

Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

TEAM!

Simple Strategies to Success



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Initially, the caption to this article was going to be “The Secret to Success.” However, secret means something that is hidden – kept away from exposure. Our team has come to the conclusion that there is no secret to building a successful team. All of the ingredients are available to all those who have the intention of being the best or successful in whatever endeavours they pursue.

Our immediate team is made up of 15 staff members. We are diverse in many ways: multi-cultural, multi-religious, different sexual orientations, gender, and an age range that spans 30+ years. These differences have turned out to be one of our greatest strengths. The wide range of unique perspectives and our ability to learn how to utilize everyone’s various talents has created our dynamic team.

Together, we support individuals who reside in a treatment home that have “high risk,” and “challenging” behaviours. This can create a high stress environment, staff conflict and high turnover. Our work environment can seem very daunting and it can feel like all of the odds are against you. We knew this from the beginning and we knew what we were faced with. We also knew we wouldn’t succeed unless we worked together – unless we were a TEAM. It has been a long road; we have faced many challenges, but we have done it together, as a team that grows stronger every day.

Our team has been asked several times questions like: “What’s your secret?” and, “How did you become such a strong team?” Agencies that want to open similar treatment residences ask, “How do you keep staff?” Again, there is no secret, but here is what we have identified that makes us truly a TEAM.

Individual commitments:

There may not be an “I” in Team but there is an “I” in Win! And to have a team that wins, the “I” stands for individual commitment. Individual commitment is a very important prerequisite to achieving team success. Individual commitment is a journey that requires constant and continuous work. It starts with preparation by positive habit forming, staying healthy, and keeping focused. It continues with execution, maximum efforts, discipline, and sacrifices. Staying committed to the road you are traveling is possible with motivation, inspiration, and by avoiding distractions that take you off course.

An individual can dream to have a degree in his/her field of profession; however, it takes individual

commitments to turn this dream into reality and finally, into an accomplishment. Without commitment it will remain an unattainable dream. Once each individual is ready to give 100 percent to themselves, he/she can then give 100 percent to the team, and success will become inevitable.

Success can take time, depending on recourses, skills, and knowledge but, with commitment, anything can be achieved. If you are not willing to give 100 percent, then why do it at all? Find something that you love and want to give all of your efforts to so that giving 100 percent comes easily.

GOALS?:

Our team is very goal driven. It is important that the whole team work towards the same common goals. Common goals and the steps required to reach such goals are often assumed rather than discussed. Stating goals, making steps to reach goals, reviewing progress, and making necessary adjustments is a process that needs to occur with the team on a regular basis.

Long term goals are important and necessary, but can be easily forgotten if they are not reviewed. In addition to long term goals, short term goals keep the team focused and motivated through the achievement of many goals while seeing regular improvements on the way to long term goal achievement. Goals also need to be set based on priorities and potentially changed as new information and resources become available. For example, if the team sees an emerging issue with a member (the term 'member' is used within Vita at the request of the people we support) that increases risk, this is immediately addressed by all resources to problem solve and decrease these risks.

It might sound cheesy, but all problems, all concerns are opportunities to improve by setting goals. This mindset or attitude ensures that we do not get stuck on the problem, finger point, or blame others. It leads to the creation of goals and improves our team and the supports we offer. Our attitudes govern the goals we aim to reach. The manner in which we achieve our goals defines our character.

Acknowledging Individual Strength?:

Everyone has strengths and talents that are uniquely valuable to the team. Each one of us understands that, to be a great team, we must acknowledge the strengths of others and within ourselves. The team has to determine how each individual's strengths fit into the structure, and ensure there is a balance through equal contribution. Each staff needs to be included and be allowed the opportunity to find his/her niche. Everyone has a part to play within their position and within the team. This is not to say that a person is limited by the position or role he or she is in. Each staff should have the opportunity to grow and learn new skills. In the absence of staff or when changes occur within the team, any staff member should be ready to fill in without skipping a beat. This principle requires individual self-confidence to acknowledge and appreciate the skills and talents of others while continuing to appreciate your own. For instance, a basketball team has many players, and each player has different strengths and skills. They cannot all play the same position and be a balanced successful team. To be the best team, each position must be valued both by the individual in that position and by the rest of the team. The coach can play a valuable part in validating each player. It is also imperative that the coach understand that he or she cannot play all of the positions either. His/her job is to empower and inspire each player and allow him/her to grow.

There may be times when one person is recognized for a job well done; it is important to understand that this reflects positively on the entire team, as each person ultimately contributed to the success.

Honesty/Integrity

When it comes to the team, being transparent is at the root of our performance. Being transparent is to have everything out on the table, good or bad. It is the foundation of honesty and integrity. The team arrived at this policy by encouraging individual team members to work on their weaknesses.

Within our team, every individual openly communicates their intentions, and the team accepts them without prejudice or judgement. This is accomplished by working towards resolving the root cause of the problem, addressing it with the goal of becoming a better team, and coming together as a unit to problem solve. For instance, if a teammate is always late for work, we approach that person without any assumptions to find out the reason for this problem. The team then comes together and brainstorms ideas to resolve it. The main focus is to eradicate issues that will derail the team no matter how little, so that we can always continue to practice in an honest and safe environment. Being honest and transparent requires that we do not attack a member of the team for their weaknesses, but identify them with the goal of supporting that person. The team embraces the saying, "Honesty is the best policy."

Trust:

Trust is an important factor for any team to be successful in their endeavours. Trust can be defined in many ways. For our team, trust comes down to our ability to rely on one another. Each of us needs to have confidence in each staff member's ability to make good decisions around daily activities, confidence in their skill level and their willingness to be there for us during crisis situations. Trust is an ongoing process that continues throughout the relationship with highs and lows. Trust can be built and rebuilt. When beginning new relationships, we build trust by ensuring commitment to the same goals from all parties and practice open communication. When our team experiences a break down in the area of trust, we rebuild it by focusing on respect of ones opinions and emotions, being transparent, communicating with each other and re-evaluating the team's commitments and goals. Once planted, the seed of trust will germinate given time and commitment.

Disagreement:

Perhaps the most important factor for a successful team is disagreement. Disagreement is often seen as negative and something to be avoided. This is not so. In fact, disagreement is necessary if you are going to build any of the pieces discussed so far. Be open to disagreement. Talk about the differences in opinion, discuss the reasons for those differences, listen to the many perspectives and use them to build new awareness. The outcome will undoubtedly be better than any one point alone. For example, there was a situation where a member's target behaviours were increasing and everyone was trying to problem solve the situation. It was clear that the target behaviours posed great risks to him and others and, as a support team, we needed to address the situation quickly. One staff wanted the dosage of the PRN increased. The rationale behind this solution was the member could not control his behaviours and he needed the medication to de-escalate. Another solution was to increase the physical intervention during the crisis due to the high risk and duration of physical aggression. The third solution was to remove the PRN altogether because there was

some evidence that the PRN had become a trigger and increased the aggression, but also, in that staff's opinion, the member was able to control his behaviour when motivated to do so. All three solutions had good reasoning behind them and the concerns were valid. Through the discussion, all staff were able to listen to the different perspectives, incorporate all concerns and come up with a final solution. Our final solution was to continue building skills with a new reinforcement program and to address the risk of physical aggression by removing the target of the PRN through a transition period and close monitoring by a treatment team. Once the new approach was implemented, the member's motivation, skills and participation increased and the target behaviours decreased. Remember, your teammates are valuable and you must respect them throughout disagreement.

Recognition:

Recognition is the glue to all of the above points in becoming a strong team. Without recognition each point will be short lived and/or not consistently practiced. Recognition is highly underused and the impact is underestimated. Recognition can light a wet fire, meaning it can ignite hope. Recognition can turn a hard day into something of great worth and can maintain a high level of enthusiasm when difficulties arise. Recognition comes in many forms and from anyone on the team. Team members are recognized for their hard work, for taking initiative, and for having a positive impact on team concepts. Any team member who brings forth an idea or solution is rewarded and recognized every day, as well as at the beginning of a meeting with a "shout out," and by acknowledging the positive impact he/she had on the team and/or goal.

Recognition isn't always about performance. It can be about valuing the team member as a person. This is done by celebrating birthdays, graduations, the birth of a child and other happy occasions. Recognition can be in the form of support, morally and/or financially during difficult times, such as a death or loss in a team member's family.

Supervisor:

There is no way that the team can accomplish their successes without the leadership of their supervisor. In any team concept, there is always a leader who has the goal of developing the best team. The supervisor at Mill Street is one who focuses on building relationships and confidence to develop our successful team.

A supervisor is a part of the team and all of the above mentioned strategies apply to the supervisor as well. Additionally, having a supervisor that understands you, values you, and genuinely cares about you as a staff is extremely motivating and reinforcing. A supervisor that sees everyone as a person is able to discover each person's personality, unique talents, and what drives him/her to be successful. It cannot be a faked process. To build a successful relationship, the supervisor must be genuine if he/she hopes to reach every staff in order for the staff to feel safe and open to the relationship building process. We are not talking about a supervisor knowing their staff by formal introduction alone. That is no one way to build a relationship. In fact, if the supervisor has one style, he/she will only reach some staff. The approach must be customized to each individual's personality and requires some attention to detail. For example, if a staff likes playing basketball, the supervisor at Mill Street takes the

time to play basketball and interact with the staff in a setting where he/she feels comfortable. Once you build a relationship with staff, caring comes naturally. The staff at Mill Street are bound together by the supervisor's contagious sense of caring. One way the Mill Street supervisor demonstrates caring is during a major incident like a member's physical aggression. He is always there to support and find ways to alleviate the risk. He is never too busy to render support. The growth of the relationship and genuinely caring about the staff allows the supervisor to learn and incorporate the individual's personality and strengths into the work environment and helps to develop both individual staff and team skills.

A supervisor can build confidence in staff or completely break a staff's confidence. Even if the supervisor comes with the best intentions, it can be a fine line. When building staffs' confidence, it starts with knowing the expectations, as well as providing opportunities to develop and practice those skills. Where the fine line comes in is how the supervisor reviews and provides feedback, or addresses concerns. In order for anyone to grow and develop skills, feedback –good or bad – is the key to success. In the case where a staff has made an error, reprimanding a staff and indicating through body language and tone that the staff is wrong implies that staff is beneath the supervisor, which will potentially shatter the staff's confidence. When the supervisor at Mill Street discusses an error with a staff, he approaches that discussion in a collaborative, non-judgemental way, with the goal of supporting the staff to find solutions to eradicate the error. When this discussion involves a disciplinary action the supervisor at Mill Street helps create pathways, through goals, to get "back on track." Solutions and goals have to be created together by the staff and supervisor. This creates buy-in and empowers the staff. Disciplinary actions can be devastating to staff but, with the right approach and support, it can be a learning and growing opportunity.

Overall, the results of our team efforts speak for themselves. Mill Street's treatment home has high success rates and low staff turnover despite the potential challenges and high risk environment. Any team can accomplish success based on the above team concepts. That is why the secret to success is not actually a secret. Now that you know what it takes to build a successful team, and you want to implement these strategies within your team, begin by communicating your ideas and sharing the above techniques amongst your team, as well as by setting goals. Hard work is required but worth it. Good luck!

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