When Good Teams Go Bad

Know when teamwork doesn't work—and how to fix it. Professors Jeff Polzer and Scott Snook teach "The Army Crew Team" case and the dilemma faced by a rowing coach who has great individual parts but can't get them to synchronize. From HBS Alumni Bulletin. Key concepts include:

A potentially great team with strong individual contributors can quickly be undone by issues around trust, conflict, team accountability, and intergroup rivalries.
In business, competition between groups can provide motivation, but if competition becomes too strong, it can inhibit cooperation and lead to dysfunction.
The best teams are those that not only combine the skills of their members to fit the demands of their task, but also energize team members through the bonding that comes with striving toward a common goal.
Solutions can include changing team members, but an event to clear the air can help to relieve frustration and resolve conflict.

by Garry Emmons

What could better symbolize high-level business performance than an eight-oared crew team rowing in perfect unison, their boat powered by a selfless collaboration of strength, skill, and shared purpose? It's no wonder that advertisers love to use this image to depict successful teamwork.

The rowing metaphor also caught the eye of HBS professor Jeff Polzer and HBS associate professor Scott Snook. The pair has produced a case about the behind-the-scenes dynamics surrounding a college crew team. But
unlike the beautiful images favored by advertisers, "The Army Crew Team" case reveals a not-so-pretty picture of a frustrating and baffling decline in performance by the varsity boat at the United States Military Academy.

**TEAMS SHOULD ALWAYS BE USED JUDICIOUSLY.**

Polzer, whose teaching and research focus on organizational behavior, leadership, and teams, sees many parallels between the Army crew's difficulties and the problems that business teams experience.

"We pursued the idea for the case," he says, "after Scott, who is a West Point grad and former teacher there, told me about his friend, the Army crew coach, Stas Preczewski. One season, Coach P, as he's universally known, saw his varsity boat, consisting of his eight best individual rowers, lose regularly in practice to the supposedly less talented Army JV boat. The two big questions facing Coach P are: Why is this happening? What can be done about it? And that's what the students must grapple with as well."

**IN SYNCH?**

Crew racing is a grueling test of strength, coordination, and endurance. Physiologists say that rowing a 2,000-meter race is equivalent to playing two basketball games back-to-back. The difficulty of keeping oar strokes synchronized has been compared to "eight people trying to do the perfect golf swing at the same time, all together, 200 times in a row."

Like most of his peers, Coach P used a variety of quantifiable metrics for each rower to determine who would sit in the varsity boat. Says Polzer, "The highest-performing individual rowers typically go in the varsity boat, just as a business would tap for its frontline team the best available finance or marketing person. But sometimes, as in business, crew coaches find it's preferable to pick someone whose greatest strength is contributing to the all-important 'chemistry' that helps teams win."

Chemistry seems to be the difference between Coach P's more talented varsity boat and his upstart JVs. Embarrassing losses to the JVs have the varsity crew members dispirited and complaining about one another. Confidence is fading fast. The national rowing tournament is a week away.

Should Coach P simply declare the JV boat to be the new varsity boat? Should he tinker and switch personnel back and forth between the two boats to seek a better combination of rowers? Or should he try to figure out some novel approach to shake the varsity group out of its funk?

Says Polzer, "Some of the key issues we discuss include trust, conflict, team identity, and intergroup rivalries. In business, competition between groups can provide motivation, but if competition becomes too strong, it can inhibit cooperation and lead to dysfunction."
“Other questions we talk about include performance spirals, especially how to turn around a downward spiral. At what point, with what tactics, and how strongly, do you intervene when there's a downslide? I always try to push the students to consider how these questions and possible solutions can be extrapolated to organizational settings.”

Concludes Polzer, “The best teams are those that not only combine the skills of their members successfully to fit the demands of their task but also energize team members through the bonding that comes with striving toward a common goal. It’s important to remember, however, that poorly designed teams can waste resources and time. Teams should always be used judiciously.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Garry Emmons is senior associate editor of HBS Alumni Bulletin.