

Creating, maintaining productive teams



**MERRICK
WEALTH**

By
**Peter
Merrick**

“Teams that work well together share information, have high trust in each other, and challenge each other’s thinking.”

Esther Ewing and Bill Sedgwick, Big Tree Strategies

In 2012, Canada rated only 17th in productivity in the world according to the OECD, which means that our GDP per hour of work was lower than in 16 other countries. This is a waste of human capital in all sectors of the economy, including the accounting profession.

Joanne Reid, professor in the Ivy School of Business at the University of Western Ontario, said in the *Ivy Business Journal* (“Productivity: A Key to Canadian Innovation and Prosperity,” 2012) that two of the four most effective strategies in growing productivity are: Smart investing in people/teams, processes, technology and equipment; and developing a culture of high engagement, ownership, partnership and teamwork. Both of these require high-functioning teams with members who are engaged.

In accounting practices, a lot of attention is spent on the technical aspects of the work, and how to do it efficiently and sufficiently, so the client is served while still concentrating on making a profit and bringing in more business. This is the question we all ask. But in many practices not much attention is spent on how the team can work better.

Recently, I took up this quagmire with Esther Ewing and Bill

Sedgwick at Big Tree Strategies, who have made it their mission to help clients create productive, high-functioning teams that share a focus and get things done. They call this process the “intentional teams framework.” I would like to share some of the highlights I gained as they apply to the accounting industry.

In smaller practices where there are fewer than 10 partners, the need to work well as a team is acute. Everyone knows everyone else, and if the team doesn’t work well together, it’s obvious, and you don’t have any place to transfer someone with the hope they will work better in a different part of the firm.

Ewing and Sedgwick, in this context of the accounting profession, talk about two kinds of teams. They are teams in public practice (accounting firms) and teams in industry or government (businesses, not-for-profits or the public sector, i.e. governments at various levels).

With regards to public practices, Ewing and Sedgwick started by discussing when team members are all working on the same engagement for the client. They said it’s important that the team works as a cohesive whole and shares the knowledge of each team member, so they can all learn from each other. Not everyone has the same view into the client or knowledge of the client.

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in each other, and challenge each other’s thinking,” they say. When this happens, the organization thrives and the client gets excellent service. And when the client assignment is over, the engagement team still has each other. “Clients come and go, but your staff you have forever,” they add.

Another example that Ewing and Sedgwick use to illustrate this is when an audit is performed by people who may be in different offices across the country, or around the world where the client has subsidiaries. The driver in that situation is for team members in remote offices to feel part of the team and not feel isolated. So they all communicate with each other in a planned way. Those in remote locations wouldn’t necessarily have the whole picture. Their need to communicate and to be communicated with, and the need for co-ordination and trust among the audit engagement team, is high.

Another example Ewing and Sedgwick use is that of a multi-disciplined team working on providing a client solution. You might have tax specialists, M&A specialists and audit specialists all working on a client business plan. Those specialists with diverse experience sets often operate in silos, but you must operate as a team that fully communicates and shares its knowledge with the push/pull needs of other elements involved in the engagement.

The last public-practice example provided by Ewing and

Sedgwick is where the accountant or accounting firm (CFO model or in public practice) has to bring in an external specialist to solve a problem and build a team around them. The specialist must fully understand their role in the team, and the team must understand its role in working with the specialist. This is critical to success, as in the case of a valuations specialist, or industry specialist or someone uniquely knowledgeable but not necessarily an accountant, i.e. an actuary doing valuations on what the client is buying. With an assembled team, people often don’t take time to work out specific understandings about how they will work together. They just launch into the work, especially if timelines are tight.

Next, our conversation moved to corporate teams. According to Ewing and Sedgwick’s experience in corporate staff teams, an intentional focus is required to bring the group together in a common language that unites the various skill sets and roles.

Sometimes, say Ewing and Sedgwick, “it’s easier to build an intentional team within an accounting practice because the same group of people will work together regularly. You want to develop the rapport and sense of community that will carry over from one assignment to the next.”

On the other hand, developing the “team” in a corporate setting can be more challenging because the teams could be made up of significantly different skill sets

from one assignment to the next. Bringing new people into a core group of team members is a challenge for the team leader who must make new members feel welcome.

Another example from Ewing and Sedgwick is when an accountant moves from public accounting to industry, and often has to manage people who have different motivations. In public practice accountants share motivations, technical knowledge, and a shared passion for practising accounting, while in industry there are diverse skill levels and motivations. In industry, too, there is a mix between accounting staff persons who have a passion for their work and who expect to make a career out of it, and others for whom it’s a job and a way to put food on the table. With the latter group, you have to work harder to figure out how to motivate them. That can be helped with an intentional team focus.

Ewing and Sedgwick believe the answer to more productivity and profitability is to invest in creating intentional teams, whether they are working in a public practice or corporate environment. What’s more, this way everyone is talking to each other. When members become intentional about working as a team, clarity follows.

Peter J. Merrick, BA, FMA, CFP, TEP, FCSI is a trust and estate practitioner and president of MerrickWealth.com, an exit planning firm in Toronto. He is the author of *ASK - Advisors Seeking Knowledge, The TASK - The Trusted Advisor’s Survival Kit and The Essential Individual Pension Plan Handbook*. He can be reached at Peter@MerrickWealth.com or 416-854-1776.