

# Rowing Together

## How to build teams that work!

By Atul Tandon and Greg Schatzlein

“None of us is as smart as all of us.” Ken Blanchard ///  
“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” African Proverb /// How essential is teamwork toward fulfilling God’s distinctive calling of your ministry organization? /// Al Lopus, president and co-founder of Best Christian Workplaces Institute, might have the best answer. He said, “Our research reveals that teamwork in Christian organizations can be likened to an eight-oar racing crew: Three rowers are engaged and rowing together, four are indifferent with their paddles in their laps and one is drilling a hole in the boat.” /// Hopefully, your organization isn’t taking on water like this one. In the next few minutes, we want to make room inside your boat for a few fresh discoveries and practices about true teamwork that can change the course of your organization. In the spirit of the Swahili word “harambee,” let’s pull together focused on this truth: True teamwork is about the bringing together two true necessities: to grow the hearts of your people into the shared vision and work of your people.

## BUILDING TEAMS THAT WORK

Building great teams, like synchronized rowing, doesn't happen by chance. Often, the best (and only) way forward is to pause and reflect on the past. Do you remember that team you were on that just didn't click? Having worked with hundreds of teams, we've seen these obstacles come to the surface:

- Lack of clear goals and objectives
- Undefined roles of who is accountable for what
- Poor team dynamic — lack of open communication, unaddressed conflicts, passive-aggressive behaviors and more
- Absence of a supportive team culture
- Inappropriate leadership styles
- Lack of coaching and staff development opportunities

When teams don't deal with unresolved issues, they become less effective and, worse, stuck in a quagmire! The "reward" is poor results, high costs, reduced quality, increased absenteeism and high staff turnover.

Is there an alternative? Yes.

In their best-selling book, *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently* (Simon & Schuster, 1999), Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman point to a Gallup study of 80,000 managers that revealed five characteristics of a strong workplace, as seen through the eyes of successful and productive employees.

Consider how your employees would respond to these questions:

- Do I know what is expected of me?
- Do my opinions count?
- Does the mission/purpose of my organization make me feel my work is important?
- Are my co-workers committed to doing their best?
- This last year, have I had opportunities to learn and grow professionally?

Each "yes" answer points to the first true necessity of building successful teams: growing the hearts of your people. Team building begins when a leader looks within each employee and finds a way to release his or her unique talents and skills, which then contribute to a great performance.

What will you, as their leader, do differently to grow effective employees? Consider these five essentials of building teams that work:

**1. Build strong relationships with each member of your team.** People, not programs, are the heart of every successful organization. It's about understanding the goals and expectations of your people, and then taking time to create an environment of mutual confidence and trust. And it's about each



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team member being absolutely clear what he or she is accountable for to achieve the team's overall goal. "How do I contribute to the big win?" Does each team member know how to answer that question?

**2. Communicate clearly and constantly.** Clear and constant communication is at the heart of effective teams. Be clear about the team's objective, its importance and place in meeting your organization's goals and, specifically, the role of each member. Be constant in affirming each individual's contributions towards both the team and organizational goals. Recognition is a tangible reward and spurs people on to do more and better.

**3. Stretch yourself and your people.** Once you understand your team members' goals, you can assess if they are equipped to be successful. If one or more lacks skills, knowledge or experience, it's your opportunity — and obligation — to fill those gaps, perhaps with a needs assessment. The growth process doesn't end. Be willing to place your team into "stretch projects" and make sure you're there to guide them through the tough stuff.

**4. Coach to teach, not tell.** As leaders, we may want to tell others when things go wrong, and then start evaluating. Reactive evaluation focuses on the past, whereas responsive coaching focuses on the future. Evaluation is a one-way communication process;

coaching is a two-way process. Evaluation focuses on shortcomings, where coaching focuses on strengths and gaining small wins every day.

Steven Covey said it best in his best-selling book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Free Press, 1990): “Seek first to understand and then to be understood. And when you have asked a question, look for opportunities to dig deeper to root causes with additional questions. This also shows you care and gets you to lasting solutions.”

A team member can learn and grow, when we as leaders choose to listen and respond. This means asking in-depth questions and listening for 75 percent of the conversation. People then have the space they need to go through a process of self-discovery and learn the key issues, and buy into solutions for their next steps.

### 5. Empathize — and knock down walls.

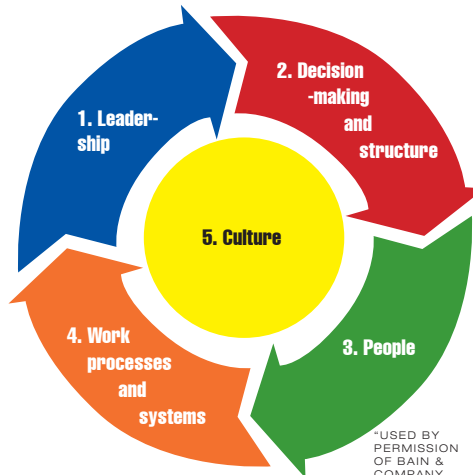
In our technology-driven society, the need and demand for empathy is not going away. As Geoff Colvin states in a Aug. 1, 2015, article in *Fortune* entitled “Humans are Underrated,” “The evidence is clear that the most effective groups are those whose members most strongly possess the most essentially, deeply human abilities — empathy above all, social sensitivity, storytelling, collaborating, solving problems together, building relationships.”

Today, you can “do in” a person with one sharp e-mail, text or tweet. A two-way, voice-to-voice, or (ideally) face-to-face conversation accelerates the mutual reward of genuine empathy and shared understanding. By showing a personal interest in people, solving problems and knocking down barriers, you will demonstrate to your team members a strong commitment to their success.

The first necessity of successful teams, growing the heart of your people, means surrendering the singular ego of “me” to the shared achievement of “we.” How is this true for organizations? And how can it be true for your organization? The answers can emerge as we move from the keys to individual performance to unlocking overall team effectiveness.

## CENTERPIECE OF TEAM EFFECTIVENESS

Research by the global management firm Bain & Company Inc. in the for-profit sector — corroborated by The Bridgespan Group by its application in the nonprofit world — helps us “locate” effective teamwork at the center of effective organizations:



Highly effective organizations exhibit strengths across five areas: leadership, decision making and structure, people, work processes and systems, and culture.

The summary text of each of the first four areas: leadership; decision-making and structure; people; and work process and systems is concise and self-explanatory. The fifth area, culture, is the centerpiece of organizational effectiveness. Culture is both the staging ground and the evidence of strong teams.

Culture is where successful teams both create and reveal a shared vision, mutual respect and deepening trust.

Are the teams in your organization rowing together in the right direction? Or are they battling unnecessarily against each other? Do your teams champion a culture of high performance values, a culture with the capacity to change? Or do they expose something less than you seek for each employee and the organization as a whole?

Consider the word “best,” the first word in the name “Best Christian Workplaces Institute.” People, like organizations with a shared a passion to fulfill God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, will naturally aspire to be the “best” they can be, as individuals and together.

- By growing the hearts of its employees — in teams in cities and communities worldwide — United Way lived out its call to “Live United.” With teams in nearly 100 countries, World Vision lives

out its vision for “life in all its fullness” to children in communities it serves, whether helping combat HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, or responding to the Syrian refugee crisis. Teams that work well transcend global reach, denominations and budgets.

- Today, Springs Rescue Mission in Colorado Springs is redefining community, compassion and Jesus’ command to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Expressions of neighbors helping neighbors occur daily through teams of leadership, staff, volunteers, donors and local friends.

Teams succeed whenever leaders grow the hearts of people and guide them into a shared other-centered work.

What words can keep us on this course? In his best-selling book, *The Boys in the Boat* (Penguin, 2014), author Daniel James Brown beautifully captures the essence of a team at work, as the University of Washington eight-oar crew crossed the finish line and won the gold medal at the 1936 Berlin Olympic games: “All were merged into one smoothly working machine; they were, in fact, a poem of motion, a symphony of swinging blades.”

The wisdom to empower and inspire every Christian leader, and every team, is for all of us to take to heart and put to work: “*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another....*” (Heb. 10:24–25). ●

**ATUL TANDON** is founder and CEO of the Tandon Institute. He can be reached at [atandon@tandoninstitute.com](mailto:atandon@tandoninstitute.com). **GREG SCHATZLEIN** is the manager, Learning & Development at World Vision, Inc. and a fellow at Tandon Institute. Greg has brought cutting-edge solutions to address team building and learning needs, at both for-profit and nonprofit enterprises, for over 30 years. Contact him at [gschatzl@worldvision.org](mailto:gschatzl@worldvision.org).

Want to learn more? **ATUL TANDON** and **GREG SCHATZLEIN** will co-lead a workshop entitled “How Do I Build Teams That Work?” for The Outcomes Conference, CLA Dallas 2016, April 19–21, 2016. ([OutcomesConference.org](http://OutcomesConference.org))