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Teams Change Everything

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Teams Change Everything

Abstract

Successful teams depend upon certain unique "teamisms" that describe that team and make it work for the colleagues involved. The Ohio State University Extension Nursery Landscape and Turf Team is such a team, and its cultural history helps define how it creates synergy that results in a high functioning, challenging, and collegial environment. From "teams do not form in a vacuum," to "teams need to constantly reinvent themselves," to a riff on "team jazz," this article profiles a team in constant growth.

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Ohio State University Extension

The Extension Nursery Landscape and Turf Team (ENLTT) is an example of collegial, interdisciplinary team that works at the Ohio State University Extension (OSUE). In looking at what makes it work, our group has identified eight key characteristics of our team that have value in

discussing Extension teamwork in general. ENLTT was formed in response our severe budget cuts in the early 1990s. It can certainly serve as an excellent model for states that face budget challenges in the 21st century. Our story helps inform the development and values of teams throughout the broader Extension community, though, as with all good Extension efforts, adaptation to the grass root realities are essential for local success.

1. Teams do not form in a vacuum.
2. Teamwork is not a zero-sum game.
3. Money is not the root of all evil.
4. Teams change everything.
5. Teams need to constantly re-invent themselves.
6. Teams need to be one of a kind.
7. Teams empower.
8. Teams are jazz.

#1: Teams Do Not Form in a Vacuum

Team history and a team's defining moments are important in understanding team development. The ENLTT formed in 1992, during a period of budgetary challenge within the Ohio State University (OSU) College of Agriculture and Ohio State University Extension (OSUE). For example, due to decreased statewide funding at that time, the number of faculty in the Horticulture Department fell from 30 to 21. This included an early retirement by a key Extension Specialist in landscape horticulture. This resulted in the chairman of the department calling a meeting of industry clientele; field faculty in the Department of Extension; and research, teaching, and field faculty in horticulture and related departments to discuss how to address resource challenges.

During that meeting, several key statements were made. The first was that with the retirement of the landscape horticulture specialist, the "Extension landscape/nursery program was gone." This statement hung in the room for several beats. It was not an unusual sentiment with regards to a key retirement, but it sounded so wrong--especially with industry clientele present.

We all looked around the room, and finally someone spoke up that this was not exactly true. After all, there were numerous Extension agents in the room that had horticulture as their specialty area. There were landscape horticulturists with teaching and research positions in the Horticulture Department, there were entomologists and plant pathologists and turfgrass agronomists from other departments in the room. In fact, there was a group of at least 20 people that easily came to mind as part of an "Extension landscape/nursery program" at OSU.

With that information in mind, someone spoke up and asked industry representatives if they would support a transformation of the program. Instead of 20 talented, competent people who loosely knew what each other were doing in the landscape horticulture program, what if we re-organized as a team of 20 talented, competent people who communicated well enough to additionally harness the genius of team? What if we seriously ran with the ideas of agent specialization and interdisciplinary cooperation? The president of the industry group present said that if we seriously developed such a team: "We would not be able to get to the bank fast enough to cash the check."

Talk about defining moments! The rest is history. From this hook, a team gelled over the next month, coming up with a clear proposal to the industry, asking for financial support for team-building--not simply for money to hire a new person or to provide a new service--but for new money to encourage development of the team. More on that later, but the important lesson is that our team did not arise from simply saying that teamwork is good or necessary, but from a history that includes several defining moments, including a budgetary challenge and a critical interchange with clientele.

#2: Teamwork Is Not a Zero-Sum Game

There are two questions that inevitably occur when a person considers becoming a member of a team. "How much time will be devoted to team activities?" "What will a team member give up in order to work on team projects?" This relates to the zero-sum idea that team activities will simply replace activities that were previously done individually and that teams will simply make life even more busy, complicated, and stressful.

This means that a team must be able to define how the team will make each person's job more fruitful and successful. A team must be able to show its members how "teamwork is its own reward."

In our case, the Buckeye Yard and Garden Line (BYGL) is an example of how we buttressed the altruistic impulses toward teamwork with the energy of synergy that teamwork provides. BYGL

(Chatfield, Boggs, & Shetlar, 1996) was started in 1993 as a weekly electronic newsletter for our team. Each week from April-October, team members from around the state meet by conference phone on Tuesday morning, discussing landscape and garden plant problems from their area. A group of BYGL writers then convene on the conference call to decide which items should be written up that week. Over the next 2 days, each writer completes his or her assigned items, and rotating BYGL senders and proofers construct, proof, and send out the overall BYGL in its FAX, e-mail, and Web (<http://bygl.osu.edu/>, enhanced by over 59,000 fact sheet and 5,000 image links) versions.

The finished BYGL is a timely, professional newsletter that comes out every week and is used by diverse sources, including other Extension offices in Ohio and elsewhere, green industry and other horticultural professionals, Master Gardeners, consumers, and the media. It provides the wealth of the OSU expertise emanating as an electronic newsletter from each OSU Extension office.

A quite important internal benefit of the BYGL is that contributors directly benefit from a weekly 90-minute interdisciplinary inservice, complete with clarifications, point counterpointing (Boggs & Chatfield, 1995), and the educational benefit of translating the spoken word into written information--a highly important skill to be regularly honed by Extension professionals. It was once posed that we should try to imagine a world in which we are not truly sure of what we want to say until we have to write about it--and that this is precisely the world in which we live.

Evaluations for BYGL are strong. In the 1999 BYGL Evaluation Survey, 67% of the respondents indicated that they had changed horticultural practices on the basis of BYGL, and 72% indicated that they had changed pesticide use practices due to BYGL. Respondents, who represented less than 10% of actual readers because Web site users were not surveyed, indicated that BYGL had saved their company or increased net profits by over \$136,000 (Gao, et al., 2000). Buckeye Yard and Garden onLine averaged 5,156 hits for the first 6 months of 2000.

The bottom line for Extension educators is as follows: Each BYGL contributor puts in an average of perhaps 4 hours a week on the BYGL. What do they get back? The most timely, useful, and heralded newsletter any of us have ever developed, available to a diverse clientele in every county. Plus we benefit from a weekly 90-minute interactive, interdisciplinary inservice each week during the growing season. Not incidentally, we also receive opportunities by BYGL writers to hone, display, and document their Extension writing efforts for their vitae. What do we have to give up to spend time on team activities? BYGL benefits make the question moot.

#3: Money Is Not the Root of All Evil

We all know that money is only one type of resource, that teams fundamentally rise and fall on their human resources. We also all know how targeted money can sometimes drive a program in ways that interfere with a more open prioritization of activities. An example is certain grants in which dollars flow in attached only to one particular static project that will not allow for needed reprioritization on the basis of changing circumstances.

With our team, we identified early on that we wanted to develop a new relationship with our industry partners (the Ohio Nursery & Landscape Association and others) that would commit us together more clearly relative to a yearly proposal and yearly funding and accountability. An early question that arose from these discussions was whether this was just a one-shot deal or whether we would continue to make proposals and seek this funding commitment if our budgetary crisis ended. We quickly focused on the proposal, the partnership, the commitment, and the idea of team-building by being very clear that this was not a short-term relationship we sought, but rather the beginning of a new way of doing business.

With that clear understanding early and with yearly proposals and accounting with our industry partners. We have secured funding from these organizations totaling over \$295,000 over the past 11 years. What is this money for? It is essentially for team-building: to make our team better able to deliver information and programming.

Some of the examples of our expenditures include:

- Reference resources for use of team members for Extension teaching;
- Laptop computers to facilitate rapid development of the BYGL each week;
- Cameras to take images used for the Buckeye Yard and Garden onLine Web site;
- Development of pilot projects such as a Plant Health Care Program;
- Defraying costs for agents throughout the state to send "agent information" samples in to the Plant and Pest Diagnostic Clinic;
- Out-of-state study tours for team members to travel to other states and countries, learning about other Extension systems and alternative horticultural practices, thus providing better insights about our own system. ("He who only England knows, knows England least.");
- Addressing local concerns that statewide team activities add costs to county offices (phone costs for BYGL are rebated to the county offices from team funds).

#4: Teams Change Everything

Teams such as the ENLTT can help change a broader culture. This happened at the Ohio State University. By 1992 the concept of agent specialization had been put in place by Ohio State

University Extension administration. Entrepreneurial team development helped give it form, and administrative support provided ongoing nurture. The process started with ENLTT, but OSU Extension now has more than 20 highly active and creative, diverse agricultural and environmental commodity and issue teams, all providing better collegial communication, cooperative planning that ultimately improves delivery of research-based programming, and development of partnerships with clientele groups. Teams have also developed in Family and Consumer Sciences, Community Development, and 4-H Youth Development.

As noted in the OSU Extension team brochure:

The development and formation of interdisciplinary commodity/issue teams is aimed at improving communication within our faculty and to better meet the needs of our commodity groups and industry clientele. These teams have focused on improved dissemination of new technology and the development of more comprehensive educational programs aimed at the commercial agriculture, and horticulture industries and recreational/urban gardening. Teams are coordinated by county agents, district specialists and associates represented across departments and colleges. Team directories are available upon request. (Ohio State University Extension, 1999).

An acknowledgment of the cultural shift engendered by these teams was highlighted in 1996 with this statement by the national Cooperative States Research Extension and Education System reviewers of the Horticulture and Crop Science Department at OSU. To quote:

Those extension teams that the review team learned about were highly productive and able to respond rapidly to clientele. A review team member who recently reviewed extension programs in several other North Central states observed that Ohio State University was the only one of these institutions where extension personnel were moving boldly ahead with creative programs...There are some other departments and colleges in the country that have a strong relationship with their industry clients, but Ohio is near the top of the list.

#5: Teams Must Reinvent Themselves

ENLTT benefited from being the first commodity team in the OSU network and from the positive energy that being present at the creation provides. Whether your team is the first of its kind or not, though, this type of creative energy is important to constantly nurture. Following are some techniques we recommend to try to keep it fresh.

One of our team mottoes comes from William Shakespeare: "A lily that festers smells far worse than a weed." We use this to jettison programs that do not work for the team. We learned early on that certain programs become more vigorous from team cooperation (BYGL is an example), but that others flounder.

One example was a Perennial Plants School that one team member had successfully developed for years. It was in fact growing in attendance and quality. For one, brief, non-shining moment it became a team activity, with shared responsibility and leadership by none. The energy was lost, the program suffered, and we quickly realized--this was not an example of the energy of synergy. It would decline as surely as a hosta planted in a hot, sunny site. This program was one that was best done by the person who had developed it rather than as a team activity.

We decided early on that membership in ENLTT was not guaranteed simply on the basis of job description or other presumptions of interest. We formed as a team partly to foster better communication with our clientele and were concerned that if any member of our team was not involved enough to know what the team was doing, we would all suffer. So we do expect some level of commitment to team activities. We do not automatically assume people are members of the team when hired, regardless of their position. We post a standing invitation on our team directory:

Membership on the team is based on interest and commitment to the vision and mission of the team. Potential members are encouraged to participate in some of our activities to determine if they would like to become a part of our team. If you are interested in the work of the team, contact any of the team members.

Our mission and vision statements, torturous as they are to thrash out, provide a good opportunity to think about what we are as a team. As we progress, we periodically revisit and rewrite these statements. Are we just a commercial horticulture team, or do we also serve the consumer horticulture area? Should we include members from outside the university? How should we proceed to expand our funding base? These are important itches to constantly scratch.

#6: Teams Must Be One of a Kind

Once a team is successful, it can be tempting to try to clone it, to look for a recipe. In a way this article might seem like just such an attempt. Though we do believe there is value in looking at such stories of teams that have something going and continue to grow (Leholm, et al., 1999), without belaboring the point overmuch--it is not our intent to suggest that any team should look

like ours. It is our opinion that cookie-cutter recipes for teams and teamwork, as tempting as they may be, are simply recipes for disaster. Teams work when members believe that teamwork is its own reward; energy cannot be mandated.

#7: Teams Empower

One of the crucial aspects of our team is its high degree of collegiality. It is non-hierarchical in nature, maximizing human resources. Leadership is shared, but often with discrete roles that can be identified for evaluation and promotion documents. Examples include our CTO (Chief Travel Officer) and our team Financial Czar. Agent specialization plays a big role here, with increasing professionalism and recognition region-wide, statewide, and nationally for many of the team members.

Several times at presentations at national Extension meetings one of the authors was asked how many agents are on the team compared to the number of state specialists. The honest answer, though it could be easily determined, was a suddenly realized "I don't know." We do have a Team Coordinator for administrative contact purposes, and that person calls meetings, assembles meeting agenda items, organizes certain team contacts with clientele groups, and doubles, perhaps, as a CCO, chief communication officer.

Another key human resource component of our team is the extent to which each team member is constantly challenged. This culture has been encouraged in a number of ways. "Point CounterPoint" is a popular magazine column that two team members write for a statewide trade journal (Chatfield and Boggs, 1994-Present), and this idea of open, back and forth debate is encouraged in team meetings and in BYGL conference calls.

The edges of sensitive egos have worn off over time as people learn that different perspectives can be expressed without retribution; ideas will not be used against the other person. The history of again and again coming into meetings with widely divergent, strongly held opinions only to emerge from the meeting with decisions reflecting the "genius of team" has built strong commitment to vigorous debate in the best tradition of academic and intellectual ferment. We encourage opening our minds to different ways of doing things and have annual team study tours outside Ohio in order to see how Extension works in other states and to see different approaches in the horticultural subject matter area.

Though we value brainstorming and the acceptance of vetting any and all ideas ("multihorticulturalism", so to speak), we also have a team culture that adheres to the principles of reason. In the words of Carl Sagan (Shermer, 1997): "If you are open to the point of gullibility and have not an ounce of skeptical sense in you, then you cannot distinguish useful ideas from the worthless ones. If all ideas have equal validity then you are lost, because then it seems to me, no ideas have any validity at all." Above all - *Cogita tute!*

#8: Teams Are Jazz

The social commentator and jazz critic Stanley Crouch (Crouch, 1995) puts into broader perspective the implications of true teamwork, and fittingly sums up the ENLTT experience:

The high degree of individuality, together with the mutual respect and co-operation required in a jazz ensemble carry with them philosophical implications that are so exciting and far-reaching that one almost hesitates to contemplate them. It is as if jazz were saying to us that not only is far greater individuality possible to man than he has so far allowed himself, but that such individuality, far from being a threat to a cooperative social structure, can actually enhance society.

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