



LACK OF TEAMWORK

Once upon a time there was a group of pipeliners who worked at a large facility with tanks and pumps and motors and valves. They were called a team. The team had a manager, operators one of whom was designated a lead, technicians one of whom was designated lead, senior operators who worked mostly at the other facilities, some subject matter experts, and an administrative assistant. The operators took turns working shifts, so they did not see one another except for short periods of time. The manager, the technicians, the subject matter experts, and the assistant worked mostly in the daytime so they saw the operators only when their shift worked in the daytime. Were they a team? What constitutes a team?

In The Wisdom of Teams, the authors specify six “team basics” or disciplines that make sense for good team performance:

1. Small size, generally fewer than twelve
2. Complementary skills are present to accomplish the work
3. Common purpose
4. Common set of specific performance goals
5. Commonly agreed upon working approach
6. Team members hold themselves mutually accountable for their performance

I think it is very difficult to instill these teamwork disciplines with groups of pipeliners. Why is that? In the tank farm team there were more than twelve people. The people had complementary skills and there was an overarching common purpose. When the overarching common purpose was applied to the specialized work that is necessary to operate and to maintain and to manage a large facility, the common purpose got diluted into purposes for operators, technicians, management, and subject matter experts. Within the large team, there existed several work groups.

This also occurred with the performance goals and working approach. There was little mutual accountability, since most of the rewards were for individual performance. Teamwork became frustrating to all involved. Interpersonal conflict occurred and the “team” had problems. How would you address these issues? What makes teamwork difficult in your workplace, if it is? If teamwork is not difficult, what makes it easy?

When I ask groups of pipeliners if teamwork is important in their control center or tank farm or maintenance crew, they always answer in the affirmative. I think we are conditioned to say that teamwork is important. Personally, I believe teamwork is very important in pipeline companies. I think teams can be effective if we identify both the existing sub teams within a larger team and create special sub teams with a specific purpose and specific goals, such as safety or customer relations. This also allows an individual’s contributions to team performance to be evaluated and rewarded.

Let’s use a control center “team” as an example. If the control center has two consoles, there are two console sub teams. Even if the entire control center has a common purpose, the two console teams should agree on their purpose, performance goals, and agreed upon working approach. These should be applicable to their consoles and their specific customers. In addition to individual accountability and responsibility, there should be mutual accountability and no finger pointing at one another when something bad happens. Within the console teams, smaller teams could be responsible for procedure reviews, training improvements, lessons learned, etc.

When I work with teams, I ask them to develop these items for effective teamwork:

- Clarify the team purpose and goals.
- Have an effective team plan that identifies team customers.
- Clearly define the roles and responsibilities.
- Establish ground rules for team behaviors.
- Practice clear communication with regular feedback.
- Reward good team behavior.
- Punish poor team behavior.
- Use well-defined decision making procedures.
- Achieve balanced participation with no superstars.
- Be aware of the group dynamics that affect both relationships and tasks.

