

It's Team-Being, Not Teambuilding

Lessons from an Old Jazz Musician It's Time to Stop Building Teams and Start *Being* Teams¹

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I met a very special person many years ago who showed me what it really means to work as a team. He was an old time Jazz musician by the name of Freddie Katz.

Freddie won the Playboy Jazz award many years ago, writing music for the Chico Hamilton Quintet. Not only that, he also was invited twice to perform at the White House. Needless to say, Freddie was a very accomplished musician who introduced the cello to jazz.

At the same time, Freddie was a self-made anthropologist. As Professor Emeritus at Fullerton College, he fascinated many students over the years with his cello, demonstrating the evolution of the Gregorian chant in the history of music. Freddie was a very warm and lovely human being.



I met Freddie at a Job Corps Center located in rural Kentucky, in Monmouth Cave National Park. I was there to evaluate the work of a group from the University of Oklahoma who were training the staff of a Job Corps Center located there. The Oklahoma group was actually engaged in what has now become known as teambuilding, although it wasn't labeled as such at the time.

As part of their program, the Oklahoma group asked Freddie to bring in his jazz trio and perform for the kids at the Center. Their thinking was that it would be a real treat for those young people, who were a mixture of eastern urban rebels and rural Kentucky never-do-wells. And then, they figured, Freddie could get up the next day, put on his anthropological hat and give them a little information on how to get along together.

Freddie and his trio gave a wonderful concert. He had those kids in the palm of his hand. For over two hours, everyone in the room was swept up in beautiful mixtures of rhythms and harmonies. We *all* were totally enthralled.

¹ I am indebted to Jim Perkins, former General Manager of Chevrolet, for this expression. In January, 1990, I had the pleasure of participating in the planning of his first annual Chevrolet Senior Management Conference. His goal was to build a stronger sense of team at the conference. During one planning meeting, Jim turned to his top managers and said: "Gentlemen, it's time we stopped building our team and start *being* a team!"

At the end of the concert, a group of the young men, who, themselves, had been playing music for a while, asked Freddie if they could perform for him. Freddie, of course, was delighted. So, they brought their instruments up on stage and began playing their hearts out. What followed was a charming, homespun performance by some talented young musicians.

And then an extraordinary thing happened. Freddie's trio picked up their instruments and began blending in with the kids. All of them improvised together for over an hour. It was "a happening." It was as if they were talking to one another in a totally different language. The kids, the Job Corps Staff, and all of us in the Oklahoma group were completely entranced.



The next day, Freddie stood up and started telling everyone what it means to work together. He walked right into the audience, looked around, and said to them, "Last night, when we were all playing music together, we were a real close group. Many of us are so different from each other—different ages—different races—we come from different parts of the country and different cultures—and yet, last night, we really played great together—*as one group*."

"Do you know why?" Freddie asked his audience rhetorically. "It's because," he answered himself, "as we talked with each other through our musical instruments, we did so with mutual respect and courtesy—without any barriers."

"There's a certain underlying form," he went on to explain, "sort of like a set of rules to jazz—a structure—within which we all stay as we play. It gives us our timing and our harmony. But there's something else—and it's equally important. There's a kind of musical etiquette that we follow, where we don't step on each other's solo, where we give everybody a chance to have their turn, where we can tell by glancing at each other when we should all play together on a tune."

"And there's one more thing," he said, reflectively, "last night we all felt a special excitement in making beautiful music *as a group*—everyone was proud of his *individual* part, but we all knew that we had to *put those parts together to create the whole sound* that we produced."

I remember Freddie pausing at that moment. He cupped his chin with his hand, nodded to himself, and looked around at the kids. "You know," he said, "in order for all of you to work smoothly together, you really need the same ingredients—mutual respect—courtesy—a set of rules you all agree to live by—a group etiquette that gives you each a chance to take part in whatever is happening."

"Then," he continued, "you do your individual best—*every moment*—you take pride in what you are doing. But you also realize that *when you all work together, you can produce something greater, and more special than you can when each of you works alone*."

Freddie stopped, nodding his head thoughtfully. “Yes,” he said, “those are the things that will help you all work together, just like we did last night. Wouldn’t it be wonderful,” he asked, as he spread his arms out to his young audience, “if it could always be like that?” To which they responded with smiles and nodding heads, and a chorus of *yeah’s*.

I’ve thought a lot about Freddie over the years since that day, as I’ve worked with management teams all over the country. I constantly marvel at how true are his words when it comes to people working together as a team.

I’ve read numerous articles and books on teamwork. I’ve talked to experts in the field. I’ve conducted many teambuilding sessions. I’ve taught students the principles of team management. But no one has ever captured the essence of what it means to *be* a team like Freddie did back there in rural Kentucky.

There’s a lot to be learned from an old pro like Freddie. With years of performing under his belt, he knew then what it takes to function as a team.

And Freddie was not alone in his knowledge. Coaches of great sports teams know what he was talking about. So do commanders of crack military units in the thick of battle, surgeons in the middle of an emergency operation, campaign managers in the heat of a presidential election, and project managers in industry, who, daily, are innovating their way to the front of the marketplace.

People build teams everywhere decisions are made. The team has become one of the most important key units in organizations of all kinds. The complex specialties in today’s world call for people to work more effectively *together* to get things done. As Nelson D. Schwartz recently reported: “...management experts and longtime watchers of corporate America say the current environment demands, and is attracting, yet another kind of chief executive: the team builder.”²

So, what goes into *being* a team?

To start with, consider what it would feel like when you finally stop *building* your team and start *being* a team. Peter Senge has a good word for it. He calls it *alignment*,³ where a group is functioning as a whole instead of its individual members working at cross-purposes. In his classic book, *The Fifth Discipline*, he provides a wonderful example of what that feels like. He quotes from the memoirs of basketball player Bill Russell of the Boston Celtics:

“Every so often a Celtic game would heat up so that it became more than a physical or even mental game, and it would be magical. The feeling is difficult to describe, and I certainly never talked about it when I was playing. When it happened I could feel my play rise to a new level...It would surround not only me and the other Celtics but also the players on the other team, and even the referees...At that special

² Nelson D. Schwartz, *C.E.O. Evolution Phase 3*, The New York Times, November 10, 2007.

³ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*, New York: Doubleday, 1990, pp. 234-235.

level, all sorts of odd things happened. The game would be in the white heat of competition, and yet I wouldn't feel competitive, which is a miracle in itself...The game would move so fast that every fake, cut, and pass would be surprising, and yet nothing could surprise me. It was almost as if we were playing in slow motion. During those spells, I could almost sense how the next play would develop and where the next shot would be taken..."⁴

That magical feeling, that special coordinated energy, is what *being* a team is all about. And it doesn't only happen with basketball players like Bill or musicians like Freddie. It happens with any group of people who are truly functioning as a team. I've seen it happen with people in all kinds of work settings.

I've seen it happen with top managers from high tech organizations meeting to work out strategies for staying ahead of fast changing developments in the marketplace.

I've seen it happen with educators who gathered in small groups all around the country to estimate future trends in adult education as a basis for deciding how resources should be allocated.

I've seen it with middle managers and supervisors in service organizations, who met to solve customer relations problems and design procedures that would make them more responsive to their customers.

In all of these groups, people told me how excited they were—how “charged”—how pleased they were with what they had accomplished together. Invariably they singled out their experience as “special,” as “rare,” as “energizing.”

Just like Freddie and his fellow musicians, individuals in an aligned team blend with each other in harmony as they work together to achieve a goal or solve a problem. There is music in their team collaboration.

The team culture of well functioning, aligned teams is markedly different from the culture of a dysfunctional, unaligned team.

The dominant characteristic of a well functioning, aligned team is a “climate of trust.” Trust is built upon a foundation of safety and confidence. People in a group feel safe when they know they won't be ridiculed, embarrassed, controlled, manipulated, exploited, or punished in any other way by other group members. People in a group are confident when they know they are doing their best and can depend on others in the group to do the same. When this atmosphere of trust prevails in a team, we have a *Team Culture*.

In contrast, the dominant characteristic of a dysfunctional, unaligned team is a “climate of defensiveness.” People don't feel safe. They look out for themselves at the expense of others. They work at cross-purposes, competing with one another. They finger-point and blame when something goes wrong, instead of constructively turning

⁴ A New Paradigm for Developing Organizations,” in J. Adams, editor, *Transforming Work*, Alexandria, VA: Miles Riler Press, 1984.

the situation into a problem to be solved. When this atmosphere exists in a team, we have a *Survival Culture*.

The characteristics of a *Survival Culture* vs. a *Team Culture* are shown below, along with the critical role that Managers play in cultivating a *Team Culture*.

<i>In A Survival Culture,</i> People are unaware of how their jobs fit into the organization's mission	<i>In A Team Culture,</i> People know what each must do to achieve the organization's mission	<i>Managers:</i> Involve everyone in shaping and owning the organization's mission
<i>In A Survival Culture,</i> People promote their own agenda, and are out for themselves, which sidetracks team discussions	<i>In A Team Culture,</i> People are aware of their interdependence in solving problems and reaching decisions	<i>Managers:</i> Model, demonstrate, and teach interdependence and team behavior
<i>In A Survival Culture,</i> People do only what their job descriptions say they should do	<i>In A Team Culture,</i> People go beyond their job descriptions to help others	<i>Managers:</i> Focus people on outcomes rather than on rigid job descriptions
<i>In A Survival Culture,</i> People self-protectively keep opinions and ideas to themselves, which weakens team member bonds	<i>In A Team Culture,</i> People, unafraid, openly express their opinions and ideas, which strengthens team member bonds	<i>Managers:</i> Support open discussions and never belittle those who disagree
<i>In A Survival Culture,</i> People reject diverse opinions and ideas, which deters others from offering their own opinions and ideas.	<i>In A Team Culture,</i> People, are open to diverse opinions and ideas, which invites others to offer their own opinions and ideas	<i>Managers:</i> Encourage the sharing of differing viewpoints, which leads to innovative ideas
<i>In A Survival Culture,</i> People are focused on finding fault, which impedes team accomplishments	<i>In A Team Culture,</i> People are focused on solving problems, which increases team accomplishments	<i>Managers:</i> Use mistakes as opportunities to learn and discourage finger-pointing and blaming
<i>In A Survival Culture,</i> People obediently follow procedures, no matter how ineffective they are	<i>In A Team Culture,</i> People, together, continuously strive to improve work processes	<i>Managers:</i> Foster and reinforce a customer-driven, problem-solving mindset
<i>In A Survival Culture,</i> People are critical and judgmental, which fosters defensiveness and sabotages teamwork	<i>In A Team Culture,</i> People are not critical or judgmental making it safe for taking risks, which strengthens teamwork	<i>Managers:</i> Model and cultivate objectivity and constructive decision-making
<i>In A Survival Culture,</i> People don't respect and trust one another, which discourages greater team participation	<i>In A Team Culture,</i> People respect and trust one another, which encourages greater team participation	<i>Managers:</i> Gain the respect of team members and reinforce respectful behavior whenever it occurs

Managers play a key role. Their behaviors will make or break a *Team Culture*.

Many older managers of today grew up during the 20th century, learning authoritative, bureaucratic attitudes and behaviors. Lawrence Miller, author of *American Spirit: Visions of a New Corporate Culture*, tells us that they were “vicariously conditioned” by a variety of cultural heroes that he calls *The Lone Ranger* and his clones:

“There were always the helpless victims. These were usually an elderly rancher and his unmarried granddaughter, who lived with him. They were going to lose the deed to their ranch, the railroad was going to run through their house, or their cattle were being rustled....The victims always got themselves into this fix, but never, never could they get themselves out of it. These characters were among the dumbest creatures ever placed on this planet.”

Then, along came the Lone Ranger and his faithful sidekick Tonto, sweeping in to take charge, quickly grasping the problem, identifying and outwitting the bad guys, and riding off into the sunset with a hearty “Hi-Yo-Silver!”⁵

Miller argues that we learned many lessons from this cultural hero. We learned that someone else is responsible for the “problem down on the ranch” (*blaming*). We learned “that those who got themselves into the difficulty are incapable of getting themselves out of it”—that someone must be sent down to fix it (*control-centered, authority-centered, dictating to others*). We learned that “in order to have the mystical powers needed to solve problems, you must stay behind the mask”—you must keep ordinary people from getting too close to you so you don’t lose your powers (*withholding, impersonal*).

It is an interesting fact that we lacked heroes who made *consensus decisions*, where people gather together in a *dialogue*—to listen to one another, share information, define the problem, weigh alternative solutions, and reach a unified decision.

Lawrence Miller contends that people in the most successful organizations will feel a spirit of oneness, a harmony of purpose, an alignment to common interests and action. He believes that the central focus of managers will be to create this harmony and that even hiring practices will favor people who can become an important part of the interdependent culture of the organization.

When people are *team-being*, you will find communication open and widespread, characterized by mutual respect and trust. You will see departments cooperating, people helping each other out no matter in which department they work. People will initiate actions on their own for the common good. Managers will serve as facilitators and supporters rather than traffic cops and controllers.

Throughout your organization, people will feel a sense of camaraderie, a commonality of direction, an alignment to a shared purpose. Each person knows that he or she owns a part of and contributes to the shape of the future being developed by the collective actions of everyone.

⁵ Lawrence M. Miller, *American Spirit: Visions of a New Corporate Culture*, New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984, p. 53.

Further, you could say that the well being of each team member becomes a collective goal of the team. This is the kind of goal that social psychologist Muzafer Sherif years ago termed a *superordinate* goal.⁶ A superordinate goal is a goal for which its accomplishment requires the collective efforts of the entire group—“the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

A CEO, who inspires employees throughout a company to buy-in to a “shared vision” is establishing a superordinate goal. *Being*-teams are teams that operate with such a shared vision. Everyone feels they own a piece of the larger, collective future. Each team member brings his or her personal set of talents, skills, and experience to the team. Each has a contribution to make. When a *Team Culture* exists and all team members are focused on the team goal—when they are *aligned* to that goal—everyone will feel they own a piece of the action.

When people feel they *own* what they are doing they will feel in control of their lives. This is what psychologists refer to as “locus of control”—people who feel in control assume responsibility for what occurs, while people who do not feel in control assign responsibility to someone or something outside themselves.

A feeling of ownership promotes *internal* motivation, another concept that has been around among psychologists for years. When organizations foster conditions that build internal motivation, overall morale is higher and employees are more committed to what they are doing.

When people in a team feel they *own* a piece of the action—when they know they can play a significant part in shaping their futures—they will be aligned as a *being*-team. Bill Russell and his Celtics teammates certainly knew they each had a piece of the action when they pressed to win a championship game!

Teams in the workplace are no different.

Remember jazz musician, Freddie Katz? He would add an important special ingredient to team-*being*: self-disciplined, personal competency. It is a group of hard working, skilled musicians, who make the best music, not a group of lethargic, unskilled novices.

This does not mean that team-*being* can only be achieved if the team starts by recruiting the most highly charged, exceptionally skilled team members. In fact, when a *Team Culture* is cultivated, people will feel *inspired* to work harder and to sharpen their personal skills, because the rewards and internal satisfactions they get from what they collectively produce will reinforce them to do so.

What it does mean is that *the self-discipline and personal competency of team members are important ingredients to a good team*, whether they are brought to the team as it is formed, or developed and cultivated in the team as it works toward team-*being*.

⁶ Sherif, O. J. Harvey, B. J. White, W. R. Hood, and Carolyn Sherif, *Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation: The Robbers Cave Experiment*, Norman Ok: University Book Exchange, 1961. I am grateful for my association with Muzafer Sherif who showed me that the rigor of science is not incompatible with the passion of the human spirit.

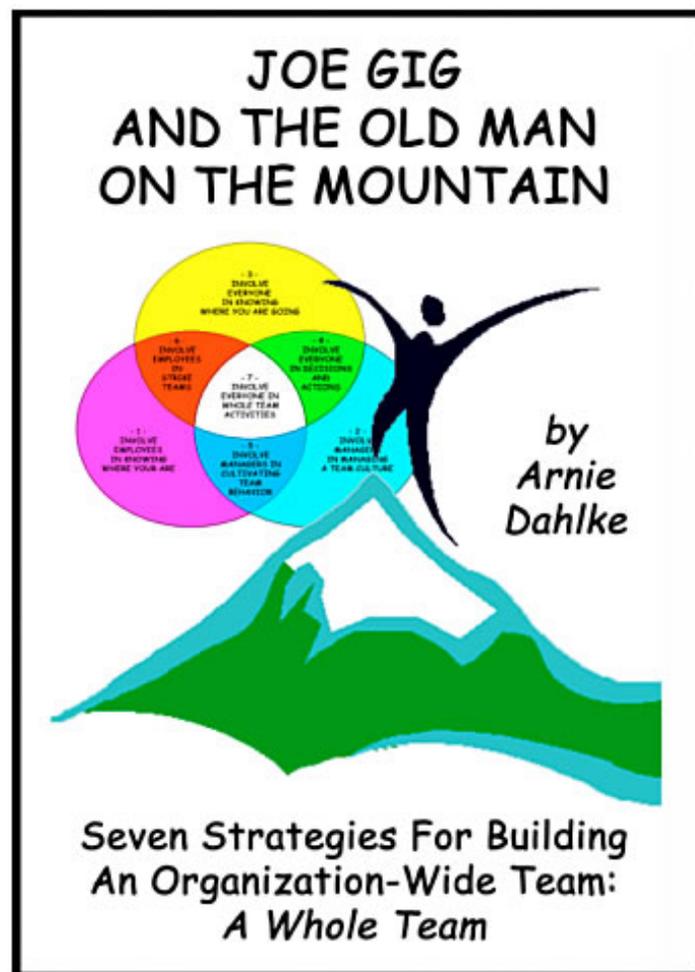
One final point: *Team-being* takes practice.

Learning team skills is like learning any other skills. Just knowing the ingredients of good teamwork doesn't automatically mean your group will function as a team. You will need to practice, practice, practice, and then practice some more!

There will come a day when it all will suddenly feel perfectly natural, and you will experience the special excitement of being part of a group that is flawlessly coordinated; a day when you realize you have stopped building a team and are actually *being* a team.

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With Freddie in mind, throughout my many years of helping organizations build teamwork, I developed a seven strategy approach to building an organization-wide team, and decided to write a book about it in the form of a fable to make it an easy read:



Dahlke, A. (2008). *Joe Gig And The Old Man On The Mountain: Seven Strategies For Building An Organization-Wide Team: A Whole Team.* Book available from author: Arnie@arniedahlke.com