

Teams That Trust

Two dogs playing in the ocean provide pointers on how staff members can create a spirit of teamwork that's not only highly productive, but fun. **BY SARAH LEVITT**

I love any opportunity for a leisurely walk on the beach, sun beaming, waves noisily cresting and falling in rhythm. It was on one such walk last fall when I came upon the Rottie and the Retriever.

Meandering along the shoreline, I looked up to see the two dogs engaged in a game of fetch with their owners.

They were riveted, standing at attention and watching intently for the wind up and release of a florescent green tennis ball into the waves. Each time, they would take off with gusto.

The Rottweiler, running full steam ahead, would stop short at the water's edge, ankle deep, watching the Golden Retriever leap headlong into the waves. Talented at navigating water, the Retriever didn't hesitate to swim in search of that ball. And the Rottie would stand, searching the waves with his eyes. Locating the ball and staring directly at it bobbing in the water, he guided the Retriever as he swam.

With the ball held tightly in his jaws, the Retriever paddled back to shore, and the Rottie happily greeted him. Then they'd both return to solid sand, shoulder to shoulder, whereupon the game would begin again.

The dogs made for an exceptionally high-performing team. Despite different talents, friendly rivalries and various languages among owners and dogs, the entire performance was fluid, seamless. And everyone looked like they were having a heck of a good time.

That good-times aspect of teamwork in the office often gets lost in the shuffle. It's easy to lose sight of what we already know: a trusting team is more efficient, productive, creative and innovative – and it's also more fun.

That exceptional spirit of camaraderie will only occur if you know that your teammates have your back and that they're not going to take the ball from you and

claim it as their own. If you start drowning, you're confident that they would dive in after you or throw you a life preserver.

When there's trust among members of a team, they know that your success is theirs. There isn't ownership or pride in carrying the ball to shore. A team can get



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by, perhaps, without trust, maybe even perform well in the short term. But a team that doesn't have trust can't excel or accelerate. And it can't go the distance.

Team members also need to understand each other's strengths. The Retriever was at home in the water, happy to splash in. The Rottie didn't have that quality, but he was often instrumental in guiding the Retriever to the location of the ball. Leaders of exceptional teams bring out the best in their team members and know that it's the combination of individual talent that makes the difference.

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complaining won't change things; it just obscures solutions and makes everyone miserable. When the waters get choppy, effective teams and their leaders get to work. Together.

Having a common, shared purpose is uniting, empowering and gives us a sense of belonging and contribution.

Effective leaders let team members know the context of their work, that it matters and that they're integral to a piece of the overall picture. This not only creates motivation, it creates meaning and generates common understanding of what the organization is all about. And being a part of something feels good.

Communication really is key. Clear, consistent expectations are building blocks of trust. And the more specific leaders are about goals and feedback, the more powerful their teams will be.

Trust elevates the entire game, whereas infighting destroys it. The two owners throwing the tennis ball weren't spending valuable time and energy settling turf wars between two 100-pound dogs. They were watching to make sure all was well, keeping an eye on the ocean's conditions. They were available for backup and support, but they didn't have to play referee.

Trusting teams make for high-performing teams because their time, attention and energy are focused on solving the problem or creating new ideas. They're not embroiled in the energy drain of infighting.



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