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Dipping Below the Waterline

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My wife and I recently got married and we merged her 9-year-old with my twin 5-year-olds to form one larger family. The roles for all five of us needed to be redefined because of this big and wonderful change in the way we live. The old way of doing things needed to be updated. And despite the fact that this family merger was extremely good for each of us individually and collectively, adjusting to the changes required paying close attention to both the mechanics as well as the emotions involved. The changes required ongoing discussion and clarification of our new roles and responsibilities within this family group.

Regular clarification and discussion around changing roles and responsibilities should also take place in workgroups where new members join and others leave or when there is a change in focus or direction. When a workgroup reaches a level of productivity that is no longer satisfactory is also an excellent time for this.

The Waterline Model (developed by Roger Harrison, Ron Short and John Scherer) is a useful diagnostic tool for helping such groups who seem to be working harder than ever yet not operating as effectively as possible. It is also useful when there is dissonance within the group that reduces overall efficiency. This is because groups often get stuck not because of technical issues, but because of structural problems with regard to goals and objectives or roles and responsibilities.

The Waterline Model's notion of task versus maintenance is useful to keep in mind whenever you are working with a group of people. For instance, when your group is working to accomplish something but gets stuck, it is helpful to stop talking about the task at hand and drop under the waterline to talk about maintenance of the group. Maintenance, in this sense, means delving into the relational aspects within the group. It means talking about the feelings, attitudes or perceptions that are inhibiting you from doing your part to fully participate in accomplishing the group's goals.

When a workgroup's progress gets stymied, it is more often than not the roles and responsibilities of each member that needs to be examined. In fact, more than 80% of workgroup dysfunction can be associated to this lack of clarity. This is because members may not



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be clear at a given time on what they are each supposed to be doing to help meet the group's objectives. Job titles and job descriptions only go so far in addressing this. Without greater clarification around the specific role each member plays and the associated responsibilities within that role, the group can continually spin its wheels or go entirely off track. And these roles and responsibilities will likely change over time.

Shifting the focus from task to maintenance means taking the necessary time to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each member of a group. Talk about what may be keeping individuals from doing their part to contribute to the group goals and objectives. Give every member of the group an opportunity to speak up and communicate what may be preventing him or her from doing their best. Though it may seem like you don't have time for this, the task at hand will always take longer and the problems will go deeper below the waterline if not addressed. These problems deeper below the waterline include such things as group dynamics as well as interpersonal and intrapersonal problems. And these can take a lot longer to rectify.

So whenever your workgroup gets stuck, take the time to stop doing and start talking. Check in with individual members of the group to figure out what needs to be said to get things unstuck. Making time for this regular maintenance will make your tasks go that much smoother and more efficiently.

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