

Address to Communications Professional Development Team

Good morning. Welcome to the Extension Professional Development Work Day at the Blank Park Zoo. Given the recent events in San Francisco, I hope that "retreat" won't be the operative word here today.

You are here today to share your skills to help create an effective professional development program in communications for your Extension colleagues and to develop effective working teams.

These days, there are numerous creative methods for teaching team building skills: ropes courses, whitewater rafting, and paint ball to name a few. For the totally committed team Skill-Seekers, getting a spot on a reality show like Survivor or the Great Race is the ultimate training. And then there was one that I read about a few years back where a dozen Burger King marketing execs suffered first- and second-degree burns while walking over hot coals as part of a team-building retreat. One of the injured, a VP for product marketing, tried to put a positive spin on having her feet flame-broiled like so much ground chuck, "It made you feel a sense of empowerment and that you can accomplish anything," she said.

Not to worry. Our agenda for today is a kindhearted approach and includes discussions and activities. But before we begin, I would like to say a few words about teams. The central purpose of all team building is to create or increase a sense of commitment to the goals of the organization. The outcome of all team-building exercises should be to improve the functioning of the team as a whole and to increase the effectiveness of team members as team players. Ladies and gentlemen, it has been my experience that neither walking over hot coals nor attending a team-building retreat will turn you into a team player if you are a lone wolf in team clothing.

There is a popular notion in today's business culture that asserts, "There is no 'I' in team!" As Tom Peters said in Fast Company magazine, "Stellar teams are invariably made up of quirky individuals who typically rub each other raw, but they figure out how to be their peculiar selves and how to win championships as a team at the same time."

I agree. Organizations too often minimize the value of the individual in favor of creating a homogenized team. The fallout can include mediocrity, lack of motivation, and poor performance.

You've heard the term "groupthink." It's when consensus outweighs innovation and people don't speak up due to intimidation, apathy, or a strong desire to be accepted as a "team player." Horrors! The kiss of death in any organization is to be viewed as "not a team player." Unfortunately, what happens is that people get the

message pretty quickly that it's best not to rock the boat, don't speak up, and never, ever disagree with group consensus.

There is a frequently told story about Walt Disney who asked his design team to come up with some fresh new ideas. They worked all night to prepare for his 7 a.m. deadline. When morning came and they presented their ideas to Walt, he listened patiently, then went to the wastebasket, dumped out the contents, and tacked the discarded designs up on the wall. He wanted to see the ideas they didn't agree on, knowing that often, innovation is screened out in the interest of presenting what's safe, reasonable, and acceptable.

I'm betting there was someone on that team whose ideas went into the wastebasket more often than the rest! It's the lone wolf, the rebel, the one who will willingly play "devil's advocate" that we need to listen to more often — before the team heads straight for the path of least resistance.

Avoid discouraging the exceptional talent in your team by asking him or her to hide it under a team jersey. Weak teams are threatened by novelty, challenge, and controversy. Highly effective teams have the strength and wisdom to accept each individual's significant talent and make the most of it.

So what's the ultimate team challenge? To build a better team by creating an environment where highly innovative individuals can shine without subjugating team goals to human ego. No doubt about it, the dynamic between the individual and the team can be difficult to manage. It's not clear-cut, it may generate conflict, and it's certainly not the safe, easy, predictable path to follow. Yet there's no significance in safety, as Theodore Roosevelt advised when he uttered these famous words:

"Far better it is to dare mighty things, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat."

To "dare mighty things," ask yourself the following questions then take action to implement the discoveries you make:

- What are your most significant talents?
- Which are you not using in your present position? Why is that?
- What will you risk by using those talents?
- And the reason you are here today—how can I share those talents with my Extension colleagues?

The key to daring mighty things seems to come down to trust. The trust you have in your own talents and abilities, and the trust that your team has your back.

And remember, real teamwork means never having to take all the blame yourself.