

**TITLE: "INDIVIDUALISM VS. TEAMWORK"**

by Tim Bryce  
Managing Director  
M. Bryce & Associates (MBA)  
P.O. Box 1637  
Palm Harbor, FL 34682-1637  
United States  
Tel: 727/786-4567  
E-Mail: [timb001@phmainstreet.com](mailto:timb001@phmainstreet.com)  
WWW: <http://www.phmainstreet.com/mba/>  
Since 1971: *"Software for the finest computer - the Mind"*

*"There is more to building a team than buying  
new uniforms."  
- Bryce's Law*

**INTRODUCTION**

As you travel around corporate America these days, you hear a lot about "teams"; that groups, departments or whole divisions are trying to behave more as a team as opposed to a group of individuals. Its the latest catch phrase du jour. I guess someone finally figured out the power of teamwork. But just how much of this represents sincere efforts? My corporate contacts tell me its mostly facade. They contend they get some nifty new corporate shirts and some great pep talks, but aside from this, little else. As much as corporations tout the need for teamwork, most still encourage rugged individualism.

There is more to creating a team than simply saying you are one. New shirts and axioms are nice, but in order for this to work, people have to think and act as a team. In other words, success hinges on it becoming a natural part of the corporate culture.

**CORPORATE CULTURE**

Teachers, coaches, and drill instructors have long understood the value of teamwork. The intent is to turn a heterogeneous working environment into a homogeneous environment whereby everyone is working in a concerted effort towards common goals. But do corporate managers truly understand teamwork? Not necessarily. Many still create competitive environments in the hope that the strongest will rise to the surface. Teamwork is more about cooperation than it is about competition.

This brings up an important point: Teamwork is taught. It means developing a disciplined work environment where the participants must conform to a specific set of rules. Inevitably, it means breaking some work habits and creating new ones. This can be painful, yet necessary if you want to achieve the desired results. Basi-

cally, you are teaching people how to live and work together as opposed to apart.

In the United States there is more of a natural inclination to teach individualism as opposed to teamwork; perhaps this is because we are a nation based on freedoms. For example, our public school systems have minimal dress and hair codes; each student is allowed to look and dress as they personally see fit, many with some very questionable taste. This is permitted as it is believed the individual must be allowed to freely express him/herself. This may be fine, but it certainly does not promote a spirit of teamwork. Compare it to other countries, such as Japan, where students are required to wear school uniforms and are given group assignments, such as the preparation and cleanup of their daily lunch. In Japan, students are taught the value of cooperation at an early age which has the added benefit of improving their socialization skills.

As mentioned, teamwork requires the establishment of a working environment conducive to teamwork. It doesn't happen simply by making some platitudinous statements. A manager must do more, much more; some suggestions:

1. First and foremost: Lead. All teams need a leader who can articulate goals and give direction. The team must trust and believe in its leader. Without such confidence, the team will not likely follow the leader, particularly in times of difficulty. The leader should also be wary of leading by democratic rule. Soliciting input is one thing, as is having assistants, but there can only be one ultimate leader to guide the team.
2. Institute uniform operating practices that everyone will be expected to conform to, such as operating hours of work, dress code, office appearance, speech and conduct, etc. Such uniformity stresses the equality of the workers. As another suggestion, downplay job titles and put more emphasis on work assignments instead. Job titles tend to emphasize a person's stature in a company and can be disruptive in terms of equality.
3. Establish standard practices for executing work assignments, thereby everyone is following the same methods, and using the same tools and techniques in their work effort. This improves communications, provides for the interchangeability of workers, and promotes the development of quality work products.
4. Make sure everyone knows their responsibilities and assignments and understands their importance. Nobody

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wants to be regarded as the weakest link and, as such, the manager must be able to communicate their importance and carefully balance the workload. Yes, there will be those workers who will undoubtedly excel over others, but teamwork is a group effort. If a weaker worker needs additional training, either give it to him or replace him.

5. Routinely check progress. Whenever applicable, keep statistics on both team and individual performance. However, it is not important to publish such stats. It is important for the leader to know the team's strengths and weaknesses, but it is nobody else's business.

6. Be on the lookout for conflicts in working relationships. Some people will simply not get along and it is up to the manager to referee such conflicts. Either have the people work out their differences, keep them apart, or rid yourself of them. You want harmony, not contention, on your team.

7. Allow time for the team to meet and discuss issues as a group. This keeps everyone in tune with common goals, problems, and the team's general progress. It also allows the team to socialize and form a camaraderie (a bonding of unity).

8. Recognize individual achievement but reward on a team basis as opposed to an individual basis.

## **CONCLUSION**

Are we really trying to promote teamwork or is this nothing more than the latest corporate fad that is being implemented more for public relations than anything else? Let's hope for the former and not the latter. Teamwork is a powerful concept, particularly when there is anything of substance to be done.

Shrewd managers intuitively understand the need for teamwork. Let me give you an example from the world of entertainment. Jack Benny, the famous comedian of yesteryear had a great appreciation for teamwork. His radio and television shows were consistently at the top of the rating charts for a number of years. When asked what his secret to success was, Benny simply said teamwork. To Jack, it wasn't important that he personally got the best lines and laughs week after week. In fact, he was often the butt of many of the jokes. Instead, he made sure his cast, guests, and writers all received the accolades they deserved. It was more important to Benny that people said they had tuned into *"The Show"* as op-

posed to tuning in to see *"Jack Benny."* He was right.

I realize there are instances in business when it becomes necessary to exercise individualism, but these are becoming a rarity. Instead companies can find greater glory as a team as opposed to a group of individuals.

*"Individual glory is insignificant when compared to achieving victory as a team."*

- Dot Richardson, M.D.  
U.S. Olympic Softball Team  
Two time Gold Medal Champions

For more information on corporate culture, see:

No. 28 - *"Understanding Corporate Culture"*- June 13, 2005  
<http://www.phmainstreet.com/mba/ss050613.pdf>

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*About the Author*

*Tim Bryce is the Managing Director of M. Bryce & Associates (MBA) of Palm Harbor, Florida and has 30 years of experience in the field of Information Resource Management (IRM). He is available for training and consulting on an international basis.*

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