Pros & Cons of Team Sports
By Paperitalo Staff

I'll have to talk about me for a bit in order to set up this week's article. Sorry.

I never grew up playing team sports. The only team-like activity in which I was involved as a youth was the band. And, since I didn't like the position I was assigned, I quit, after having played the trumpet for about five years.

This has left me conscious of a missing skill set throughout my career. Most attempts to confine me to a structure have not worked, despite my ability to land positions with some of the best companies in the world. After a while, I usually ran screaming from the building. Consequently, for 21 of the 40 years I have been in the working world, I have worked for myself. Give me a project with scope, schedule and objectives, and I'll move heaven and earth to make it successful. Just don't ask me to sit around the campfire singing "Kum ba yah"--I haven't got time for that.

There is a personality named Howie Mandel who apparently is even less of a team player than me. In a recent interview, he explained how it came to be that he did not graduate from high school. While a senior in high school, he decided the library was not large enough. So, he went to the Yellow Pages, called up three contractors and had them come out and bid on constructing an addition. The Principal saw these people out in the school yard measuring and ask what was going on. They told him they were preparing to bid on the library addition. He asked who authorized this and they said, "Howie Mandel." Once expelled, he did not bother to go back.

I can relate to Mr. Mandel, but obviously large and complicated tasks require teams of players in order to be accomplished on either a project or on-going basis.

Drawing on the signature phrase of another personality, "Larry the Cable Guy," I like the idea of "git r done." And this reveals the flaw taught by team sports.

Team sports have positions, and players are taught to play positions very, very well. They are also taught to not encroach on another's position, except in a mildly supportive role. Most people come into their careers with a bit of this thinking, taught to them from a very young age. It is so ingrained they do not even know they have it. A non-team player like me sees this, because I am not hard-wired this way.

Over the years, I have been in many, many mills and talked to countless numbers of employees, several thousand I am sure. It has always amazed me to watch employees who know their organization is having problems, which are obviously caused by specific team member deficiencies, and they do nothing about them. This is a corporate culture that puts businesses out of business.

The military is a "team sport" as well. However, under fire, while discipline is maintained, all team members learn that they have to work together in order to survive. So, in the necessity of extreme conditions, they know they can bridge the "it's not my job" mentality and do what needs to be done.

Back to business, particularly in the United States, our litigious society has done nothing but reinforce that only the specially trained can do certain tasks. Companies are sued because non-trained people do things that result in a litigation opportunity. Hence, companies reinforce the "it is not my job" mentality.

Pulp and paper companies that can develop a culture that breaks from the rigid team attitude have a real opportunity to thrive, no matter the grade they make. For such companies can win the war of attrition, even in declining grades, and be the last one standing. After all, there is still a market for new buggy whips, and someone has to make them. Of course, the decision to be the last one standing involves more than just this as an objective, but it is possible to achieve, if the culture is correct.

Taking the positive side, in growing markets, a company adopting such a culture has a chance to really soar. Some of the computer software companies founded in the 1970's and 1980's showed how this is done--they coddled individuality and did very, very well.

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Could loosening rigidity help your company? If you are in a leadership position, it is worth exploring. It is difficult to achieve. However, if you don't succeed at it, I am sure one of your competitors eventually will. You really have nothing to lose.

As far as safety goes, we talk about training all the time. However, if you find yourself in a position where you alone are with a person needing CPR and you have not been trained, what will you do? I hope you will at least try, even at the risk of being sued. You just might save a life.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##

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