

Dolan's Virginia Business Observer

PAGE 3 Dot Com Takes Space In Battlefield Tech Park

PAGE 13 Earnings Up 188% In Noland Record 1st. Qtr.

PAGE 14 HOV Lanes Available Longer Hours For All

A-TEAMS VS. YOUR TEAM

Hampton's Kristin Arnold Explains
What Makes Top Teams Tick



HAMPTON

KRISTIN Arnold, president and CEO of Quality Process Consultants Inc., has just finished her first book, "Team Basics - Practical Strategies for Team Success." Arnold is a Hampton-based business consultant who concentrates on team building and improving processes in a team environment.

"A team is stronger than each individual," Arnold says. "My role is to draw out the strengths from each person, and then to collectively make agreements on how to move forward."

Some of Arnold's clients are Caterpillar Inc., Newport News Shipbuilding, Siemens Automotive, the National Institute of Building Sciences, the EPA and the U.S. Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Army and Coast Guard.

"You read many of these team books, and they're very theory-oriented, very conceptual," Arnold says. "You read a book from cover to cover, and then you ask, 'Okay, where do I go now?' This is more, 'Let's pick it up, read one of the pieces before you have your next staff meeting and try something different.' That's really how teams get better. Somebody decides that they want to do one thing different."

Arnold got her start in business consulting about 10 years ago while on active duty in the U.S. Coast Guard. After extensive training in facilitating meetings, team development and team building, she left the service and opened QPC in 1993. She spoke with Joseph Harris of DOLAN'S VIRGINIA BUSINESS OBSERVER.

Why is the process of team building important to business?

Team building is nothing new, but it seems like lots more companies are using it.

Team building is really a process by which you are helping a team work better together, and there are lots of different ways to do that.

The way that I build teams and improve their teamwork is to take real work and watch them go through a real-life situation. Then we talk about what worked, what contributed to that, and what could we do differently. Then I suggest some process tools and techniques to help them work better together — any team can work better together.

You can't improve anything unless you know what you're doing, so the first step in process improvements is to identify what process you're looking at. The second one is how are you currently doing it? What are the steps?

Some steps are intuitively obvious stupid steps — well then, get rid of it.

In other ways you might re-engineer it, which is throw out the entire process. You start with the end result of what the customer is looking for and then decide how the best way to do that, and usually it's a technology-oriented solution.

You can try to just automate the process. You can renovate it; you can improve it; you can do some problem solving. I help teams figure out what they're going to do with it.

A-TEAMS VS. YOUR TEAM

Hampton's Kristin Arnold Outlines What Makes Top Teams Tick



It's important to business because, ultimately, it affects morale, productivity, time management, effective work habits and on down to the bottom line.

In your work today, is there one recurring trend — positive or negative — you're seeing?

What I'm finding is that a lot of businesses aren't taking the time to really analyze the processes of how they work together and do business.

The pace of the economy is moving so quickly; we get all these things, the gadgets to make us more competitive, more nimble, more flexible, more skilled. Because everything's happening so fast, people don't want to take that investment of time to say, 'Let's step back and figure out what our strengths are, what our areas for improvement are.' I'm finding that to be kind of an interesting thing that's going on in the economy right now.

The Information Age has become a double-edge sword...

Yes. There are a couple of trends that are going on in the teaming world that are attributable to the changing pace of business.

Most of the time we give our employees or we give the company technology and we don't set any expectations about how it's going to be used — no ground rules have been established. There are lots of different ways that teams are using technology either efficiently or non-efficiently, and with the rise of virtual teams, technology is even that much more important.

That's another trend, the virtual team trend where people aren't in the same office. They're dispersed geographically. There is a big difference between bringing together people who work on opposite sides of the office and those on opposite sides of the world.

How do you bring together these

people that have divergent cultures, divergent technologies, divergent perspectives, divergent time zones? How do you bring them together so that they can work effectively toward a common goal?

Often, they're crossing organizational boundaries. They don't even work for the same boss or they don't even work for the same company, and yet they're brought together to accomplish a task. If they don't even know how to work on a geographically co-located team, it's pretty hard to work on a virtual team because the skills are very similar, but they're compounded — it's exacerbated.

Generally speaking, because so many businesses have been profiting in this economy, do they lose sight of the processes that are contributors to their success?

Yes, but there's another element in here. With all the technology that you have at your disposal to help teamwork, the pace of work has accelerated so quickly that there's a hesitancy to embrace the concept of team building: 'Who has the time to do team building?' — the typical connotation of team building. They think it's that fluffy stuff, but it's a very critical issue to so many aspects of running a successful business.

The pace of work is happening so quickly that it's not uncommon for people to just do stuff without just taking a moment — an investment of time and energy — to do what what needs to be accomplished.

Isn't there a perception that teams spend all their time in meetings, and therefore waste productive time?

Yes. And it can be true if don't execute. You really have to come together quickly, do great work, and then go out and do great work individually and stuff. This is really the way that people are doing work now.

You can't do your job as a single Dilbert pod person, so this has to happen and people have to be able to come together quickly and do great work and go out. I don't think teams do much work. The real work gets done back at the computer. The real work gets done on the plan, but it's done by individuals.

Teams are great for coming together and coordinating, planning, making agreements, setting schedules, whatever, but ultimately the work still has to be done. Now, there are some people, like the CEO executive teams — their job is to make teams hum — set vision for the company, meet and greet customers, those kinds of things, and there are some people that that's their job, is to create teams.

But, for the most rank and file person, if they're spending more than 50 percent of their time in meetings, you've got a problem. Because you've got a bunch of

people who can't get any work done; people are spending their workday in meetings and they're getting work done at night; either staying late or they bring it home.

The cost is killing the employees; it's just killing them. This pace - I don't know how much longer it's going to continue - but I don't see it stopping.

Business teams are made up of many members from all walks of life. How do you handle an underlying issue like a clash of cultures?

The Boomers have a very, very specific mindset about the team is greater than the sum of its parts - you know, there's no 'I' in 'team'. The boomers were brought up in that mentality of the melting pot.

The [Gen] Xers look at that and they go, 'Cute,' but it doesn't quite fit. Each person has a valuable contribution to make and they want to be recognized for the work they did.

An Xer will look at conflict as just a natural part of the process. You've got your opinion; I've got my opinion; that's a good thing. The Boomers don't want conflict. They'd rather avoid conflict or accommodate it vs. hash it out.

You need more conflict management skills. You need more negotiation skills. You need better listening skills, you need just the same team skills that are effective in any kind of teamwork, but you need them more, more enhanced to really value the diversity of that team.

As more businesses use self-managed teams to help solve problems and improve operations, is it OK for management to be removed from the process?

First, you have to ask, 'Are you really talking about true self-managed teams?' Then you have to ask, 'Are your teams truly empowered to set compensation schedules, to set their own work schedules, etc.? All you're measuring here is results - management backs away from process. The team's allowed to manage the process, in fact, allowed to tangle with some of those things that usually management takes care of.

So no, it's not dangerous for management to be removed. But there is a problem when management has certain expectations, but no specific direction has been plotted. Management has to create - is required to - an environment or system of support for self-managed teams to be successful.

It's management's job to make sure that you've got the tools and the resources. If you hit a barrier, they remove the barrier. If [team building] comes from an inherent philosophy that these people are capable, able, willing to do the job. Management has to support the process.

Trusting your people is an inherent piece of the process. You have to have the ability to say, 'Here's what I expect,' and then to be able to walk away. That's probably the toughest piece for leadership to do when they're implementing a team-based system.

It would seem like if a team is empowered to make important operational de-

isions there would be pressure. How is the issue like fear of failure addressed in a team-building effort?

I think there's a lot of this, but a lot of it depends on what the cultural norm is. If you're going to be chopped off at the head because you failed, in fact, building trust within is going to be tough. If the culture is - and this is true in many companies these days - if your culture is, we punish failure, then you're going to have a tough time inspiring your team. The pace of business is really escalating.

Can team building work in the upper reaches of management where people have very specific titles and roles - and egos?

It's interesting because at the lower ranks, people look at the leaders, the executives in the company, and they want to see team-based behaviors because they're being expected to play team and they want to see the executives play team. What's really interesting is that when you get to that core leadership group, they generally aren't playing a team.

There's a very different set of behaviors for executive teams than there are for separate workplace teams. Their functions are very distinct and this is more of the way that the work goes. So, there's kind of a disconnect because these people at the lower ranks are being asked to play team when, in fact, their leadership team - it's not a sound

strategy to play team the same way.

How does a business measure the success or failure of its team-building effort? Is it strictly the bottom line?

Whenever you're setting up a team, you've got to have some measures, and those measures should be linked to your business plan. So, if you care about customer satisfaction and you've got a customer satisfaction index, your team, the end result is they should be able to show an increase in customer satisfaction.

So, if you're forming a team, why? What's the sound business reason? Now, I'm kind of the voice of reason who comes in and goes, 'Why are we doing this?'

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