

Good teams at work

Written by Julie Desmond
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“As an engineer, people always told me who I had to work with,” says high school teacher and successful engineer, Jon Hickman. He was explaining that choosing your work partners can be a blessing... and a curse. “Sometimes you find out your best friend isn’t your best partner on the job.”

Recently, I visited the recruiting offices of CH Robinson in Eden Prairie, MN. This company is one of the world’s largest third party logistics providers, meaning they partner with companies to get products where they need to end up. At its core, this is trucking. Not exactly a sexy industry. And yet, the people I met had been with the company through acquisitions, recessions and the rest for eight, 10, 14 years and more. Collectively, that’s a lot of corporate brain power staying in one place for a long time.

They tell me they stay because of the people, the culture, the opportunities, and the great team they’ve put together. I believe it. I was there at 3:00 in the afternoon, when many companies are either napping or out grabbing a coffee, but this place was hopping, and everyone was smiling. Drinking the Kool-Aid? Maybe. But for as many years as the team has been evolving, that’s a lot of Kool-Aid. What seems to make that group work is common to the most effective project teams. They have adaptability, accountability and autonomy.

Adaptability allows individuals on the team to flex when crisis or unexpected obstacles surface, either in terms of workload or activities. If three top performers go out on leave simultaneously, how are we going to handle that? Being able to turn on a dime is an asset in any case; getting a whole team to flex as needed is powerful.

Accountability to the team is a stronger motivator than accountability to a company. Teams that understand each player’s strengths have the right people in the right positions, which in turn, means players can trust each other to get their part of the job done effectively and efficiently. “She knows what she’s doing,” is the highest compliment one team member can pay to another because it means the team as a whole is functioning at a high level. When team members trust each other, they can rely on one another to carry fair weight.

Autonomy, or personal independence, seems like the antithesis of what drives a top team. However, when team members already trust each other, and when the team as a whole is talented at adapting and evolving, then an individual with a good idea can stand up and make things happen. Progress is often the result of one person with one good idea who has one heck of a team behind them.

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If you think collaboration and team building doesn't matter, ask the Minnesota Vikings. Or the Twins. Or (ouch) the Gophers.

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