

Effective leadership is much more than simply managing functions and projects. It involves a shared commitment to change between leaders and followers based on high level of mutual influence and trust.

Dr John Milton-Smith



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How Important is Trust?

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Many organisations ask for team building or team facilitation days with the hope of creating an improved work climate and morale. In many cases the team building days either achieve very little other than having had some fun, a few laughs and a social gathering or leave a negative feeling for the participants.

An important question to ask before embarking on any team facilitation or team building day is “what is the purpose of this day”? You may also want to consider what you would like to achieve from the team building day out. In my view, the ultimate goal of any team building or team facilitation process is to increase the level of trust and cooperation within the team.

How does one go about developing this trust? Good question! Traditionally the high ropes experience or similar activities are an attempt at building trust, and for some participants can be exceptionally powerful and be the catalyst for significant change. However, in my experience most of the benefit is on an individual basis and not necessarily a shared team experience that can be effectively translated into the work environment.

One of my experiences of a high performance team and the ultimate demonstration of trust in a working relationship is somewhat different from what you may expect. It was an experience that changed my life and has framed my outlook and approach to almost everything that I do. It all started with a decision to get involved in training guide dogs – little did I realise how significant this choice would be on me and my life. In total I have trained three guide dogs – Dooley, Katy and Alfa. The training involves two years of dedication, time, perseverance and lots of love and devotion to the dog, following which the dog is returned to the academy where they begin working with the blind person that they have been paired with. After six months of high level training with the blind person, building the relationship and trust, the pair are put through their paces through a ‘live’ test in the city. If this is successful the pair attends a graduation ceremony where the dog graduates to become a ‘guide dog’.

I recall my excitement at being invited to watch the ‘live test’ for Katy and her blind person in the city, particularly as I had not seen Katy for six months since handing her back to the academy. It was an amazing sight, observing the pair navigating obstacles, crossing busy streets, going around head high street signs, and traversing through the crowds. The utter faith and trust of the blind person in the dog’s judgement and the ultimate perfect performance of the pair was staggering. I found myself moved to tears as I watched the synergy of the working relationship evident by the visible bond between the two.

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What does this experience mean for me and how is this relationship between a guide dog and a blind person an example of a hi-performance team?

What do you think would cripple the effectiveness of the guide dog and blind person working relationship? To help answer the question, I will share with you a little more about the working relationship between the dog and the blind person. When the pair get to an intersection and wish to cross the road, the blind person takes responsibility for making the choice of when to cross the road. However, the blind person relies on feedback from the dog to assist in this decision and more importantly, to test the decision. So, if the blind person makes a decision to cross the road after having listened to the traffic and starts to move but the dog hesitates, the blind person trusts the dog's instinct, stops and re-evaluates. The dog's responsibility is effectively to obey its instinct, i.e. the dog will hesitate if it anticipates a danger. The dog is also trained to avoid head high signs, obstacles and pot holes in the pathway. The 'blind' trust of the blind person in the dog is complete. Without trust the relationship between the blind person and the dog would not work. The blind person is ultimately the leader in the team, but relies on a high level of mutual influence and trust to make the team most effective.

What does this mean for us in the corporate environment?

1. There has to be a very good reason for the team to need to work together.
2. Effective teams need effective leadership that is characterised by willingness to engage and commitment to mutual influence.
3. There needs to be absolute clarity of roles, i.e. who is responsible for what.
4. The communication between the team members needs to be absolutely clear with no ambiguity; and the purpose of the communication needs to be defined.
5. The team needs time to learn about how each team member operates and the strengths and weaknesses of each of the team members.
6. There needs to be a high level of trust for there to be a capacity for high level of team performance.

So what does this mean for team building days? Team building days need to be designed specifically around building trust in the team through focused activities that translate back into the work environment. While it is important to still have 'fun' activities spread through the day, my belief is that to get the greatest impact from team building the day needs to examine the effectiveness of the team.

Trust in the team leader and between team members are both products and determinants of team performance. My experience observing such a dynamic hi-performance team has significantly influenced my approach to leading a team, such that my primary focus is to establish a climate of mutual influence and trust within the team.

What are you going to do as a leader to establish a climate of mutual influence and trust in your team?