How do I help my employees become Team Players?

Every organization wants employees who are team players, and team players are found at every level of the organization. It isn't just the responsibility of front line employees, new professionals or middle managers to be team players. All employees, from part-time, hourly workers to C level executives must put the organization's interest first, trust management, support decisions, understand context and give 100% effort. The higher you rise in the organization, though, the more you become responsible for developing team players within your span of care. Here I describe four strategies for helping employees in your organization become team players.

The first and most critical strategy sounds simple, but is deceptively hard. Be the boss. This principle is most difficult for people making the transition from front-line positions into management, but can also be hard for upper-level managers who have never quite mastered the art. The truth is that management is a different animal. The relationship between two front-line employees is qualitatively different than the relationship between one of those employees and a manager. That difference is a discussion for another time, but for our purposes, the important point is that a leader must accept the responsibilities of leadership, and not try to just be a team member with a higher salary.

The first role of the leader, in developing team players, is to model the five principles. Put the interests of the organization first, trust organizational leadership, support decisions, understand context and always give 100% effort. No one can expect their staff, supervisees or team members to develop a team player perspective if they are not willing to take that perspective themselves.

Beyond simply modeling the five principles yourself, leaders should communicate their expectations clearly. Most employees don't become team players, not because they are unwilling, but because they simply don't understand what the organization really wants from them. Don't trust the grapevine to do the work of communicating organizational expectations. Rather, leaders should clearly articulate the five principles of team players, describe how the principles play out in their organization, and regularly revisit individual employees' progress toward becoming a team player.

The second strategy proceeds from the first. In addition to communicating expectations well, leaders should share all kinds of information with their employees. Team players are employees who trust their leaders, support decisions and understand context. However, those responsibilities are very difficult to uphold when information is lacking. Employees find it hard to trust leaders whom they perceive as having secrets. Employees cannot support decisions they are unaware of, and are much more likely to support decisions they understand. And information is the cornerstone in which understanding of context is built.

The third strategy requires the balancing of two critical activities. Take input, give direction. The simple truth is that leaders that accept input from their subordinates are more effective. Your teams have diverse perspectives and ideas. Many are skilled, intelligent individuals, regardless of their experience or credentials. You will only benefit from providing appropriate opportunities for employees to give input on organizational decisions and activities. Remember though that the principle is *take input* not *take direction*. This goes back to the first principle. Organizational management has responsibility for making decisions, and to not let passive aggressive, subversive, unmanageable employees force a direction on the organization through their intransigence.

Rather, the leader's imperative is to *give direction*. Make decisions and stick to them. Clearly articulate expectations, and then hold people accountable for meeting those expectations. Give the team something to accomplish and then lead them to the accomplishment of that. This is not an exhortation to avoid change. Plans change sometimes, and those changes are often necessary, whether it is for greater success, or simply for survival. But when change is necessary, communicate what it is, and then move forward. Give direction and then go.

Lastly, if you want people to enthusiastically embrace the team player concept, give the people what they want. Watch carefully for how people progress in their development as team players, and then recognize and reward their progress, publicly and privately. These rewards can range from simple pats on the back to bonuses and promotions, as is appropriate to the situation and the organization, but whatever form they take, they are a critical piece of the puzzle.

Whatever level of the organization you find yourself in; you have the opportunity to be a team player. Apply these four strategies and you will also have the opportunity to see team players proliferate throughout your organization.