The Breakthrough Team Player

Becoming the M.V.P. on Your Workplace Team

Andrew J. DuBrin

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assistance is required, the services of a competent professional person
should be sought.

To the members
of my family team,
**Drew, Douglas, Melanie,
Rosemary,** and **Clare**

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Introduction

A key organizational reality is that to be successful, you have to be a good team player. Teams of one type or another predominate in today's workplace. To move ahead or hold on to their jobs, most people are compelled to spend at least part of their time in collaborative effort. The collaborative effort I refer to involves many different types of work arrangements calling for cooperation between two or more people. Excluding the self-employed working alone, virtually every reader of this book will spend some time in one or more of the following work arrangements:

- A management team in which a group of executives shares responsibility for running an organization or a substantial chunk thereof
- A department of more than two people in which some joint projects are undertaken
- A work team in which a group of employees takes care of daily work, but with more collaboration than a conventional department
- A self-managing work team in which team members are given substantial authority to govern their own activities and perform many managerial tasks
- A task force or committee to which members are assigned part time to solve a pressing problem, or explore new opportunities for the company
- A project team whereby the members work together for a relatively long time on an activity of major consequence to the organization, such as launching a new product or reengineering the firm

- A quality circle whereby a group of volunteers devotes a few hours per week to improving the quality or productivity of a product or service
- A virtual team in which the members interact by computer, drop in and out as needed, and take turns being a leader

You might argue that some of the above groups are truer teams than the others because a higher level of commitment and collaboration is required. A project, for example, requires higher levels of cooperation among members than does a traditional department calling for occasional joint activity. Although some work groups require more collaboration than others, the team player is an asset to all of them. Without a high level of cooperation and collaboration, a work group will not achieve the status of being a true team. Instead, it will simply be a collection of individuals working alone whose combined output is the simple sum of their individual output. A team, in contrast, achieves synergy.

If 1,000 workers at all levels from chairperson to entry-level worker were polled, about 999 would agree so far—being a good team player is essential for success.

In recognition of the importance of teamwork, this book has two important purposes. The more obvious purpose is to elucidate the myriad ways in which you can become an effective team player, thus enhancing your contribution to the team. Unfortunately, being a good team player takes you only to the point of receiving average salary increases and career progress.

Its second purpose can have a much bigger impact on your career. I will explain how you can be a superior team player, yet at the same time be enough of a standout performer to be recognized for your unique talents. We may all want to be good team players, but who gets the big promotion, an individual or a team? When the headhunters are asked to find a key executive, who is hired, an individual or a team? After the executive is hired, that person may bring in his or her own team, but the team is rarely hired at the outset.

Sports teams operate on the same principle. In team sports such as basketball, baseball, football, and hockey, team play is

essential. Yet the standout players are often paid ten times as much as the team players who do not distinguish themselves. Fans also admire good team players, but they collect far more trading cards of individual players than of teams.

Learning to become the *breakthrough team player*—one who contributes mightily to the team effort but still pulls ahead of the pack—requires a careful understanding of team play. You have to be willing to cope with nuances and subtleties. A trap for many bright, ambitious, and impatient people is to readily dismiss information about the dynamics of team play as "common sense." If being a standout team player were common sense, we would not have two common types of organizational casualties. The first type is those people labeled as "poor team players," and therefore dismissed from consideration for promotion. The second type of casualty is those people who are good team players but watch others break loose from the group to achieve bigger organizational rewards.

To enhance your chances of becoming a breakthrough team player, the information in this book is organized as follows:

Chapter 1 explores the key issue of finding the right balance between being a good team player and finding room for individual recognition. Many of us want to satisfy the demands of the organization yet not sacrifice ourselves for the good of the group.

Chapter 2 explains the major attributes and actions of effective team players, such as sharing credit with the team and using the word *we* frequently.

Chapter 3 describes how to avoid the trap of conforming so much to group norms and expectations that you think like everybody else and lose your uniqueness.

Chapter 4 describes the various roles carried out by team players such as informal leader, Knowledge Contributor, Flaw-Finder, and People Supporter. Exploring these roles will enable you to select several that fit your style and circumstance.

Chapter 5 helps you acquire the right mental set for developing cross-functional skills. Such skills are valuable, because today's managers and professionals are supposed to wear multiple hats and work well with people from other disciplines.

Chapter 6 confronts the reality that team structures have