



Neanderthal Team Building Lessons

Neanderthals had bigger brains than us and the same genetic mutations for speech and demonstrated imaginative traits. Yet Homo Neanderthals perished and Homo Sapiens evolved to dominate the planet. What was the difference? The answer, science now indicates, is that Homo Sapiens had more effective team building skills. And the continuing evolution of those skills is as essential to cultural, organizational and personal growth today as it was then. (Reading time 180 seconds).

A new idea in evolution appears to have uncovered what was the spark that mutated us into creatures that could speak, plan and think in a way that made us not anatomically modern humans (that had happened 100,000's of years earlier) but behaviorally human.

What launched the human race on to continuous and exponential innovation lies in an idea called Collective Intelligence. It concludes that the inventiveness and rate of cultural change of a population is dependent on the amount of interaction between individuals.

Archeology and scientific discoveries now show that the momentous catalyst for human progress and invention was when primitive trading led to concentrations of populations and the resultant interaction between individuals and ideas. Such exchange and the ideas shared through trade actually led to farming; the oldest farming sites have been discovered at even older primitive trading hubs. Farming led to further population concentrations and the exchange of more things and IDEAS in and between more densely populated areas.

The exchange of ideas makes what is learned collective and cumulative. Concentrations of individuals that interact made it possible to draw upon inventions made outside one's immediate family or tribe or neighborhood. Instead the exchange of new tools, new methods and new ideas occurred throughout multiple neighborhoods.

The development and refinement and efficiencies of modern work, and the evolution of modern man lie not in individual imagination or intelligence. Instead it is a BIG TEAM EFFORT. Neanderthals, as it turns out, weren't big enough team players. They did not have sufficient interchange with enough other individuals to learn how to evolve the common or even superior traits they shared with their homo sapien cousins.

The Neanderthal/Homo Sapiens lesson is that increasing the interchange between larger numbers of individuals can dramatically change the entire course of history for the better - for the individual, the team and the society as a whole.

What does that mean for us today on a professional and personal level? A lot.

Matt Ridley in his insightful Wall Street Journal Essay, "Humans: Why They Triumphed", reports on these discoveries and reiterates the economist Leonard Read's point that, "Nobody - literally nobody - knows how to make the pencil on my desk, let alone the computer on which I am writing. The knowledge of how to design, mine, fell, extract, synthesize, combine, manufacture and market these things is fragmented among thousands, sometimes millions of heads."

Our prosperity, security and growth are directly related to how much and how effectively we interact with other individuals and teams we are or could be a part of. The greater exchange of ideas, the greater the benefit to the success of your organization, culture and to you directly.

Be Willing and Able to Share Your Knowledge

So it is important that you not only are willing to share your knowledge, but that you take the risk and develop the communications skills to do so effectively. Testing your knowledge and thoughts makes you aware of gaps in your know how, helps others benefit from what you do know and motivates people to share more knowledge with you. This intercourse of ideas is what can breed and multiply more and better ideas even faster than the proverbial rabbit.

Create Opportunities for Team Members to Open Up

A good practice to initiate a team project or to improve your existing department's results is to ask each team member to elaborate on their strengths and important experiences. Have each individual tell what their expertise is professionally - what they are really good at - and what other strong interest or hobbies they pursue. After you learn those diverse personal strengths and interests then ask each person to elaborate on how they think their strengths relate to their understanding of the goal and how they may help accomplish it. In this process, and over time, someone else on the team may see something you can bring to the objectives that you might miss.

Personal Growth

Every one of us is on a team. If you do not recognize what team you are on, figure it out. Enter into frequent, effective idea exchange within your current teams and new ones you seek out. Interact. Expand your intercourse of ideas, without getting yourself overwhelmed. The intercourse of ideas does not occur by sitting in meetings. It occurs by LISTENING in meetings...and thoughtfully expressing yourself.

Be willing to ask more people you know for advice about your challenges and opportunities. In addition to people you know, broaden your view of who and what you are interested in to create a whole new strain of cross-bred thoughts. The purpose here is not to become a specialist in multiple disciplines, you should have your own specialty, but to learn from other areas and people what may add to your work and life focus.

In addition, the offspring of such diverse interchange will be many un-thought of ideas. Ridley points out in his essay that the camera pill was invented after a conversation between a gastroenterologist and a guided missile designer. Yes we should specialize, but being interested in many things, and listening, learning and communicating our interests multiplies the value of our existing know how.

On the personal side of life – with family members and friends - the more you open up and intelligently interact together, the greater the probability that each of you will benefit from more meaningful achievements and enjoyments in life.

So don't be a Neanderthal. Be an active, communicative, cross breeder of the ideas that will continue to spark a better life for you and all the rest of us Homo Sapiens that share the planet with you.

Jim Bird, Publisher

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Quotes by Vincent Thomas Lombardi

"The achievements of an organization are the results of the combined effort of each individual."

"Individual commitment to a group effort -- that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work."

"People who work together will win, whether it be against complex football defenses, or the problems of modern society."

Vincent Thomas Lombardi (1913 – 1970) was an American football coach. The Green Bay Packers won 5 NFL Championships during his tenure as coach.

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Expand Your Idea Exchange

Pick one or more individuals to exchange information about your professional or personal expertise and contact them now to set a time for such an exchange. The objective is to learn more about each others talents and interest, to spark current and future discussions and ideas. Make it at least a weekly habit. The growth of individual and societal wisdom comes from just such frequent interchange of ideas.

Work-Life Balance Lessons

By Katie Leonard

When I returned to work after my son was born two years ago, I explored part-time opportunities at Turner that would allow me to continue to be challenged professionally while giving me more time with my child than a full-time job could. A reduced schedule wouldn't have worked well with my previous operations position, but the business unit leaders and I felt that a part-time position as a purchasing agent made sense. It was a good fit for me professionally, too, since many people in operations rotate through purchasing as part of their professional development.

Working part-time isn't common in our business unit so we didn't have a lot of role models to follow. My supervisor and I were both originally concerned that my work hours would creep beyond what we had agreed on and I wouldn't be happy, but that hasn't happened. I'm grateful that my colleagues respect my job's parameters and I know that they appreciate my willingness to be flexible when necessary.

Here's what I've learned to do to make sure the company gets my best work while I maintain the part-time schedule that I need for balance right now:

Work like you're always going on vacation next week. Most of us are more focused and accomplish more when we know we're going to be away for a week or two. I always feel like I'm "going away" for half the work week; that state of mind helps me be more organized and efficient.

Establish goals and stick to them. One of my unwritten goals was to make this part-time situation succeed because I wanted to show that it could be done. I think most here will say that it has worked well. Our department also has weekly and monthly goals related to the purchasing schedule; keeping them in front of me helps to focus my efforts on the right tasks.

Delegate when possible. I've learned to identify which tasks are good fits for purchasing assistants and to pass them along appropriately.

Don't make promises you can't keep. For example, rather than committing to work deadlines that aren't reasonable, I offer an alternative instead. My husband and I also work hard at home to keep our commitments, whether it's getting to daycare at a certain time or socializing with friends.

Leave room in the schedule for important "extras." I still find time to connect socially in the office because it's important to me. I also help nurture Turner's relationship with my alma mater, Georgia Tech. I recruit employees and helped plan and teach the recent semester-long, Turner-taught construction technology course at the university.

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