

Teamwork in pole position?

There's a lot spoken about team work and sport - but how important is team work in achieving sporting success? Or is it simply the brilliance of an individual Beckham that achieves the glory? Gary Saunders, HR and change partner in fe3 looks at teamwork and his personal passion - Formula 1 racing - to see if teamwork really does hold pole position.

I've just returned to work from my Grand Prix fix, during which I was lucky enough to see stunning back-to-back wins by Lewis Hamilton at Silverstone and Hockenheim. It's noticeable in post-race interviews that the drivers give a great deal of credit to their teams - both the parts at the race and those back in the factory.

In recent years it's become trendy to use the analogy of sports teams - mainly football teams - for organisational team building. But I wonder how valid this really is: after all, sports teams are about a series of one-off performances, whereas successful organisations have to perform continuously.

Over the years I've worked with lots of organisational teams and, in many cases, one of the intended outcomes has been building team effectiveness. As part of my approach, I developed a diagnostic, derived from the work of Buchholz, Roth and Hess in their book "Creating the High Performance Team" (Wiley, 1987). My interpretation of their eight attributes is as follows:

- Common Purpose (Aligned on Purpose in Buchholz et al.): everyone knows what the team is trying to achieve
- Appropriate Leadership (Participative Leadership in Buchholz et al.): the person closest to the solution and with the skills to deliver it leads
- Shared Responsibility (same in Buchholz et al.): everyone takes an equal share in the work and in the success or failure of the team
- Applied Talents (Creative Talents in Buchholz et al.): team members identify and then play to their own and colleagues' strengths
- Goal Focussed (Focussed on Task in Buchholz et al.): results rather than inputs come first
- High Communication (same in Buchholz et al.): all information on performance is shared
- High Innovation (Future Focussed in Buchholz et al.): the team encourages challenge and improvement ideas
- Opportunity Responsive (Rapid Response in Buchholz et al.): the team looks for ways to identify and exploit new opportunities

I developed a simple list of questions to assess the extent to which these attributes are present in a particular team - four questions for each attribute. I thought it would be interesting to see how well this might work for a Formula 1 team.

Of course, the modern Formula 1 team is part of a much more complex business - some of them global in scale. Aside from designing, building and racing cars, the business includes sophisticated supply chain management, logistics, highly competitive marketing and PR, sponsorship management and development, not to mention the financial management and control of budgets that run into hundreds of millions of dollars. Long gone are the days when cars were built in little more than sheds. Toyota, for example, applies its global values and philosophy (The Toyota Way) to its motor racing organisation. Increased complexity has also brought with it increased team size, with the largest having around 1,000 members and many more if you add in their key supplier partners.

Using meta-analysis based on what I've read and observed about them and the way they work, here are the results:

1. Common Purpose: I think it's clear that all Formula 1 teams have this and show a strong commitment to it.
2. Appropriate Leadership: Formula 1 teams tend to be rather process oriented, so maybe not every decision is taken at the lowest possible level all the time. Perhaps that explains why Lewis' second pit stop at Hockenheim was mistimed.
3. Shared Responsibility: again, this looks pretty strong for most Formula 1 teams, though the team Principal tends to take the blame and the drivers the credit!
4. Applied Talents: this may vary with team size, the larger team being more likely to rely on functional specialisms.
5. Goal Focussed: clearly Formula 1 teams are; they also have milestones and sub-goals.
6. High Communication: I think the best Formula 1 teams have this and it's part of what gives them the edge. For example, we know that McLaren drivers have access to each other's data.
7. High Innovation: clearly this is present within Formula 1 teams and their key partners, such as engine suppliers. No Formula 1 team can succeed without the ability continuously to develop the car in every possible aspect during the season.
8. Opportunity Responsive: this may not be a particularly strong attribute of Formula 1 teams as they tend to be very much focussed on the present. However, when the rules of Formula 1 change, the best respond the quickest.

So overall I think we can conclude that the best Formula 1 teams show the attributes of a High Performance Team, although they may not apply all of them all of the time. If anyone reading this has any inside knowledge to challenge or add to this analysis, I'd love to hear from you.

In the mean time, here's to the next race!