

TEAMWORK TAKES ON THE STAR SYSTEM

BY DAVID COLMAN



Do you remember sitting in your school's examination hall writing your final exams? My palms sweat just thinking about it. Those moments marked a watershed in our lives. It was the culmination of all we had learned to that point about what success meant. As you sat there, you may have recalled things you had learned at your mother's knee: work hard, and you will be successful; do better than the other kids, and you will get a great job.

All of this, the maternal advice and hard work at school, was our apprenticeship in the star system. Its message was simple: beat your competition and you will be a star, a success in life.

At no point while you were writing your exams did anyone stand up and say, "Let's work together on this and be as successful as we can. Some of you brainstorm the best ideas to the first six questions. The rest of you, work together on the essay question. Then we'll put it all together. Let's make sure everyone gets an A+."

As ridiculous as this 'examination' scenario seems, it is exactly what many organizations and companies want us to do. The success of both you and the company, as they see it, is through meaningful teamwork. At this time, let me loudly express my bias about this. I am a big fan of teamwork. In fact, I strongly believe that you and your company are challenged without it.

If that's the case, why is teamwork often ineffective? In three words, it's 'The Star System,' that same system we grew up with at home, in school, and is now everywhere in our work world.

Several years ago, I had the 'pleasure' of being among several thousand employees who migrated to self-directed work teams. I had to find, create, and help a team of facilitators deliver training to these employees. I had a front-row seat through the whole thing. The 'experiment' eventually failed, or was abandoned, depending upon perspectives. Some of the reasons it failed were: wrong people in the wrong jobs; premature staff reductions causing unnecessary stress; internal rivalries; and, yes, 'The Star System'.

One thing is certain. 'The Star System,' or the recognition of one employee's individual achievements compared to those of others, is not going away, nor should it. Even if you abolished the system, other areas of your company or other companies will continue to operate a 'Star System,' and people will be drawn to it. The challenge is to find a way for the two approaches to co-exist. But how can you do that? Here are a couple of ideas.

The saying 'you get what you reward' was never truer. Take a hard look at how and what you reward within your company. If you want teamwork to succeed, you have to recognize it and reward it. Telling your employees that teamwork is a must and the key to your success will not make it happen. Rework your salary and incentive structures to reflect the contribution of teams. "If the team fails, everyone fails" should be your mantra throughout.

Team members and leaders need special skills. At a minimum they have to be effective at decision-making including consensus, brainstorming, rating and ranking, and force field analysis. They must listen, really listen. If they don't have these skills, find the resources now.

Teamwork and 'The Star System' can get along. In fact, the right rewards and the right skills will give you the best of both worlds - a team full of stars!

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