leader.

Ask a group of people to think of a highly successful team and to identify the three key characteristics that made it great. Without fail, the answers will include statements such as "People were open with one another," "I felt tremendously valued in this group," "There was a buzz of excitement when we were together," and "I enjoyed myself enormously." All of these statements relate to that hard-to-define aspect of teamwork that we call climate.

Certain conditions must exist in order for a positive team climate to form. The following conditions must be present:

- *Trust*: The belief that deeds will follow words and that the other person will take your interests into account. High-quality relationships cannot operate where there is lack of trust.

- *Openness*: People say what they really think and feel.

- *Closeness*: Team members feel affection for one another, and a similar, basic set of moral values draws team members together.
- *High energy*: The team has a strong positive atmosphere and zest for life.

Trust

Trust is an enabling force. It is the foundation of a positive climate, providing stability during turbulence and change. There are five conditions that must be met to achieve a climate of trust.

The first condition is *honesty* – telling the truth even when the truth is embarrassing, unpalatable, or shocking. People accept that they cannot expect to know everything at once, but when information is conveyed, it must be the truth.

The second condition is *consistency*. A person who waivers on matters of principle is soon distrusted, even though he or she may be telling the truth in each individual moment. A trustworthy person must have a core of stability, consistency, and dependability.

The third condition is *realism*. People whose statements are incredible or fanciful are not believed, even though they may be totally sincere.

The fourth condition is *application*. Deeds must follow words. A person who promises to do something must follow through or else his or her credibility will be destroyed. If a person is offered something positive (e.g., an incentive) that fails to materialize, the offerer immediately will lose credibility. The same principle holds true when a disciplinary action is threatened but not carried out (i.e., not coming to a meeting leads to expulsion from the team).

The fifth condition is *compassion* – a belief that others (especially team members) will act fairly and decently. We trust people who appear to have our best interests at heart, and we want to be treated with compassion and dignity.

Openness

Not all group climates support the development of a team approach. Team building requires a climate of openness – one in which problems, concerns, and feelings are aired. A climate of openness must exist in order for team members to establish relationships that are genuine and close.

Openness is not easily achieved or maintained. Too many people have learned to hide feelings and thoughts that they think are unacceptable. However, it is vital in team building that members take risks and suggest initiatives. It should be possible for people to be wrong without being made

to look foolish.

The degree of openness in a team affects its climate so profoundly that it is helpful to identify the advantages and disadvantages of an open approach. The main advantages of an open approach are:

- Frustration is reduced.
- Closer personal relationships are established.
- Problems are clarified and can be addressed.
- Feedback is given, enabling others to learn and develop.
- Energy is released as issues become unblocked.

However, there are also potential drawbacks to group openness:

- People may feel more vulnerable.
- People's lack of certainty is exposed and may be interpreted as weakness.
- Others may feel threatened by openness and may react by becoming hostile.
- Problems that are difficult to handle are brought into the open.

Closeness

Closeness can be defined as a feeling that another is known and is important. Teamwork requires that members establish a climate in which members care for one another but, as a work team is neither chosen nor a family group, the required level of closeness is less than is required for other personal relationships.

Closeness affects the ways in which people perceive the world around them. We pay attention to those who we feel are part of our "inner circle" and tend to ignore those who are not; this will undermine the team's work until closeness is fostered.

Closeness among team members is built on:

- *Shared experience*: Each member has been through emotionally significant experiences with the others.
- *Disclosure*: People say what they really think and feel.
- *Respect*: Each team member respects the other members' unique qualities and characteristics.
- *Shared goals*: The team members share similar purposes.
- *Gratitude*: People say that they value the input of others and act accordingly.
- *Shared values*: A similar, basic, common morality draws the team members together.

A team's capacity to deal with interpersonal problems is a good test of its level of closeness. A close team uses effective interpersonal problem solving, which combines both feedback and respect for individual opinions. Effective listening skills are particularly helpful. When a disagreement or

communication breakdown occurs, the team members work at identifying the source of the problem. (Dealing with interpersonal problems is discussed in greater detail in Module 10: Conflict Management.)

Closeness has its difficulties. The more affinity among the members of a group, the greater is the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by "groupthink" which affects a team's ability to solve problems and make good decisions. (Groupthink is discussed in greater detail in Module 9: Making Decisions.)

High Energy

The most satisfied teams are those in which every member feels enlivened by his or her participation. High energy is self-perpetuating because the team members become accustomed to operating in that fashion and feel compelled to give their all to the team. An attitude of "we can do it" is adopted. Setbacks are recognized but are not allowed to demoralize team members. The team is an exciting place to be. Much of this comes from the personal qualities of the team's members. The following behaviors or attitudes help to generate high energy in a team:

- *Recognition of success*: The members honor achievements both great and small.
- *Sense of winning*: The members communicate the feeling that participation in the team is participation with winners.
- *Real challenge*: The members know and state that success will not come easily.
- *Sharing of blockages*: The members identify and resolve potential difficulties early.
- *Payoff for members*: The members help each member to feel that he or she has gained something of real importance through participation.

Assessment of Team Climate

The following key questions may be asked when assessing a team's climate.

Positive Group Climate

- Are members encouraged and supported?
- Are members' contributions valued and accepted?
- Are all members involved in discussions and allowed to be heard?
- Does the group set high standards in establishing procedures and in evaluating decisions?
- Are personal issues dealt with compassionately? Do members fully accept the group's decisions?

Negative Group Climate

- Do members withdraw for the group by daydreaming, by whispering to others, or by wandering from the subject?

- Does any group member compete with other by attempting to offer the most ideas, to play the most roles, or to talk the most?
- Do members act aggressively, criticize or blame others, show hostility, or deflate others?
- Do members use the group for self-confession by delving excessively into personal, non-group-oriented feelings or issues?
- Do members disrupt the work of the group by clowning or by acting flippant?
- Do any members argue for their own special interests or lobby unfairly?
- Do any members block the group's progress by going off on tangents, by arguing too much about a belabored point, or by rejecting ideas without having given them due consideration?

References and Recommended Readings

Francis, Dave and Young, Don. *Improving Work Groups: A Practical Manual for Team Building,* Pfeiffer & Company: San Diego, Calif., 1992.

Scholtes, Peter R. *The Team Handbook*, Joiner Associates, Inc.: Madison, Wisconsin, 1988.

Schwarz, Roger M. *The Skilled Facilitator*, Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco, Calif., 1994.