

Teamwork – From Ants to Humans

by JOE LASKY, JR., CSP, CHMM

AT A RECENT church service, our pastor told a fascinating story about how fire ants survive using teamwork. She showed a short video of how the fire ants survive in an emergency such as a flood. They can literally “walk on water” and through the power of teamwork, float together across rivers like living boats. The pastor referred to the fact that if the congregation worked together as a team, similar to the fire ants, there would be nothing that they could not achieve.

Well, the lightbulb went on in my brain. It made me think about humans in general – why can’t we do things that are equally astonishing as well? If we all work together, anything is possible. Over the last several years on the job, I have found that with our larger projects — i.e., turnarounds involving hundreds of employees at both the managerial and craft levels — the only way to achieve 100% cooperation is through communication and teamwork.

If we were to compare fire ants with employees or team members, it means we are looking for a synergistic relationship. In other words, the more efficiently everyone works together, the more productive and profitable our business will be. The players on our typical large projects include field engineers, quality managers, safety managers, superintendents, foremen, and line personnel (craft). Each one of these players depends on one another to be successful. All work packages created by the customer have to be signed off by the people listed above. If one of the signatures is missing or not obtained, the work will not proceed on that package.

Just as the survival of the ants is dependent on the concept of working as a team, likewise the survival – and safety – of our crews is dependent upon each person working together.

In our business, the team concept is crucial to the success of the venture or job. But it’s much more than that. It could mean a matter of safety and security, in some cases.

However, not everyone possesses

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the same inherent nature of the fire ant. Not all team members are “all in” for the cause, for the sake of the greater good. Some “team” members operate independently, serving their own agendas. Some are less social and less likely to work well in a team setting. So, unlike the ant, employees may need to be nurtured and taught team building skills. Our business models should include team building

scenarios for employees. The message of these sessions/training should focus on common goals and the importance of maintaining a positive attitude, and emphasize leadership through a commitment to personal growth.

An ant that isn’t doing his part in keeping the raft afloat will most likely be washed away by the rushing waters. Employees who don’t understand their roles on a team face a similar danger. They won’t literally be swept away, of course. But if they distance themselves from their team through a less-than-commendable attitude or by focusing on their own interests rather than the benefit of everyone, they may experience unwanted career changes or stagnation.

There are many ideas and thoughts as to how we can strengthen our teams. Here are four critical keys:

- Positive Attitude
- Communication
- Personal Growth/Leadership
- Common Goals



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If all employees maintain a **positive attitude** at work, they can easily be trained for improving skills. Just like the fire ants, people with positive attitudes are more likely to work well together to accomplish goals. A positive attitude can be fostered in employees through an inclusive approach by the management. If one is included in task planning or incident reviews, for example, he or she is more apt to feel accepted by the team.

Understanding what motivates an individual is a powerful driver towards helping them forge a positive attitude. The ant is motivated through a desire to stay alive. Employees' motivation is encouraged through feelings of acceptance and shared pride in the work they perform.

Communication is something we do automatically – like breathing. On a daily basis, we talk to our spouses, kids, and friends without giving much thought as to how we are doing it. But communicating effectively comes with experience. Choosing the right words, listening with our minds and not just our ears, and getting the message across are skills most everyone needs to work on.


Communication needs to be one-directional at times, like when you're informing everyone about a new policy or procedure. However, the better communicators have a trait that seeks a response of understanding from their

audience. There are techniques/protocols that are used in industry to ensure proper and sufficient understanding of the information being transmitted.

If each individual, especially managers, develops personally and strives to be a more effective leader, the entire organization will improve. **Leadership** is key to sustaining a positive team, all working toward one objective in a safe environment.

Synergy and productivity will be evident when all the teams are happy and work together to accomplish **common goals** – i.e. a successful turnaround project.

Whether you are a single fire ant or individual employee, working as a team continues to be good business. And history has shown time and again that companies with strong team-building processes in their cultures achieve the greatest financial rewards.

So with that in mind – If ants can do it, why can't we?
Have a Safe Day! 



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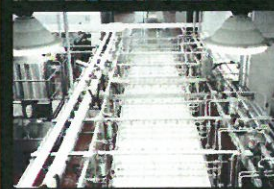
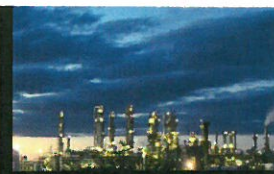
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