
Ties That Bind

Overcoming Departmental Barriers

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Introduction

Taking business trips as a team can blaze the trail toward common ground among people from different departments. Trips provide an informal environment where people can let their guards down and step outside the usual professional role. The history that travelers create is a priceless means to building better relationships. The fact that the mechanics of work are left behind and folks begin to relax makes people more comfortable with each other. The memories and events of the trip will remain a constant tie among the travelers which will make confrontation easier in the future.

Trips should not be a time to just go play and squander valuable corporate/community time and money. Expectations for trips must be made clear and a definite daily schedule must be followed. For example, free time may be given in the morning before the seminar for folks to work out or relax. Lunches and dinners can be devoted to working on brainstorming ideas and focusing on an agreed issue of concern. It's important to have a little fun and relax too. For example, take turns each night among travelers on places to eat. Or, pick a site seeing activity that the group can mutually enjoy. But remain focused and stick to the agenda. The experience of accomplishing a common goal and having a little fun can lay the ground for a life long meaningful professional relationship.

For example, a group of administrative and physician leaders went out of town for a seminar. During an energetic dinner discussion, a physician leaned across the table and yelled at one of the administrators, embarrassing her and hurting her feelings. The next day, the administrator confronted the physician away from the group. The physician and administrator discussed the incident. The administrator was open and frank about her feelings which encouraged the physician to open up about his feeling on the matter. Each accepted each others' feelings, and apologies. The entire event solidified a strong personal and professional relationship that has only grown stronger over the years.

Work on a meaningful project during business meals

When the group of travelers agree to a "trip project" and they accomplish the project over the course of the trip the sense of accomplishment is tremendous. The daily distractions often found at work are gone which helps to foster creativity and more open conversation. And, the less demanding schedule provides the time and focus needed to see a project through.

Traveling groups must first select a topic that interests everyone. For example, a group of physician leaders brainstormed on a trip about how physicians who intend to be successful at SOMC should behave. The SOMC White Paper that resulted from their comments, "On Being Successful at SOMC," became a major recruitment piece for new physicians, and is widely regarded as a concise and accurate description of the organization's cultural expectations for newcomers.

The team must commit to work steadily until the project is complete. Always allow for some social conversation at the beginning and end of each meal to help lighten the mood. Focus on brainstorming to encourage creative participation and don't require formal preparation. Encourage and welcome different perspectives which will lead to a better understanding of each party. The SOMC Medical Education Leadership Team engaged in several extended dinner conversations about the team's expectations for trainees. Perspectives were collected from administrators, medical education physician leaders and physician preceptors. These expectations were eventually finalized in a document that new trainees review and sign when they join the SOMC community. This document has clarified expectations, improved communication and provided a foundation for productive relationships with trainees and among the Medical Education Leadership team.

Solicit and share ideas

It's simple, soliciting ideas triggers other ideas. Sadly the mechanics of the usual work environment do not usually foster a sharing of ideas. That's why the informal setting of a trip is so important for "testing the waters" and beginning the process for recruiting support for ideas that may bring about organizational changes. All members must remain open and non-judgmental to new ideas so that no one is intimidated to share. And, the open sharing of ideas will help combat the tendency of different departments to go their own way with little or no knowledge of what others may be doing along the same line.

Each member of the team must personally participate which will help to demonstrate that everyone's ideas are valued and will be taken seriously. Make sure to select a comfortable, distraction-free environment. A loud and busy restaurant will only impede communication and lead the group off course. Perhaps most importantly and often hardest to do is to withhold all criticism of ideas presented.

Take time to learn about each other

Working trips allow folks to become more comfortable with each other. The informal setting allows people to speak about their children, hobbies and interests outside of work which helps us to better understand each other.

This increased familiarity with each other promotes synergy. We begin to become aware of others expectations, preferences and needs. This interpersonal comfort allows us to “dance with discomfort” and encourages the openness to change.

Go out of your way to blend your professional and personal lives. For example, the SOMC Medical Care Foundation leadership team commits to eating lunch as a group every Wednesday. The lunch has no agenda, except to explore the personal interests of each party. The group has also committed to one social evening a month in which the group can discard the barriers of roles and duties and just simply get to know each other as friends. This personal investment allows the group to overlook minor annoyances among the team, accept bad days with ease and make the case for projects and changes more effectively.

Make expectations clear

Clear expectations provide the roadmap to success. It takes the guesswork out of our actions and brings a reassurance or comfort to our efforts. No one can read minds. By clarifying expectations frequently, you begin to mentor and encourage others to do the same and this in turn simplifies almost everything. Encourage each other to be open and frank about whether expectations are reasonable. This will help reduce error, rework and misunderstanding. Write expectations down.

Repeat and review expectations regularly, because they may change. Try to clarify expectations with examples and repetition. Check on progress of expectations to demonstrate that the expectation is still in effect. And, use the medium of communication that the receiver prefers. For example, an administrator had tried on several occasions to communicate with a physician leader face to face. It was the administrator’s preferred form of communicating. However, each confrontation was fruitless and accomplished nothing. Finally, the administrator realized that this physician leader preferred to communicate with email. It definitely required what the administrator considered more work but the end product was finally achieved and the relationship established based on the expectations of that physician leader.

Identify and respect barriers

A true understanding of barriers reduces frustration. When we identify barriers it helps to develop focus and priority-setting. And an understanding of barriers helps leaders avoid wasted effort, and deadly mistakes. If you never seek to identify the barriers that may exist, you can never overcome them. You can identify barriers by asking fellow leaders to explain what they see as barriers, recognizing that agreement is not required. It’s important to recognize that many barriers are unconscious. Test your perceptions of barriers with others, and consult with a mentor about the best approach.

Give it time

It takes time to really understand others, their perspectives and their challenges. All you have to do is reflect on a relationship that you’ve had with a colleague for five years, as opposed to the one you’ve had for six months. The five year relationship lends itself to predictability and understanding of each other over time. First impressions are often times not right. It takes time to become comfortable enough to be honest about what you’re really thinking. And people will have to get to know you before they can trust you.

Announce to the other party that you do want a relationship or a better relationship and that you are willing to invest the time to make it happen. Set realistic expectations among each other. Socialize. And, don’t be pushy... it doesn’t help. Avoid becoming obsessive about barriers and accept the normal setbacks and plateaus. Celebrate progress. Socialize!!!

Be persistent and consistent

Giving up is a barrier itself. Most accomplishments will require persistence, persistence and more persistence. Persistence can be confused with being pushy. Clarify with folks that you are committed to seeing the issue through and don’t wish to be perceived as pushy. You’re just sincere and committed!!!! But know when to back off.....because timing does matter.

Consistency is a key element to breaking barriers. Consistent people are viewed as more credible. Have you ever met a fickle person who never feels the same way about an issue twice??? It’s a barrier and it makes people uncomfortable. Consistency makes relationships easier and provides evidence of character. Set the tone; monitor your moods, be on time and most importantly deliver on your commitments.

Avoid negative people

Negative people will waste your time and energy. They will bring you down and are never part of the solution. They can distract a team from its real focus and mission. Negative people are frequently the barrier. It is possible to succeed without negative people and avoiding them will help to guarantee your success. You can avoid negative people by not putting them on teams. Identify them and ignore them. It's that simple. Confront them if you see opportunity to persuade. But don't reward them for their negativity. Go around them, over them, through them and make them feel isolated.

Make work fun

Fun relieves tension, builds friendships and increases the comfort among members to share ideas. It makes everyone less guarded and it combats the boredom of the usual drill of tasks.

You've got to commit to building the relationship. Be fun and it will be contagious. Laugh at yourself often. Celebrate.

Encourage open dialog

People cannot know what you're thinking unless you tell them. No one is a mind reader. Hoarding information is a barrier because it implies that there is some "inner circle" that is in the know. We learn and truly build relationships by being open. If we don't speak openly and listen carefully, then interdepartmental barriers can never be fully understood or broken down.

Make it an organizational expectation that stating one's position good-naturedly is the preferred behavior. Ask people what they think and then really listen. Practice empathetic listening and repeat what others tell you to make sure you've truly heard what they said. Modeling openness will lead to openness.

View colleagues in other departments as your clients

Colleagues in other departments are our internal customers and we should treat them that way. We all have an obligation to serve each other. And, when you think about it, don't you prefer to be treated like a customer? Everyone is dependent on each other. A good relationship between

departments develops an organizational competitive advantage by helping to effectively identify and resolve operational barriers. And approaching your colleagues as a customer will keep you focused on understanding exactly what people need and want.

Following up is probably the most critical skill a leader can develop. Anytime someone has asked you or directed you to complete a task it is critical that you follow up periodically during the task completion and then follow up when the task is completed. This one skill, if mastered, can develop credibility, dependability and foster strong relationships between departments. No one wants to feel as if their request has sunk into some black hole!

Conclusion

Working trips are just one tool to effectively break down barriers among departments and build relationships. Organizations must make effective interdepartmental relationships an organizational expectation. Finding a common goal and working toward that goal together can be one of the most enriching professional experiences. The openness to new ideas is invigorating.

It won't be easy. It will take time and barriers will be confronted. But with time, and persistence you can develop relationships that will define your job, excite you, inspire you and guide you into the future.

About the Authors

Mary Beth Dever, MBA has fourteen years of experience in healthcare. Ten years of experience in group practice administration of over 15 multi-specialty satellite sites including two Urgent Care Centers. She has launched and planned 20+ physician practice start ups, including building design, equipment purchases, billing system set up, contracts and staffing. She is also the Administrative Director of SOMC's Medical Education Department and the Family Practice Residency Clinic which is comprised of 14 Medical Students, 3 Interns, and 8 Residents. Mary Beth also administrates the Hospitalist program for SOMC.

Miss Dever earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Telecommunications from The Pennsylvania State University and a Masters of Business Administration from Ohio University.

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Dr. Stewart was born and raised in Rome, Georgia. He graduated from Berry College in Mount Berry, Georgia and received his MD from the Medical College of Georgia. He completed his psychiatric residency at the Medical College of Georgia and then served as Chief of the Mental Health Clinic at the US Air Force Hospital near Rapid City, South Dakota. He opened his private practice in Portsmouth in 1981. He returned to graduate school and earned an MBA from Ohio University in 1999.

Dr. Stewart is a Diplomate of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and a Distinguished Lifetime Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. He is a past president of the Ohio Psychiatric Association.

Dr. Stewart is a former Chairman of The Ohio Partnership for Excellence. He also served as a member of the Board of Examiners for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Dr. Stewart is the senior author of, "A Portable Mentor for Organizational Leaders," a book published by SOMCPress in 2003. He and his wife, Fay, have two grown sons.