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Long-Form Essay
July, 24, 2018

The Perils of Forced Teaming

I love a good team experience.

As a junior high cheerleader, I happily sported the navy blue and white of the St. John's Eagles, swished around in a slightly too short corduroy circle skirt, and turned countless cartwheels as I joined my squad in exhorting our basketball team to steal that ball, make that swish, win that game, and in general beat 'em all. Indeed, I can still sing the school's entire fight song, and I remember not only the words, but also the moves that went along with many of our cheers.

As a high school student, I joined enthusiastically in loudly chanting pep rally cries, first for the purple and white Crusaders, and then for the red and white Sobos. Plus, I was a member of many particular sub-teams in high school: the volleyball team, the newspaper staff, the class of 1980, the group of graduates headed to college.

First as a college student and then as a college teacher, I found it easy and pleasing to self-identify as a Huskie, then a Chaparral, then a Huskie again. Given the diversity of a college crowd and the transitional growing pains so many first-year students experience, I have often found it useful to appeal to this one thing we have in common. In that situation, pointing out the ways in which we do belong together and share aspects of our identity can be an effective and gentle way of reminding everyone that while we never would or should deny our unique perspectives and experiences, we share important things, too, like our focus on learning well together in this place at this time.

Parenting brought its own team affiliations. I can't even remember the names of all the t-ball, baseball, basketball, soccer, cross-country, track, and swim teams my kids have been on over the years, but at some point I donned the team tee or hoodie of them all, shouting the appropriate encouragement from the bleachers for those Timber Wolves, Chargers, Rockets, Wildcats, Sharks, Wild Dogs, and so on.

Once my son was accepted to and heartbreakingly left home to attend college—the first of my birds to leave the nest and fly fully free—I was a Jayhawk all the way, hung on the outcome of every March Madness game, and said, "Rock Chalk!" entirely without shame or irony. Now that my daughter is similarly on the cusp of leaving for college—thus entirely emptying my nest, at least during the academic year—I'm suddenly but forever part Titan, and green and white has become one of my favorite color combos.

And that's just sports. Beyond that, I feel a team-like affiliation to my street, my neighborhood, my town, the department I teach in, and even more specifically to the group of instructors I now belong to.

Plus, my little family of three (mom, son, daughter) is an unbreakable team of long-standing, no matter how far afield from one another we may roam. I suppose I also identify with Team USA at least some of

Details	
Words	2,264
Characters	13,678
Sentences	71
Paragraphs	48
Reading Level	College Student
Reading Time	8 mins 14 sec
Speaking Time	12 mins 35 sec

the time, such as when rooting for Olympic swimmers or hockey players, or during our local, small town Independence Day parades and fireworks displays—moments when the sense of national identity that might bother me at any other time do tend to kick in, despite my general distrust of same. Then, too, I self-identify as a member of a Catholic parish, as a writer and a writing teacher, and even as formerly stay-at-home-mom (SAHM) who is now part of still another team: the growing group of gray divorcees.

In short, team affiliation is natural, unavoidable, and—within reason—even healthy. There's comfort, support, and relief from isolation and loneliness in a sense of belonging. For instance, other SAHM's understand both the fatigue and the joys of 24/7 parenting in a way that few others can. They get the gallows humor that might shock others, and they empathize with the deep desire for simple but elusive things like the ability to string together six hours of uninterrupted sleep, or to take a shower start to finish without ever once having to pause to referee an argument, tend to an injury, or reassure a child that mommy showering does not actually constitute a meltdown-worthy crisis. The members of the SAHM team, bless them one and all, would also generally not question or critique any fellow SAHM's attempts to make use of the available camps, day-care centers, or babysitters to carve out some crucial solitary time, now and then. They tend to appreciate the need to read, write, or even just breathe to one's very own rhythm, now and then.

Over-identification with a team—for instance, being inconsolable for days over a team's key loss—might be cause for concern, and identifying with a team to the point of shunning or devaluing those who don't belong to it (e.g. not liking, or trusting anyone who doesn't opt to be a SAHM) is the stuff of which human cruelty is often spun, but the impulse to belong is not, in and of itself, inherently unhealthy.

Unfortunately, like many positive impulses, the need to belong is readily exploited, and the rhetorical strategy known as "forced teaming" is one common path toward weaponizing this basic, innocent desire.

In *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals that Protect Us from Violence*, Gavin De Becker calls forced teaming, "one of the most sophisticated manipulations" (149). This is so at least partly because it requires first understanding the human need for belonging, and then deliberately exploiting that need for nefarious purposes. As De Becker points out, this manipulation is often particularly difficult to resist because it can look exactly like innocent rapport building of the sort we might undertake when seeking to establish common ground with new people we meet in social or business settings. Indeed, it can feel rude to decline to be roped into inclusion in the first-person plural pronouns that are the hallmark of forced teaming. Not many people are bold enough to voice objection to being included in a "we," "our," or "us" without consent.

But sometimes, especially in the absence of consent, objecting is exactly what a person ought to do.

De Becker is specifically interested in the ways in which ploys like forced teaming can be used by con artists intent on sexual or financial exploitation of their marks, and wants to empower his readers to be wary of the "we're in the same boat" approach that can lead to unwitting cooperation with or capitulation to relative strangers who don't actually have our best interests at heart; however, even in far less immediately dangerous and more subtle day-to-day interactions with friends and colleagues, the ploy is one to watch out for, whether on the giving or the receiving end.

Recently, I received an email, copied to several others, from someone with whom I have been involved in a long, contentious, and fairly formal, widely recognized dispute. It bemused me to see how liberally that missive was sprinkled with those telltale first-person plurals, and it definitely felt a bit threatening to be, quite against my will, lassoed into the writer's vision of "our" shared goals, which "we" would be working on together in such-and-so fashion despite open hostilities. Given the larger audience at play, I sat on that email for a full day, and then carefully and concisely responded in a factual manner with nary a "we" in sight. A small thing, perhaps, but an assertion of resistance to the strategy, and a reclaiming of individual voice and agency.

That email and the discomfort it caused reminded me that anyone who must routinely communicate with a group should be wary of the tendency to deploy forced teaming strategies without full awareness of same, and careful consideration of motives and impact.

Case in point: the business email that opens with the salutation "Team" is increasingly common. Makes perfect sense, too. After all, "team" seems an appealingly shorthand way to address the members of a group, especially a large one, and it has the added bonus of seeming to underscore and cement the group's shared work and common goals. However, as De Becker observes: "Generally speaking, rapport-building has a far better reputation than it deserves. It is perceived as admirable when in fact it is almost always done for self-serving reasons" (152).

Reconsider that salutation, then. Why begin with "team," and how might that go terribly wrong, even if one's intentions are meant to be admirable? What might the real or perceived underlying self-serving motivations be?

One difficulty is that, in practice, all members of a team tend not to be created equal. When forced teaming, intentionally or not, obfuscates obvious and palpable differences in power, status, rank, or influence, then that seemingly cheery and bonding salutation might well generate a powerful counter-narrative among the less privileged or favored members of the group, for whom both the cheeriness and the less than subtle suggestion that everybody better get on board right now--with no annoying objections or questions to slow things down for the rest of us, or else--may well seem more threatening than inviting.

Further, forced teaming undermines the importance of the individual's unique identity, voice, and contributions to the work of a group. The one who slaved for days to edit and shape a train wreck of a proposal into something worthy of presenting to a client might be quite justifiably steamed by the sweeping and condescending thanks issued to the "team" for its collectively tireless efforts. Appealing as teams can be--witness my impressive lifetime collection of memories and gear from assorted teams that have mattered to me and my family over the years--it pays to recall that self-esteem and self-actualization outrank belonging on Maslow's famous hierarchy. A wise communicator and talented leader will keep that in mind, never sacrificing individual connection, mentoring, or recognition to the potentially inspiring but equally potentially flattening, individuality-erasing imperatives of the team. Balance is everything.

So how to draw upon the very best aspects of teams--togetherness, common ground, belonging, shared identity, gestalt--without tipping into the darker territory of erasing or exploiting individuals? And how to appreciate and enjoy team affiliation without being overly vulnerable to the manipulative strategies collectively known as forced teaming?

Here are some suggestions:

As the sender of communication or the leader of a group, ask yourself the following:

- What are my motivations when using team-oriented language and imagery?
- What outcomes am I looking for?
- Is it possible that I am forcing a team identity rather than creating and nurturing a true team?
- How completely have I considered potential misreadings or identity-reclaiming counter-readings of any team-oriented communications?
- Have I been careful to acknowledge and praise outstanding individual efforts?
- Have I been similarly careful to tend to mentoring or coaching individuals who may be experiencing challenges or in need of support?
- How can I help shape or influence the team-oriented aspect of my workplace ethos in positive, healthy ways?

As the receiver of communication, ask yourself the following:

- Is there actually a team here? Why?
- Does the sense that "we" are "in this together" feel false, forced, coercive, or rushed?
- Does the proposed or suggested "team" consist only of you and one other person who is relatively new and unknown to you, or significantly more powerful than you in some key way?
- Do you sense potential danger? Are you tending to and trusting your gut reactions?
- Does the group or its functional leader adhere to values that run counter to your own?
- Are you confident enough to resist inappropriate or uncomfortable attempts at creating speedy rapport?
- What are your motivations for being part of this team? In what specific ways does the affiliation benefit or limit you?
- How empowered do you feel to object when the team is moving in a direction that feels wrong or uncomfortable to you?
- Is your overall experience of affiliation with this team positive and empowering, or anxiety provoking?
- Do you see yourself as a valued and recognized member of the team?
- Are your performance and individual development enhanced by the team?

Deliberately exploring questions like these can help you determine whether or not to reconsider and revise your own group rhetoric, and determine how healthy and beneficial your group affiliations truly are.

Just as I enjoy and benefit from team membership in my personal life, so do I often both participate in and oversee the creation and development of teams in my professional life. As a member of a team of instructors, I participate in group efforts such as assessment and placement. As a classroom instructor, I regularly call upon students to participate in group-work of their own. Witnessing students' triumphs and challenges as they attempt to form smoothly functioning teams that consciously value individual efforts even while accomplishing more than the individuals alone ever could has taught me that, before we even begin, it's important to stop and consider both the pleasures and the perils of group affiliations.

Understanding a little something about why teams and team-oriented diction, images, and communication strategies appeal to us, and how that can lead to frustration or outright exploitation if we aren't careful can only help us accomplish the tasks and achieve the growth we're after.

If all goes well next time around, I fully expect my very observant and impossibly clever college students to accuse me of subjecting them to a (relatively benign, but nonetheless real) form of forced teaming.

If they do that, I'll definitely cheer, for they will be exactly right. However, I probably won't turn any cartwheels for them, much as I'd love to. After all, my days of swishing around in a slightly too short circle skirt of navy blue corduroy and performing daring gymnastic maneuvers on unforgiving, highly polished hardwood floors have long since passed.

But the best and worst of what teams can be--their pleasures and perils with or without pom-poms--will forever fascinate.