

Taming the Tiger of Teamwork in Six Easy Steps

by Dan Stockdale



Have you ever felt like a tiger tamer

without your whip and chair when you're in a meeting that has degenerated into chaos and has moved its focus from the agenda? Most team breakdowns happen because of a lack of communication; the team members are simply not listening to or respecting each other. Instead of trying

to achieve harmony and work effectively and collaboratively for the team's interests and goals, they're hostile, territorial, and committed to their own individual agendas.

Team leaders and participants can learn how to achieve team harmony from professional animal trainers. By using their strategies, you can get each team member to deliver the results that will fulfill the team's mission and work effectively.

- **Remain calm.**

When you're dealing with large animals, like a 300-pound tiger, you must stay relaxed and composed, no matter how the animal behaves toward you. Showing your nerves can cost you your life. In business, you risk your job, or possibly even the whole company, if you lose your cool. At the very least, you risk losing control of the meeting and losing the respect of peers and superiors.

When things get heated, petty, and distorted, you need to solve problems in a rational, focused manner, rather than letting them grow further and further out of hand. Take immediate steps to restore order by restructuring scheduling and taking steps to strengthen communication. First, remind the group of the reasons they were brought together, and be firm that each person take on the responsibility of remaining calm and staying focused on the issue at hand. Then, keep the group focused while acknowledging and respecting whatever has driven the team off-course. Calmly and quietly say, "I understand XYZ is a significant issue, and we will be sure to address XYZ later in the meeting. Let's finishing talking about ABC right now so we can get to XYZ as soon as possible."

- **Maintain routine.**

Tigers, like people, love consistency; they eat, sleep, play, and learn at generally the same times every day. Like animals, we are creatures of habit and simply function better when we can anticipate what's next. Knowing what to expect and when to expect it makes us feel safe, and if we're in conflict with our team members, routine will comfort and calm us.

Establish proper protocols from the project's or meeting's beginning and follow them so that everyone's expectations are the same, and each individual knows what his or her role is on the team. Ensure that lines of communication within the team are clear, and implement back-up systems as necessary to ensure that routine can be followed to the greatest extent possible.

- **Be patient.**

Animal trainers recognize that each animal learns at its own pace; some catch on extremely quickly while others learn more slowly. Teaching certain behaviors takes a long time, and the trainer must remain tolerant and flexible, trying new approaches as necessary to accomplish the needed results.

On your human team, you must allow enough time to accomplish the business at hand without rushing slower team members. The team will be more effective with sufficient time to accomplish the work, and you will achieve more buy-in from all members. Because they all have their areas of expertise, individual team members will also have their own issues that need to be addressed. Be indulgent and let each team member take the time they need to effectively present their concerns.

Also, remember to exercise your own patience with the team, and require all team members to exercise patience to each other during the process.

- **Anticipate and plan.**

Trainers know they must stay one step ahead of their tigers. When working with large, dangerous animals, trainers always have an escape plan in mind that will protect them by removing them from the work area. They know to always keep the worst case scenario of a possible attack in mind and to have an escape plan at the ready.

Keeping in mind all possibilities of what could happen is key when you're working with your team. Anticipate as much as possible what road blocks might arise. Given the issues you're working on, what things are likely to happen? What *could* happen that might be less likely but is still a possibility?

- **Respect personal issues.**

Male tigers, especially, are territorial and may not necessarily like to be near each other. And if they're having a particularly bad day, the trainer can tell and will probably choose another time to work with them. Exotic animal trainers must respect the tigers' personal issues about territory and space, and you should do the same thing with a team.

Respect all team members for what they bring to the table, as this understanding will keep the atmosphere of the meeting less negative and aggressive. The team members must simply agree not to get in each other's faces! Even when they disagree with one another, or confront inevitable differences in personal

preferences, personality, style, and views, they must all recognize the value of each individual to the team.

- **Behavior breeds behavior.**

If a trainer were foolish enough to be aggressive toward an animal, the animal may respond aggressively toward the trainer. Likewise, within a team, the way you approach someone determines how he or she reacts to you and how that person approaches you in return. Be aware of your behavior, tone of voice, and any latent hostility or other issues that might influence others' behavior negatively. Whatever behavior and attitude you put out there will very likely be the type of reaction you get back from your teammates in response. Approach one another with a professional attitude. The Golden Rule holds true: If you want people to be nice to you, you have to be nice to them.

Taking One for the Team

If you try all of these techniques and share them with other team members, chances are good that your group will be more productive and effective, and therefore generally happier. But what if you feel you're doing everything "right," and the team still refuses to work together or follow these tips? You should try to keep the team together and share what you've learned, encouraging the other team members to try it, but also realize that sometimes the team simply may have to disband and re-form with new members.

Some tigers don't work out in one performance group but may excel in another group. And there may be rare occasions when a tiger goes into a retirement program or a sanctuary because their personalities are just too aggressive. You shouldn't literally have to send any team members out to pasture, but, depending on the situation and how far off track it is, if a single individual is keeping the team from performing, eliminating him or her from the team could do the trick, and the remaining team can get on with the work at hand. By implementing these team building tips in your organization, you'll quickly find that your group accomplishes more in less time, thus showing a positive contribution to your company's bottom line.

About the Author: Dan Stockdale is a speaker, author, consultant, and exotic animal trainer. He is President of Adventures In Leadership, Inc., an educational firm that specializes in applying the principles of positive reinforcement to organizational issues and sales performance. His principles allow clients to achieve exceptional results while maintaining a positive, energetic environment. Dan also accepts 20-25 keynotes per year where he demonstrates his philosophy of management using live animals. You can find out more about Dan Stockdale at <http://www.AdventuresInLeadership.com> or by calling 877.3.JUNGLE.

EDITORS & PUBLISHERS: This article may be reprinted in your publication at no charge providing you receive advance written (email) permission from the author. Please email your requests to Dan@AdventuresInLeadership.com.