



What My Mom and Her Friends Can Teach Us about Teamwork

By Debra Loftus, Ph.D.

The Scene.

I've just returned from a week away that presented me with contrasting bookends of experience. At the start of the week, I enjoyed time spent in the company of my 76-year old mother and a group of her similarly-aged friends who live in the same area of Florida. At the end, I was leading a chartering session with a new leadership

team. I moved from one experience to the other without much reflection on the relationship between them, but for some reason I now find myself musing over the possible interconnections.

What did I observe in that group of elders that would benefit the younger team?

The Bookends.

At first glance, the two experiences couldn't appear more different. On one hand, we have five septua- and octogenarians away for a mini-break in a vacation home: playing cards, soaking in the pool, and taking trolley tours of the surrounding area – all against a backdrop of constant good-natured banter. On the other, eight leaders in their mid-career years ensconced in a resort meeting room: getting to know each other, wrestling with deeper questions of how to lead their newly-formed organization, and bonding around the headiness of being engaged in a start-up. Little map-ability from one to the other, right? Perhaps.

But my imagination conjures up a different answer. What if the twain had met?

Elders versus Elderly.

I've had the pleasure of watching my mother and her friends on numerous occasions. They are a tight-knit group of widows who care deeply for each other. They sing together at nursing homes, go on several carefully planned trips a year funded by periodic monetary contributions to a "travel account," and most importantly, support each other through the health challenges and personal losses that are inevitable at their age. In short, they take care of each other.

Not all people in their age range are wise or qualify as "elders" but these women are. Their system dynamics and conversations reflect a wisdom that I treasure. (Even while I'm being teased as the token youngster, which is also something I treasure given my own advancing age!) They are a team engaged in co-creating lives of continued meaning together.

Co-creation and

Nourishment.

The leadership team I had the pleasure of working with is also engaged in co-creating lives of meaning together, as leaders and as human beings. Both aspects were present, and acknowledged, as they discussed meaty topics...as is often true in the best leadership teams.

We examined the years leading up to this point in time and the various leadership journeys they've each been on; most notably, the aspects of those journeys they wanted to intentionally put in service of this team going forward, and those they wanted to leave behind. Each team member took a risk in sharing, and owning, what he/she was bringing to this undertaking. It was a fabulous, rich, multi-layered discussion.

I have a favorite quote I often introduce at the kick-off of a team building session: "We create the teams to which we belong. And they, in turn, either nourish or drain us." This

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quote has been attributed to Dr. Jack Gibb, an expert on team development and trust.

The truth of that sentiment has borne out in my personal and professional lives again and again.

would have benefited that leadership team...and any team that is still finding its way to high performance?

Continuing with the artistic license I've been taking, the following points explore the

I often ask people if they've seen financial performance benefit from healthy teams. Almost every hand in the room shoots up. Then I ask, "How many of you have seen financial performance damaged by unhealthy teams?" Up go the same hands.

When I first introduce that quote to teams, I often ask people to raise their hands if they've seen an organization's financial performance benefit from healthy teams. Almost every hand in the room shoots up in the air. Then I ask the reverse: "How many of you have seen an organization's financial performance damaged by unhealthy teams?" Up go the same hands.

Improbable Meeting. So how do we help teams nourish each other more effectively and, in turn, create better performance for their organizations? Based on my observations of my mother and her friends, I think they'd have some valuable ideas to offer.

Lessons from the Elders. Back to my over-active imagination: what if the two groups who bookended my week had met? What simple, yet powerful, lessons might the group of friends have imparted that

admittedly simpler pursuits and day-to-day rhythms of my mom and her friends, seeking a larger applicability to the more complex tasks involved in building an effective team in the workplace.

Let's see how well they transfer.

1. Clarify Roles: as in many effective teams, these women have found a way to formally and informally assign roles to each other that play to their strengths (and help them manage their weaknesses). One is a master baker so she tends to bring the baked goods to their gatherings (although I've never had a bad dessert made by any of them!). Another is very organized, with a head for numbers, so she is the manager of the travel fund I mentioned earlier. Yet another is the better driver so she tends to be the chauffeur to and from the airport when one of them needs to travel out-of-state. While they share many interests and pastimes, they

find efficient ways to get a broad range of tasks done that allow them to engage in an ongoing, ambitious schedule of activities. All without the benefit of any job titles.

2. **Be Honest about Your Capabilities:**

I've heard these women speak openly and unashamedly about what they are good at...and not. These self-assessments are based both on their individual profiles of personality traits and long-standing strengths and weaknesses as well as the changing status of their health. This high level of self-awareness and honesty allows them to both carve up the roles that need to be fulfilled (see point #1) as well to discern who needs what support against the reality of their aging and the health challenges that come along with it.

3. **Ask for and Give Help Without Keeping Score:**

I know of myriad, touching examples of the ways in which they ask for, and receive, help from each other. The "help needed" has ranged from something as innocuous as finding a good cleaning lady up to help making decisions about independent living status, family conflicts, and emotional crises. My out-of-state siblings and I have personally called upon various individuals in this group of wonderful women to be part of our extended care network for our own mother as she hit a few challenging periods of time. And the help is given with unquestioning generosity of spirit.

4. **Take Care of Each Other:**

These women care for each other deeply and they back it up with action. They check

in on each other with phone calls and drop food by if one of them is sick. They visit each other in the hospital and various step-down rehab settings when an illness or injury strikes. When my step-father was in the final stages of hospice care a few years back, one friend sat vigil with my mom for long hours on end. They are committed to each other and the group...and they act on it, even if it means sacrificing some of their own needs.

5. **Air Your Grievances and Move On:**

It's not all peaches and cream in this group of friends. Interpersonal conflicts of various sizes bubble up and from what I can tell, pretty quickly get addressed through direct, one-on-one airing of the grievances. Perhaps that's one of the great lessons of advanced age: time is precious so why waste it by dancing around the issues? We could all benefit from being so tidy with our conflict resolution.

6. **Have a Meaningful Purpose to Serve:**

These are women of purpose and enthusiasm. They do volunteer work together: practicing weekly and then singing Oldies in area nursing homes. Several of them are or have been hospice volunteers. They take trips to interesting locations and send back hilarious pictures (there's a certain hot tub shot from a trip to Branson, MO last year that defies description). They are bound together by their desire to remain actively engaged in a meaningful life and to be connected to each other. That bond fuels them in ways I

can only guess at from the sidelines but it's been an inspiration to watch.

Bringing it Home.

As may be clear by now, I admire what those women have built with each other. I aspire to be like them with my own friends. And I know a good number of workplace teams, new teams and long-standing teams alike, that would benefit from applying the lessons this group of women could teach.

And isn't that what a great team does for those around them? Provide a model of

good teaming practices to internalize and make our own.

While the personal boundaries and organizational contexts for a group of widowed friends and a workplace team are somewhat different, the humanity involved in working closely with each other in service of a deeper purpose is the same.

Perhaps we should start a movement for a "Bring Your Elder to Work Day"?



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