

Cohesive Teams

All of us at sr4 have led teams. We have coached teams. We have recruited teams. We have designed teams. We have been on successful teams. We have been on teams that should have succeeded but didn't. And we have learned through experience what kind of team is best at getting the job done: not the smartest, not the most experienced, not the most fun, not the most driven...but the most cohesive.

And by cohesive, we mean every member of the team pulling in the same direction, eyes on the same goal, supportive of each other – always showing up and pitching in, never breaking down or opting out.

Our experience is that cohesive in its absolute state is uncommon. Therefore, in our practice, we strive to achieve some degree of something that might somehow remind us of what cohesive could look like, and then we work purposefully to improve on that.

We have been encouraged by a study that Google has done in its search for “What makes a Google team effective?” They thought they were looking for who to put on a team to assure stellar performance. What they found was that WHO is on a team matters less than HOW the team members interact, structure their work, and view their contributions.

That's good news for us, because, typically, we work with teams that are already assembled, already assigned an objective, and already struggling, incohesively, to get started or to drive toward some kind of conclusion. We help them answer three essential questions:

- How are you interacting with each other?
- How are you structuring your work?
- How does each member of the team feel about their ability to contribute toward the common objective?

Embracing those questions leads toward more cohesive teams, and more cohesive teams pave the way to more innovative ideas ... more informed decisions...and higher organizational performance.

For us, building Cohesive Teams is like working at the cellular level of an organization. It's the basic building block of what we're all striving for, which is...Organizational Health.

In Practice

We were engaged by the leader of a Marketing Operations team. The purpose of this team was to support the company's product teams in the execution of marketing plans. The leader wanted to change her team members' orientation from "order taker" to "strategic partner." At the team's annual conference in the first quarter of the year, we asked each member to think about a time when they had actually felt like a strategic partner in a relationship with one of their internal clients. After a few minutes of reflection, only three people, out of a group of 28, were able to share with the group a story that demonstrated what it felt like to be a strategic partner. All three of them were excellent. This enabled us to assure the entire group that they didn't have to learn anything new – all of them just needed to do more of what three of them had done once.

Leading into a break, we told the group that we were looking for a few people who self-identified as "ideators" or "clarifiers." During the break, we collected enough volunteers to form an ideating team and a clarifying team. We sent the clarifiers out to interview product teams about what they thought it would look like to have a strategic partner in Marketing Ops. And we worked with the ideators to design an agenda for the next quarterly meeting. The ideators then cross-checked their meeting design with what the clarifiers were learning.

At their next quarterly meeting, our ideators and clarifiers introduced an action plan for everyone in the group to show up as strategic partners instead of order takers. Off they went, to execute the plan.

When it was time to design their third quarter meeting, we brought together an eight-person design team from within the group. As a convening activity, we asked each person to tell a story about how someone in Marketing Ops had demonstrated the behavior of a Strategic Partner. The first individual told stories for ten minutes. We jumped to the whiteboard to start writing things down. We never got past this convening activity; it continued for the duration of the scheduled time. Each person told multiple stories. We filled two whiteboards with examples. This Marketing Ops team went on to dominate that year's Marketing Department annual awards. They were recognized, in essence, for doing the work of strategic partners.

Our great satisfaction, however, was that they had learned how it felt to operate as a cohesive team. Because with that, strategic partnership was only the beginning of what they could achieve.

Wherever we have worked, we have observed teams that achieve less than their potential due to incohesive tendencies toward lack of trust, unhealthy conflict, under-utilized strengths, absence of clarity and competing objectives. At sr4 Partners, we come to work every day thinking about new ways to dissipate unhealthy tendencies, and turn "incohesive" teams into "cohesive" ones.

Something You Can Do, Now

At your next team meeting, ask everyone to think about a time when they were on a team that accomplished something to its full potential. Then ask them to get a partner and tell their stories to each other. Now, the important work in this exercise will be done not by the story teller, but by the story listener. Because the listener's job is to jot down what was present in the story that enabled the outcome. Maybe it was trust. Maybe it was the clarity of the objective. Maybe it was the unity of the effort. Maybe it was each member of the team doing what they did best. Make a list of what the listeners observed. Shape that list into categories. Talk about whether there's cohesion, in your team, around those categories.

Something We Can Do, Together

We can have a conversation about what it would take for your team to start now, wherever it happens to be, and work purposefully toward becoming more cohesive. And we can have a larger conversation about how Cohesive Teams are a big part, along with Healthy Leaders, Thriving Cultures and Inclusive Change, of creating a Healthier Organization. These are the building blocks that have emerged, for us, from our belief that most people truly want to do great work, but things get in the way. Many of those "things" are accepted as just the way organizations are – which we have come to see as just the way organizations might tend to be, but not irrevocably so!