

Four stages turn a group into a team that pulls together

Robyn Pearce

Abbey, the new Chair of her local Parent/Teacher organisation, had seen the previous chairperson run himself into the ground because of poor delegation skills. No way would she fall into that trap, she decided and set about to actively involve as many of her committee as possible. Sub-committees were established for all the core tasks, an experienced leader was appointed to lead each sub-committee, and they were encouraged to seek assistants from other parents not on the elected team. Abby felt that this would be a good way to involve more parents in the running of the school affairs and her team enthusiastically supported the idea.

Brendan, one of the long-standing members, took on responsibility for fund-raising. He gathered around him a small sub-committee just as Abby had suggested and started running his own monthly meetings. All manner of complex and time-consuming money-making suggestions flowed forth to the main executive – too many for them to handle. Because Brendan's focus went into his own area of interest – the fund-raising – he didn't always get to the main meetings. Therefore he didn't fully understand that the organisation had inherited a number of serious issues, including a disciplinary matter with one of the school staff. Major fund-raising events, although important, didn't hit the top of their radar screen right then.

One day, a few months into her appointment, Abby was surprised to receive a very curt request from Brendan to attend one of his sub-committee meetings. To her surprise she found that he and his team felt unheard, unappreciated and frustrated.

As well as Brendan's low awareness of the issues the executive were dealing with, a couple of other communication 'issues' muddled the waters.

- ◆ He didn't send his reports through until the night before the main executive meetings, which were always held in the morning. This meant that Abby had no time to consider the recommendations, or circulate them to the rest of the executive, until after their meeting.
 - ◆ Neither he nor Abby talked together very much; because they were both busy their main dialogue was by email.
- They both contributed to the situation, but had Abby known more about the following



four-stage process of team development she could have saved herself a lot of grief.

Level 1: Educate

A new team usually doesn't know enough to be able to make informed decisions. At this stage the leader needs to make decisions and direct the team's activities – and begin the education process at the same time. He or she does this by also explaining issues, telling the new members about the decisions they'd made and why they made those choices.

A surprising number of managers make decisions and don't share the thinking – instead they share just enough to get the outcome. When you tell people what's going on, they're being prepared for higher-level involvement. They're learning by osmosis, even when they don't realise it.

Level 2: Ask for input

Now the team leader is asking the team for suggestions. They'll also apply the suggestions of the team where possible and keep them informed at all stages. If the team's recommendations can't be applied, they're told why.

Level 3: Involve fully

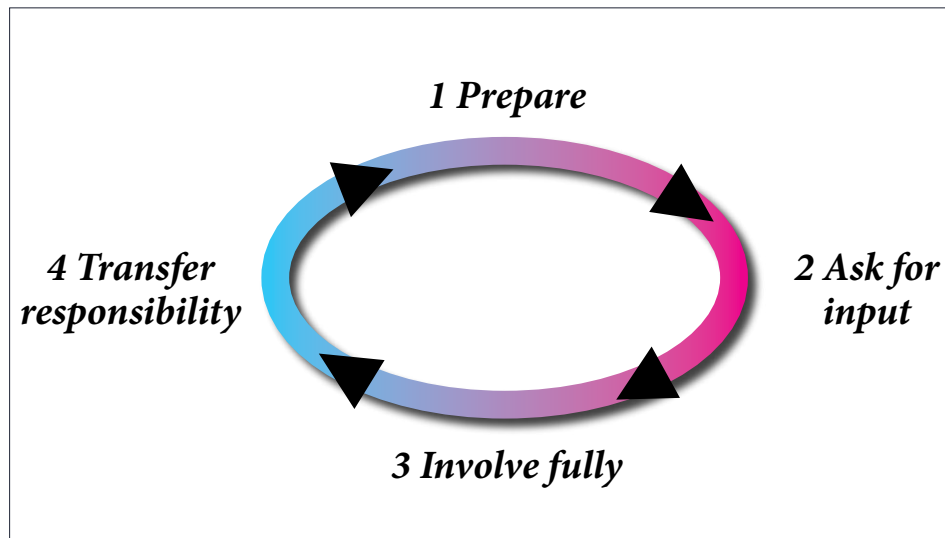
This is the collaborative phase. A well-informed team discusses all aspects of the situation and decisions are made collectively. A well-run voluntary organisation, based on sound democratic principles, generally works like this. Consensus on key issues is gained before the group acts. They share responsibility, accountability and risk taking. Although a school or commercial entity doesn't operate quite the same, a forward-thinking principal or CEO will incorporate as many of these elements as possible.

Level 4: Transfer responsibility

The leader delegates the decision-making to the team, or individuals within the team, who operate autonomously. They tell the leader what they've done, as relevant, and take full responsibility for the outcomes.

If a leader doesn't understand these steps, or hasn't communicated the level of responsibility they've given to a team, they lay themselves wide open for frustration and disempowerment of their people.

Abby wanted Brendan's team to work at Level 2. However, they interpreted their mandate



The Development Cycle

as being somewhere between Levels 3 and 4. Both sides were responsible for communication breakdowns, neither understood the development cycle, and they had to work three times as hard to repair the situation.

How can we help our teams learn? How can we develop future leaders? How can we create an environment where people can contribute and grow?

Some may say, 'Why grow new leaders? Doesn't that put my job at risk? What if someone becomes as good as me?'

One of the most important roles of leadership is to make yourself redundant; if you're not growing at least as fast as your team, you're not stretching yourself in readiness for new opportunities. A leader who's indispensable is a threat to their organisation. Life is full of

uncertainty, we never know when something will happen to us, and if we're the only one who can do a job, we put our organisation under serious threat. The first thing a good leader does is begin to groom a successor.

To become powerful, we must give power away.

Some managers seem to believe that to "give power" means "let the team loose" on a project, and that if they've passed the task over, they have to take the consequences of the team's efforts. Naturally enough, that's a scary thought for a responsible leader. What if they get it wrong? If a group hasn't had enough training, direction and experience, or they haven't grasped a solid overview of other strategic issues facing the organisation, of course they'll make decisions based on the limited data they've

been given. And then they're more than likely to produce flawed results. The outcome can only be frustration on all parts. Instead, team development is a dynamic evolutionary process in which all parties are involved.

And one last point about well-developed teams; they're more productive. Someone who doesn't feel very valued won't worry about the little time wasters that cuddle in for comfort. However, if they feel that they 'own' their job they'll be much harder on their own time inefficiencies. Given the opportunity to take responsibility, they'll work to their maximum instead of working to rule.

'Set me a task in which I can put something of myself, and it is a task no longer, it is a joy, it is an art.'

Canadian poet Bliss Carman

Have fun managing change, information and the people you work with, both at work and in the various voluntary organisations you're involved with. It's a work of art and - if done well - it's a gift to those around you.

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