The Missing I

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7 Steps Ahead

"There is no me. I had it surgically removed."
-- Peter Sellers

At one high tech company that I worked with, I watched an interesting scenario unfold: after completing a major milestone, the engineers were high-fiving and taking some time to brag about their accomplishments. Enthusiasm and excitement were running high when a member of senior management decided to interrupt the gathering with the reminder that, "There is no 'I' in team."

This utterance had an effect not dissimilar to that of a skunk wandering into a fancy dinner party. On the scale of wet blankets, this was one that had been left out in the rain for a week. Within a few seconds, all that enthusiasm was gone, vanished into the ether. Properly harnessed, that enthusiasm could have catapulted the team into its next milestone. Instead, the team approached its next milestone with a shocking lack of energy, especially given the successes they'd had to that point.

The problem is that while there may not be an "I" in team, a team is made up of individuals. There are three "I"'s in individual. What does a team do? Well, in most situations we hope the team will win. There's an "I" right there in the middle of win. Oddly enough, you can't win if you take out the "I."

While it's critical for a team to be able to work together and for members of the team not to be competing with one another, that's only a piece of the puzzle. It's equally important that each member of the team feel that they are an integral part of the team's success. Without that personal connection, it's extremely difficult to get people excited about the work.

Unfortunately, I see companies far too often treating team members as interchangeable parts, not as unique individuals. Not only does this undermine the team, it is also a tremendous waste of resources: a major advantage of having a team is that you have access to multiple eyes, ears, hands, and brains. Each person brings unique skills, knowledge, and perspective to the problems the team is facing. When a company fails to take advantage of those people, then they are spending a great deal of money for very little return.

In the Mann Gulch disaster, Wagner Dodge failed to appreciate the perspectives and opinions his team brought to the table. He relied solely on his own eyes, ears, and brains. Had he bothered to obtain information from the rest of his team, it is highly likely that most of them would not have perished under Dodge's command. When the team has no "I," the team cannot see.

On the flip side, some companies go too far in the other direction. One company, that shall remain nameless, spends so much time on "I" that there's no time left for "we." There have no team; there's only a group of people who happen to be wandering in something vaguely approximating the same direction. Meetings are characterized by constant jockeying for position and arguments over turf. Different groups in the company see themselves as competing with one another for the favor of the CEO and for the eventual rewards. Oddly enough, the level of excitement and commitment in this situation is about the same as the one in which there is no "I." When you have too much "I," no one can agree on what they are

seeing. In other words, too much "I" or a missing "I" produce much the same degree of blindness. That's not good for the individuals, the team, or the company.

So how do you make sure you have the right "I?"

Start by creating something worth seeing. Paint a vivid picture of the company's future, and show each person how they, as individuals, matter. Remind employees of the skills, knowledge, perspectives, and abilities that led to them being part of the team.

Show each person how they fit into the overall picture, and how their colleagues fit in as well. Make sure each person has a clue about what the others are doing. Ignorance breeds contempt.

Strengthen individual autonomy: find opportunities to allow people to decide how they'll get their jobs done. Don't regulate anything that isn't absolutely necessary to getting the product out the door.

Always praise successes. Highlight significant contributions, remind people of their strengths.

Encourage and provide opportunities for team members to continuously develop their strengths. Improving individual skills dramatically improves team performance.

For a team to win, it needs to see where it's going. That requires the team to have "I'"s and something to look at. How can you provide both to your team?

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