

BY MIKE LETCHER, ICMA-CM

# BUILDING A TEAMWORK CULTURE

Workplace must embrace shared commitments and accountability measures

**T**eamwork is not a quick fix or an action used to conduct a “feel good” retreat on team building. Intuitively, I knew this as a former city manager; however, I still would hire consultants and hold staff retreats searching and tilting the proverbial windmills in search of an answer to promoting real teamwork in my organization.

In retirement, I had the time and energy to take one more look at this question of how to promote and sustain organizational teamwork. Based on my former training in total quality management (TQM), I developed a continuous improvement systems approach that relies on shared commitments and accountability measures to promote a teamwork culture.

Being committed to teamwork is a choice each of us can make. It cannot be gleaned from a how-to lecture or organizational development books. It is simply a choice that we make to accept things as they have always been and continue to be, or to take deliberate steps to change our work environment.

## Making It Happen

It may be hard to believe, but you have the power to build a work environment that is committed to teamwork. How do you make this happen?

Making your choice to want to improve teamwork is the first step. The next step is making the commitment to start moving toward a workplace that values and encourages teamwork. Commitment is the glue that drives the organization toward improved teamwork.

Once a clear commitment is developed, it provides a compass for everyone on the journey to improved teamwork.

Periodically, the commitment needs to be checked by surveying the organization on the commitments that have been made as illustrated in Figure 1 to make sure people are still headed in the right direction.

As depicted in Figure 1, teamwork begins with an individual employee’s choice to be part of this effort. It may sound simple, but when employees understand that they simply have to make a choice to consider building an environment that encourages teamwork, they are usually willing to give it a chance.

The next steps are developing the organization’s commitments to teamwork and a system to check if the commitments are being met.

## Building the Teamwork Commitment

Teamwork is not something that was often encouraged during my childhood, schooling, or work environments, and as you get older, success as an individual is not solely determined on how well you work with your coworkers, supervisors, or customers.

It is usually not part of most employee evaluations to determine compensation. Managers and supervisors are not hired or promoted on how effective they are in developing and nurturing a teamwork environment.

Most of us do not give teamwork a second thought in our day-to-day grind at work. We may not feel that improving teamwork is something we have any control over in our current jobs. The

Figure 1. The Individual Choice.

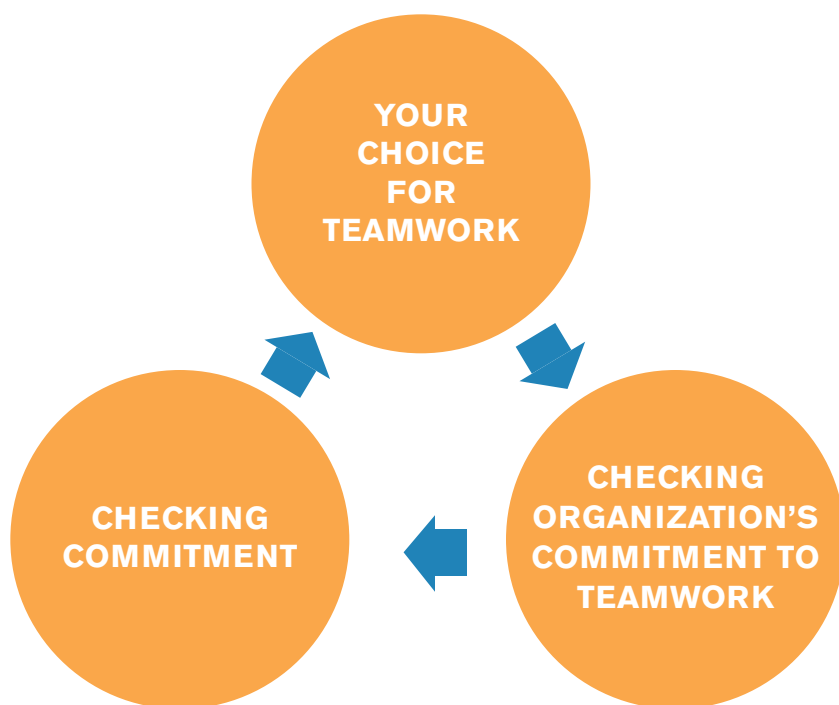


Figure 2. Three Key Areas for Effective Teamwork.



## Teamwork Dialogues

### Employee Commitment Choices

1. We control our attitude and choose to be involved in “making teamwork work.”
2. We will take initiative for improving teamwork and be involved.
3. We will be approachable.
4. We will communicate and encourage each other to work together.
5. We will stop gossip and rumors and not encourage them.
6. We will lead by example.
7. We will care about one another.

### Leadership Commitment Choices

1. We will care and value our employees.
2. We will be consistent in our management of employees.
3. We are totally committed to “making teamwork work.”

4. We will encourage employee involvement.
5. We will be transparent and keep employees informed.
6. We will lead by example.

### Recognition/Celebrating Ideas for “Making Teamwork Work”

1. Develop newsletter.
2. Conduct onsite celebrations.

### Making It Work!

1. We will share ideas and celebrate accomplishments to making teamwork work.
2. We will survey every six months on making teamwork work.
3. We Will recognize teamwork efforts.
4. We will support a making teamwork work committee to keep us all on track.

truth is, we do have the control over creating an environment where we work together and watch out for one another.

It’s a choice that you and only you can make from top leadership to every worker in the organization. Each employee’s choice to make a commitment to teamwork means everything.

### A Shared Vision

In 2017, I worked with a local school district’s transportation department in Arizona to engage employees in dialogues on teamwork. The discussions allowed the opportunity for employees and leadership to develop a shared vision for their commitment to create a sustainable teamwork culture.

The dialogues focused on three key areas for effective teamwork that included leadership and employee commitment to one another.

Through the dialogues, written commitments by employees and leadership were developed to promote a teamwork culture. Teamwork’s only true measure, however, is how it is played out “day to day” with each employee and the choices employees make to interact with their coworkers.

The power for improving teamwork is a choice. The dialogues helped shape the commitment to teamwork. The chart on page x depicts the results of the teamwork dialogues.

Once these commitments were developed by employees and leadership, the transportation department had a blueprint for creating a work environment built on shared commitments to teamwork. Its journey to building a teamwork culture had begun. **PM**

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