

Leadership Skills Series #4: Working in Teams & Creating a Culture of Excellence¹

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Introduction

This fourth publication in the Leadership Skills Series provides Extension professionals with recommendations on how to utilize short leadership videos within the topics of working in teams and creating a culture of excellence. How individuals feel about their team members and the overall culture of an organization has tremendous implications on job satisfaction and productivity. This publication suggests that creating an atmosphere where every member of the team is encouraged to fully contribute and monitoring the organization's culture ensures for successful teams and organizations. This publication introduces four videos that can be accessed online and utilized for Extension professional development. A brief synopsis of each video, a link to the video, and recommended discussion questions are provided.

Working in Teams

Working in teams provides opportunities for collaboration, creativity, and sharing diverse perspectives, which can ultimately lead to better outcomes and increased productivity. However, to get the most out of teamwork, it is important to create an environment that allows everyone to bring their whole selves to the process of collaboration. The following videos explore practices that help develop teams and foster collaboration between both extroverted and introverted team members.

Video 1: *Build a Tower, Build a Team*

Speaker: Tom Wujec

Time: 6:51

Where to find this video: https://www.ted.com/talks/tom_wujec_build_a_tower

In this video, Tom Wujec presents the “marshmallow challenge,” a competitive event where teams are asked to build the tallest tower possible using spaghetti and a marshmallow. Surprisingly, recent graduates of business school perform very poorly on this task and kindergarteners do quite well. Wujec’s research has shown that this is due to kindergarteners’ ability to build prototypes and test what works throughout the building process. Wujec argues that the design process works best when team members are willing to utilize all their senses and fully engage in the process of experimentation.

USING *BUILD A TOWER, BUILD A TEAM*

One of the best ways to utilize *Build a Tower, Build a Team* is by having teams participate in the marshmallow challenge before showing the video. Start the exercise by dividing participants up into small, balanced teams. Then, provide all the necessary materials and give instructions on how the challenge works. All the essential information on how to use this exercise can be found in the guide available at <https://www.tomwujec.com/marshmallowchallenge>.

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After the exercise, ask the group for some initial feedback on what worked for this activity, what did not work, and what they would do the next time to be more successful. Next, show the video and discuss what makes collaboration effective. Debriefing questions to discuss could include:

- What made teams successful in this challenge?
- What made teams unsuccessful?
- What lessons from design thinking could we apply to our current projects to be more effective?
- What hidden assumptions are we currently holding regarding _____ (insert a particular project here) that may be preventing us from better ways of thinking?
- How can we create better systems of feedback to more quickly adjust our efforts in a positive direction?

Video 2: *The Power of Introverts*

Speaker: Susan Cain

Time: 19:04

Where to Find this Video: https://www.ted.com/talks/susan_cain_the_power_of_introverts?language=en

In the video *The Power of Introverts*, Susan Cain shares her personal story of her struggle to feel comfortable as an introvert in a society that has a strong bias in favor of extraversion. Cain asserts that, culturally, we need a much more balanced approach to appreciating both personality types, introverts and extraverts alike. Furthermore, Cain argues that introverts tend to make great leaders, are extremely creative, and contribute highly innovative thinking to our organizations and society at large. Finally, Cain affirms the need for teamwork and collaboration, but advocates for giving introverts the freedom to be themselves through granting more autonomy at work, allowing time for thinking and contemplation, and creating environments that allow introverts to work independently.

USING THE POWER OF INTROVERTS

This video is a fantastic team-building resource because it has the potential to create greater awareness and understanding among team members and appreciation for differences in personality types. Accordingly, one-third to one-half of the population are introverts, so there is a good chance there are many introverts represented on your team. Start by asking your team who is an introvert and who is an extravert. Next, have a few people from each personality type share briefly about what the experience of being an introvert or extravert is like for them. Then, show the video and discuss what everyone learned. Possible discussion questions could include:

- Do any of the introverts have a similar story to Cain's, where they felt being an introvert somehow wasn't okay or ideal?
- Does our society really have a bias in favor of extraversion? If so, how?
- Cain argues that the key to maximizing our talents is for everyone to put himself or herself into the "zone of stimulation" that is right for them. How do we create a work environment that allows everyone the proper amount of stimulation?
- What are some things we can do as a team to help introverts contribute in a more effective way? (For example, distributing agendas ahead of a meeting allows introverts to think independently about important items before the meeting and write down thoughts to share with the team.)
- Because "time in the wilderness" is so important to the thinking and creative process, what ways can we better foster an environment that allows people to unplug and think deeply about important matters?

Creating a Culture of Excellence

"Organizational culture" has various definitions depending on who you ask. However, for these videos, organizational culture will be defined by Edgar Schein, Sloan Professor of Management Emeritus at the Sloan School of Management at MIT. Schein's truncated definition is: "A pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration. A product of joint learning." Therefore, an organization's culture is the product of beliefs, values, leader and employee behaviors, and assumptions. The following videos first help to unpack organizational culture and then to explore human and social capital aspects. These videos provide helpful resources that can be utilized to contribute to the process of building a culture of excellence within any organization.

Video 1: *Organizational Development-Strategy vs. Culture*

Speaker: Brian Bacon

Time: 01:48

Where to find this video: <https://youtu.be/zsKBl6nufYE>

In the video, *Organizational Development – Strategy vs. Culture*, Brian Bacon uses the iceberg as an analogy for understanding the surface and submerged factors that influence organizational culture. At the surface are the logical factors of an organization such as the vision or structure,

while the submerged factors include beliefs, prejudices, fears, and values that influence how people behave, which, in turn, influences culture. A leader must be aware of these submerged factors to manage the organization effectively.

USING ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT-STRATEGY VS. CULTURE

This short video provides only a basic introduction to a broad topic. However, it can be used as a conversation starter for organizational reflection and change. Structured discussion and development activities can be used to dive further into the topic of organizational culture after this video. For example, a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) or the development/revision of a strategic plan can follow this video. Below are several discussion questions that can be used after viewing the video:

- What do we attend to the most in our organization? The surface or submerged factors?
- What are ways in which we can observe and reflect upon the submerged factors and how they influence us as an organization?
- Do our mission, vision, goals, and objectives drive these submerged factors? Or are the submerged factors moving us off course?

Video 2: Forget the Pecking Order at Work

Speaker: Margaret Heffernan

Time: 15:47

Where to Find this Video: https://www.ted.com/talks/margaret_heffernan_why_it_s_time_to_forget_the_pecking_order_at_work

In the video, *Forget the Pecking Order at Work*, Margaret Heffernan argues that competition is not the way to create organizational success. Heffernan begins with the story of William Muir and his experiments with “super chickens” to engage the audience around the themes of competition and productivity. She continues by presenting research and examples from various industries to illustrate that competition is not the answer to organizational wellness. Rather, social connections and people’s interactions with one another are the keys to success. Heffernan goes on to discuss social capital and the importance of valuing everyone in order to solve our most “wicked problems.”

USING FORGET THE PECKING ORDER AT WORK

Heffernan’s talk is a way to jumpstart a conversation about collaboration and discusses ways in which team members can leverage each other’s strengths to benefit the whole. By using a strengths or asset-based approach, team members can recognize how their personal knowledge, skills, and abilities, as well as their social and community resources, can aid in meeting organizational goals and objectives. This discussion can also lead to a better understanding of one another through discovery of common interests and connections. The video and discussion questions can be part of a team-building or strategic planning session. Discussion questions can include:

- What are your abilities, skills, and knowledge that you bring to your work?
- What are your social and community resources that support your work?
- In what ways have you collaborated with individuals both within and outside of the organization to address goals and objectives?
- What are ideas you have for collaborations? What have been the barriers to these collaborations?
- What activities in this organization make you feel valued?
- What activities help you to connect to others within the organization?

In Summary

This final publication in the Leadership Skills Series focused on utilizing short films for Extension professional development within the topics of working in teams and creating a culture of excellence. The videos in this publication suggests that the keys to successful teams include the willingness of team members to utilize all their senses, team members feeling fully empowered to contribute (introverts and extroverts alike), teams capitalizing on social connections, and leaders building strong organizational cultures.

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