



Time for Building Teams

by Dr. Karen Y. Wilson-Starks

Zach sat in the company conference room with his head in his hands and wondered if he was the right man for the job. Since being promoted to Executive Director a year ago, he's felt inadequate to address the myriad complexities of Abba Care, a ministry that provides services to poor children and their families in the United States. Prior to the promotion, Zach headed the division of Abba Care responsible for providing daily meals. As he reminisced, Zach recalled how he knew everything about the Meals Division...the issues, the decisions, and recommended next steps. Life was easier with a small staff, questions he could answer, and limited outside interference.

Today in Zach's senior team meeting, Kelly, the head of the Health and Medical Division said to Rob of Education, "The Johnson children need to go in for their medical appointments, especially Joshua who is autistic. This is the third time we have scheduled major conflicts." Rob replied, "Yeah, our divisions are not talking to each other, so we keep making the same mistakes over and over."

As Zach thought about the senior leadership team, he realized that he wasn't fully capitalizing on the brain power in the room to address strategic issues and furthermore, there was insufficient coordination for everyday activities. Zach saw that his divisions could no longer keep operating as silos. Also, as the senior leader, he couldn't keep coming up with next steps in isolation. The ministry had grown too large and the issues too involved for one person to know everything and to call all of the shots. What if his senior team became a high-performance team? What else would then be possible?

Complexity: The Case for High-Performance Teams

High-performance teams make the most sense if there is a complex task to accomplish. Zach realized that the intricate array of Abba Care services such as meals, clothes, education, tutoring, life and job skills training for parents, health and medical services, housing, transportation, and spiritual development qualified for the level of complexity inherent with high-performance teams. Not only did he have to coordinate with internal Abba Care staff, but for many of the services, community partnerships were also involved. He'd have to rely on his team to determine the best practices for moving forward efficiently, cost effectively, and in ways that best supported the families. Gone were the days when he could single-handedly know what was going on and make the best decisions.

Clear Purpose: The Orienting Call

The Abba Care Senior Leadership team was very clear about their mission to provide a high quality of life and opportunity to poor United States-based children and

their families. The challenge was that each division was attempting to achieve that purpose independently, as opposed to working together and operating on the same page. High-performance teams use clear purpose as their orienting call for collective alignment and synergy.

Talented and Skilled Team Members: The Building Blocks

Over the years, Abba Care had done a lot of housecleaning and recruitment to get the best people on board to head up and work in the various ministry divisions. Zach knew he had great people who had the skills necessary to do the work for which they were hired. In one case, he moved a leader from transportation services to education because his skills and expertise were in education. A year ago when he took the Executive Director job, he hired a new leader for the Life and Job Skills division and that leader has hired people with the background to get the job done. He still may need to make a change in the Spiritual Development Division; however, he is waiting to see if that senior leader can be further developed in the role. Ministries are often reluctant to move, replace, or recruit the talent they need, yet the right people represent the building blocks for high performance.

Resources: The Fuel for Forward Motion

If there is no gas in the car, then you won't get far and the same is true for high-performance teams. Just as you won't get high performance out of a car without adequate energy resources, you don't get high performance from teams that don't have the necessary money, connections, or other resources for success. Zach realized that his primary job as senior leader was to find talent and resource the team, including providing necessary structures for strategic conversations.

Reward Structures: Reinforce and Duplicate Success

When Zack was head of the Meals Division, he was rewarded for providing high-quality meals for as many poor children as possible. He was also rewarded for establishing



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innovative partnerships with community providers. It was because of his success in the Meals Division that he was tapped for the Executive Director role. What he realizes now is that if he wants his divisions to work well together or his senior team to become strategic thinking partners with him, then he will have to reward those behaviors and not just individual success efforts. Many ministries make the mistake of saying they want teamwork, but then only reward individual success. At the end of the day, what you get is what you reward.

**Continuous Learning Culture:
The Hallmark of High Performance**

The variable that most characterizes teams as high-performance is their commitment to continuous learning together. Jesus was one of the greatest exemplars of creating high performance through continuous learning. He regularly told parables and then interpreted them to His disciples. He also regularly used everyday events as object lessons, such as the withering of the fig tree (Matthew 21:18-21, Mark 11:20-26), the casting out of the deaf and mute spirit in a boy (Matthew 17:14-21, Mark 9: 17-29), and the healing of the man born blind (John 9). Some of the lessons taught were the need to be fruitful, the power of faith to move mountains, the necessity of prayer and fasting, and the idea that not all disease and hardship is due to

sin, but that God may be glorified. Jesus also engaged the disciples in the learning process and asked them provocative questions such as “Who do men say that I am?” and “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:13-20, Mark 8:27-30)

Zack realizes he will have to engage his senior team in the issues of the organization and create the conditions for them to think together about the work they are doing. Feedback loops and mechanisms will be crucial, so not only will they do after-action reviews...such as those I experienced when serving as an active duty Army Psychologist... but he will also prompt mid-action reviews and reflection periods so that his senior team can take stock of what is and isn't working now, and do real time mid-course corrections for greater effectiveness.

To the extent that Zack is able to convene his senior leadership team and create the conditions for high performance, then he is the right man for the job. What about you? Does your scenario fit the conditions for high-performance teamwork? Will you be the architect to put all of the high performance elements together for your team? It's time to build teams! ✦

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Note: The story of Abba Care is based on a real client case; however, the names and details have been changed. ©2011 TRANSLEADERSHIP, INC.



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