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Focus: People - Your Most Important Asset

There Ain't No 'I' In Team...Is There?

By Scott Byorum

You must've heard them before. You know - those trite, overused phrases meant to get people on board with what everyone else on a team is trying to accomplish: "There ain't no 'I' in team," and, "be a team player," and, "let's win one for the team," etc. Blah, blah, blah. Don't get me wrong. Without teams, we would accomplish very little. But in the effort to unite employees into a cohesive functioning unit, we've accrued a common misconception about teamwork and team building. And I'm here to ground it.

You may have heard the phrase "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Usually the example given is that of an engine, where the whole of an assembled engine accomplishes much more than any of its individual parts. But the phrase is only partially correct. It should go "the whole has the potential to be greater than the sum of its parts, but only if those parts are in good working order." You've no doubt experienced it yourself. A hose breaks in your engine and that engine doesn't work like it used to, if at all.

In an organization's search to help people work together effectively we often overlook the most important part of what makes a team work in the first place - the individual. Trite phrases like the ones mentioned in the opening paragraph put pressure on individuals to conform to a common standard and often ignore how differences among individuals can play an important role in the dynamics of a group. Real teamwork begins when people express those differences and explore them. That's how new ideas and new ways of looking at issues arise. Conformity often quashes inspiration and expression.

If we go back to the analogy of the engine that's blown a hose or some other part, a temptation may cross our minds to say "We'll just replace the hose with a new one and the engine will be all better!" Will it? Sometimes, that may be true. Other times it may be indicative of a deeper issue...possibly too much pressure in the lines. Replacing the hose may just cause it to blow again, or a different one may fail, or the issue may surface in some other part of the engine, which is much more likely to occur in real life when you're dealing with real people and not metaphorical engines.

The cost of replacing an employee can be significant when you consider costs incurred for exit interviews, administrative functions, severance pay, increases in unemployment compensation, attracting applicants, entrance interviews, testing/exams, pre-employment administrative expenses, orientation...whew! And after that you can only hope that they will fit into the team; that the person you interviewed and accepted for the job is...well, you know...THE PERSON you interviewed and accepted for the job! You see, it isn't as easy as replacing a hose on an engine. And besides, that's the wrong way to look at it anyway.

Teams need to explore the very elements they are comprised of...the 'I'.

Think about the last time you were a part of a team. Did you feel along for the ride? That the decisions about the team's direction were in the hands of others or of the team leader? That if you expressed a differing viewpoint you would be seen as "not a team player?"

Or, did you feel that you had the support to voice your perspectives, even if you knew they were different than others? That you were one of the architects, one of the driving factors of the team's direction because each individual in the group understood one another's contribution and respected one another's unique perspective?

You are the 'I' in team... and so is everyone there with you.

The truth is, we are all individuals; all different. A good team starts with recognizing those differences and helping individuals understand them and work with them through fostering confidence and trust. This allows team members to leverage individual strengths and talents so that they can obtain a common goal. It allows them to really speak their minds and explore differences of opinion for the right solution; the one the team developed.

Is there an 'I' in team? Yep. A whole bunch of them.

Scott Byorum is the director of business development at Nationwide Real Estate Tax Service, Inc., an author and a certified Instructional Designer. He can be reached at 800-528-7803 or scott@nationwidecompliance.com.