

For Your Business ...

Learning team building lesson from soup kitchen



Bonni Carson DiMatteo

How long does it take you to build a winning team? Research would tell you three to six months; the Boston Red Sox would tell you nearly a century.

As long as I have been facilitating and teaching about effective teams, nothing quite taught me all I needed to know like the four hours of volunteering at a soup kitchen on Christmas Day.

For the last few years, my family has skipped the frenzy of the Christmas morning gift giving to join a friend and other members from her from Temple to serve at a Baptist Church in Cambridge, Mass., on Christmas morning.

Were it not for the nametags few of us would have known each other's name. We don't know what brought each of us here, but we were bound by one mission: give the homeless and less fortunate a Christmas banquet they wouldn't forget.

Before you can say "Merry Christmas" the reverend charted the goals we needed to do and assigned roles, asking for volunteers. Within an hour we needed to set tables, get the food to the stations, wrap gifts and raffles and be ready to greet the guests.

This past Christmas was a Sabbath, so many of the Temple volunteers were unable to come.

In addition, the contribution of clothes from one company did not arrive. This complicated the situation so not only did we have the pressure of time, but we also had limited resources.

As a result the volunteers joined efforts quickly and created a focus on their mission.

People helped each other and moved the goal forward by expediting what needed to be done. Roles were assigned and then changed to fit the need. There is always time to thank each other as you go. Some teenagers are too shy to mingle and some adults would rather serve than wrap. Individual quirks and differences are permitted as long as they don't undermine success.

Our goal was to get the meals ready to serve by 11 a.m. We sacrificed some of our own indulges for a greater good and together we accomplished more than we could individually.

Along the way we lived and learned the elements of creating and effective team:

- Have a compelling mission that reflects the values of the group.
- Have SMART goals: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time bound
- Have a time limit that creates pressure to focus.
- Have clear roles and responsibilities and be able to change them midstream if necessary.
- Take time to acknowledge and appreciate your team members.
- Tolerate individual quirks and differences as long as they don't undermine success.
- Everyone has to sacrifice something to achieve the team goal.
- The whole is greater than the sum of its parts — individual performance bows to team effort.
- Have fun.
- Celebrate your accomplishments.

Even as the TV newscasters arrived and interviewed cooks, volunteers and clergy we all know where the true story was.

It was in the faces of the guests as they saw the room bursting with helpers and a bountiful meal served to their place at their table. The twinkle in their eyes tells us our goals have been reached as we all paused and the minister led us in a prayer, as well as carols and the dradle song.

This was what we all came together to do. Our mission was driven by shared values of helping others less fortunate and to give some slice of joy on one morning to people who might be short on it most of the year.

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