How to grow a culture of team spirit at work

Richard Branson is a confident guy. To be fair, he has an amazing track record of success that supports his confidence. Branson is one of those leaders who found a consistent, repeatable formula for stacking the deck heavily in his favor every time he bets on a new venture. What’s his secret?

Richard Branson builds winning teams.

Founder of the Virgin Group® and one of the world’s most charismatic business leaders, Branson knows the most important thing he can do as the head of an organization is surround himself with the right people. “People are the lifeblood of any company; they need to be looked after and celebrated every now and then,” he said. Having a staff made up of heavy hitters can certainly increase your odds of success, but it’s not a guarantee. You still need to make sure that all of those skills and abilities are applied in a way that benefits the enterprise.

This is where Branson adds the special sauce—purpose. “You have got to unite your staff around you, really believe in the battle that you are going through [together].” Branson understands that, as a leader, you need to be committed to the individual and their prosperity. But just as importantly, he understands the need to provide the rallying cry that pulls the individuals together into a team with a shared purpose. People united in purpose have the ability to make amazing things happen. And that is certainly part of the reason the Virgin Group has had such global success across a variety of business segments.

Richard Branson is a cheerleader.

That may sound odd, but that’s the long and short of it. Branson is a master of creating team spirit in his organizations. The term “team spirit” probably makes you think of a bunch of generic platitudes about cooperation or, even worse, high school pep rallies. But it’s really a way of instilling a sense of purpose among a group of people. Purpose leads to action. Action delivers results. Delivering great results leads to pride. According to Branson, “A true sense of pride in the business makes all the difference.” As a leader, you can use team spirit to create that sense of purpose and pride among your employees to drive real, measurable business results.

This Blue Paper® examines the different components of team spirit, how implementing a culture of team spirit makes for a more positive and prideful work environment, and uses case study research to demonstrate how happy and invested employees can become more productive and improve bottom line results.
More than Oh-Ra-Ra

We mentioned pep rallies a moment ago. Sorry to bring them up again, but they’re such a good analogy for what we’re talking about. The typical high school pep rally is nothing more than a carefully orchestrated opportunity to unite students in a shared sense of school pride, gradually working them into a complete team-spirit-fueled frenzy. By the time they leave, they can’t even imagine their team losing the game. They’re all in.

Well, that’s the idea here too. Most organizations would love for their employees to feel a sense of pride and purpose like that. The reality is teams within an organization can be affected by an array of problems, which can demotivate and disconnect them. They may feel a lack of optimism, or exhibit a basic lack of respect for one another. The ability to trust and collaborate may be missing, or maybe there’s a lack of common goals. If any of these symptoms sound all-too-familiar, it might be time for an old school, team-spirit-building pep rally. It’s time to issue the rallying cry.

Chances are you’ve invested a lot of time and energy into finding the right people for your team. You know they have what you need on an individual level. The next step is to remove the obstacles that keep your people from sharing resources and working collectively to reach shared goals. We’re talking about adding Branson’s special sauce, purpose. Your team is the key to your success, and they need to be excited about working together to achieve their common purpose. That’s going to be your greatest competitive advantage, and team spirit can help you set the stage for that.

According to Oxford University Dictionaries, team spirit is “feelings of camaraderie among members of a group, enabling them to cooperate and work well together.”¹ In addition to camaraderie, there are some other attributes of team spirit:

- Respect
- Optimism
- Collaboration
- Trust
- Drive towards shared goals

As you implement the process of building team spirit within your organization, these attributes can provide the basis for metrics for measuring your success. A

simple way to start is to use them to identify what needs the most work. Does your team lack optimism? Do team members trust each other? Are there clearly defined shared goals for the team? Asking these questions can help you identify the best opportunities for improvement. Once you have some benchmarks to measure against, you’re ready to start rallying the team. Remember, the goal is to inspire at an individual level AND team level.

Step 1. Get together. Ask the tough questions. Repeat … a lot.

Implementing team spirit is not easy, particularly if you’re in a large organization with multiple departments or shifts. Seeking buy-in from other managers and administrators is critical, since most friction points in an organization are usually between departments that may not share the same goals. Discuss the hard questions right away, like whether team spirit is the right fit for your workplace and whether your “teams” are ready for it. Then, set up regular meeting times with managers to stay abreast of their progress as they try to make team spirit a more integral part of their game plan. Don’t skim on this part, especially at the beginning. Regularly communicating the purpose of the initiative is critical.

Here are some additional key questions to consider together:

- **What is your overarching goal?** What do you want this initiative to change within your organization? Why is it needed? What do you expect to see at the end of it?
- **How long will it take to make team spirit happen?** Based on your team’s initial thoughts, how long do you think it will take to get the idea to take root? The intensity of team spirit training depends on how ready or reticent employees are to accept it as a valid concept and decide that they want to participate.
- **How many people are in your organization?** The bigger the group, the longer it will take to create a sense of team spirit.
- **How much are you prepared to invest?** Time and money are directly related to one another in that the longer it takes, the more resources you’ll have to invest.

Don’t forget about team spirit’s attributes. They’ll help you determine where to begin. Respect, optimism, collaboration, trust and drive towards shared goals are probably already present in your office, but not as tangibly as they could be. To what extent do you see them play out between individual employees
and working groups already? Which, among the five attributes, are already manifested within your team? Conversely, which ones need to be developed and embraced? Focus on those as subsets within the broader team spirit program to direct it and give it momentum.

Use the most-needed attributes as the basis for your organizational goals. You may want to split the program into segments and begin with the most prevalent attribute (the low-hanging fruit) and then move to progressively less developed team spirit attributes. Each segment could be a month or two or vary in length depending on the corresponding intensity needed to address each area.

**Step 2. Grow your people. They’ll return the favor.**

When employees feel appropriately challenged and engaged at work, they are more likely to be happy. A July 2012 study by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) in the United Kingdom revealed that highly engaged employees “have great team spirit.” It makes complete sense if you think about it. If an employee is highly engaged, it means that they’ve bought into the purpose of the organization. They’re being challenged, but more importantly they feel like what they do matters. When employees feel like their work matters, and therefore the work of the organization is important, they’ll be more likely to rally with co-workers around a shared goal.

Two examples of successful companies that know all about individual engagement as a core component of team spirit are Facebook® and Google®. In Google’s case, employees are allowed to spend 30 percent of their time on projects that are of interest to them personally, though not necessarily to Google. Why? Because it allows employees to remain engaged and fulfilled on an individual level. Google enjoys a boost in employee morale and buy-in as a result. Ideally, projects tie back to, and ultimately benefit, the company one way or another, but there’s still a lot of freedom to pursue personal growth. And at Facebook, “hackathons” are still the norm. The idea behind them is to get a team together to expand skills for work by *doing* work. Again, something that’s not really sustainable unless there’s buy-in to the company’s purpose.

What are you doing to encourage individual engagement? Or, what else could you do to encourage engagement and thus team spirit at work? One way to do

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so is with the help of goal setting. Ask employees to develop individual goals. Make time to sit down and discuss their goals with them and incorporate one, or a handful, of the team spirit attributes into their individual goals. Find out:

- How they perceive themselves in relation to respect, optimism, collaboration, trust and drive towards shared goals.
- Which of those do they already embody?
- Which of those need more work?

For a more precise read on what kind of team spirit strengths they may have, sponsor a Clifton StrengthsFinder® test for your employees. The StrengthsFinder specializes in identifying where a person’s natural abilities lie. It gives you insight into how individual staff members think and operate. It also helps you leverage them to contribute to the team spirit initiative more effectively. With their ideas, yours, and some Gallup®-inspired insight, develop a detailed goal set together. You’ll engage employees and they will in turn impact your bottom line.

**Step 3. Pull a total William Wallace.**

**Blue face paint optional.**

We all know the scene from the movie *Braveheart*. William Wallace sits atop his horse, covered in blue war paint, staring down an English army more than twice the size of his own. He turns to his men and delivers a classic rallying cry at the Battle of Falkirk. Even though defeat was certain, they ride into battle. (Okay, this example is a bit extreme, but it illustrates the power of the rallying cry.) People will attempt the impossible if they really believe in what they’re doing.

If you’re going to successfully implement team spirit within your organization, you can’t forget the rallying cry. In an organization, that’s your mission statement and it should effectively communicate the organization’s purpose. You need to revisit it with your teams, and you need to do it often. It reminds everyone what they’re working for.

*Patagonia®,* a clothing company specializing in high-end outdoor apparel, is an example of a company with a strong mission statement that speaks to the company’s reason for being. It’s clear and concise and motivates employees: “Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis.”

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Does your organization have a rallying cry like that? Does it have something that drives people to want to do their job and do it well? If you're anything less than inspired, go back and make some changes. But this time, do it as a team. That first “all hands” mission statement session sets a precedent for the meetings and training sessions that follow. For organization-wide team spirit events, require everyone to attend. (That means you, too.) It’s vital for you to be there alongside your team, even if only to rally them.

The rallying cry (your mission statement) is all about reminding people about the purpose of the organization. And like anything else, living the purpose is an even stronger way to rally people than just talking about it. Putting the organization’s purpose into practice on a daily basis is a key piece that’s missing from most organizations. Why? One reason is a lot of organizations write their core values as nouns. How do you put a noun into action? Core values should be verbs, by definition an action. They’re the daily application of your mission.

An example of an organization that does it right is Zappos®, an online retailer well-known for its commitment to employee development. The Zappos mission is supported by 10 Family Core Values. The seventh is to “Build a positive team and family spirit.” To that end, the company strives to “create an environment that is friendly warm and exciting.”

It believes that “the best team members take ownership of issues and collaborate with other team members whenever challenges arise” and that “the best team members have a positive influence on one another and everyone they encounter.”

From running to road biking to racquetball, Zappos employees compete in recreational sports competitions outside the workplace as a team. They also pursue charitable giving after office hours, most recently with Habitat for Humanity Las Vegas, where Zappos is headquartered. The activities are popular among Zappos staff because, again, the company believes that “the best teams are those that not only work with each other but also interact with each other outside the office environment.”

Zappos employees operate within a corporate culture that encourages and values healthy and happy interpersonal relationships. The company has instituted a handful of programs to strengthen team spirit between staff members, too. For instance, employees can award coworker bonuses, award Zappo dollars, or “Zollars” to one another, or nominate each other for the Zappo Hero Award.


5 Ibid.
go above and beyond for each other because we believe in each other and we trust each other.”

Once you reach a point three to six months into the program, revisit the initial attributes of team spirit—now your indicators and benchmarks for success. Use them to help you determine whether you’re on the right track to growing a culture of team spirit at your workplace.

- **Respect.** A prerequisite to respect between team members is understanding and appreciation. One way to increase both qualities among employees is by means of the [Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myers-Briggs_Type_Indicator). In its 50-year history, the Myers-Briggs has become a trusted resource for more than 10,000 companies (McKinsey & Co.) and more than 200 federal agencies (U.S. Department of State). The MBTI helps these entities get to know their employees in terms of “what” they are: thinking versus feeling or actor versus analyst. Bring in an executive coach or outside consultant to speak about what it means to be one or the other. The experience will give everyone a new appreciation for all the “Types” in the office, how different types express themselves and how best to communicate respectfully with one another.

- **Optimism.** Employ the [Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R)](http://example.com/lot-r) or something similar to see how optimism is growing (or diminishing) within your ranks. Administer it at the beginning to benchmark your team and then repeat as the program progresses. The great thing about this particular assessment is its brevity and simplicity.

- **Trust.** As trust grows, relationships grow both inside and outside the office. The [Trust Index© Employee Assessment and Survey](http://example.com/trust-index) by the Great Place to Work® Institute is one option among many to test the strength of this burgeoning trust. The Trust Index evaluates trust in your workplace and then relates results back to your business’ Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Instead of using traditional indicators, or in addition to them, you could include some of the other team spirit attributes for an even greater level of understanding when it comes to growing a culture of team spirit.

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6 Ibid.
• **Collaboration.** Team spirit should usher in a new way of working together. If your staff rarely worked together or always came to you with questions before turning to each other, an ongoing team spirit program will help them learn to use one another as resources as opposed to just you. To encourage that transition, engineer project plans so they can’t be completed by one or two people alone. Then, observe the changing methods of collaboration your group employs from afar. Start with a rubric like the Galileo Education Network’s [Guide to Assessing Teamwork and Collaboration](#), or use it as a model to create a collaboration rubric of your own. Then, track your team’s progression over time.

• **Drive toward shared goals.** Finally, the conviction and motivation with which your team and team members meet their professional role each day should have grown since the team spirit project kicked off. There should be a perceptible difference in your team, one that compels a mission-centric culture. Each of the aforementioned attributes will contribute to a greater shared sense of purpose and the belief that they’re completing mission critical work as individuals and as a team.

You now have all the numbers and test results at your fingertips. Do they substantiate the kind of spirit you’re seeing? (Hopefully, the answer is a resounding Yes!) Don’t forget to make time to sit down with team members to gather more personal feedback from them. Are they more engaged? Do they feel more committed to the team? Their personal insights should provide a valuable means of fleshing out what the numbers are telling you.

**Fouls and other team spirit snafus**

Getting authentic team spirit to take hold within your organization is not an easy thing to do; nothing that deals with people’s behavior is. Examples abound of companies that have experienced both success and failure in trying to realize team spirit. A Harvard Business Review® (HBR) article expounds on the trials of an airline company as it tried to usher in an era of team spirit. It’s an example of a company that tried to tackle team spirit before the employees were in a position to sustain it. It’s meant to make you think about whether or not your team is prepared to take on the task of team spirit, whether you’re ready to take on team spirit, because the likelihood of a successful team spirit program hinges on the parameters you set and the gusto with which you introduce and manage it.

*The CEO of an airline introduced a flagship program in an internal*
letter to all employees. It explained his goal to foster “a positive work environment in which teamwork, creativity, and change could flourish [with] four mechanisms: cross-functional task forces, open communication, recognition committees, and individual initiative.” He wrote that the effectiveness of each and the overall success of the program depended on everyone.

For a while, it went swimmingly and people seemed to embrace the new atmosphere. There were task forces and employee trainings, rewards for good performance and even a biweekly internal newspaper. However, as enthused as employees were, external factors soon began to impact the morale of the collective and the company newspaper became a breeding ground for complaints and negative sentiments.

Over time, circumstances worsened and the pessimism grew. In an effort to manage the downward spiral of it all, the CEO got rid of the newspaper, which only served to incense employees and fuel disapproval among employees. Shortly after the newspaper was canceled, the airline’s flagship team spirit program faded and company morale was worse than when it began.

This is a classic example of a good idea that floundered in the face of challenges. The program lacked a leader willing to talk about the tough stuff. Without support, it died. Team spirit programs face the same challenges. It’s important to make sure that you and your fellow managers are ready and willing to put in the time and energy needed to get team spirit off the ground. The benefits to your organization can be substantial, but this doesn’t happen overnight.

Think about your departments, managers and individual employees. Measure where you think they stand in terms of perseverance and helping each other. Are they positive enough to support one another when they need to? Are you prepared to fully support them and talk candidly about the tough stuff? If not, team building needs to happen before team spirit can be addressed.

Team spirit thrives on positivity and respect for others. When those requisite ingredients are lacking, team spirit mentality fades with them. Here are some office personalities that drain both positivity and respect for others from the workplace:

- **Complainer Clay.** This person always finds something to complain about. The project deadline is too close, someone else isn’t pulling
their weight, the boss is asking too much too often. When Complainer Clays make their sentiments known in conversations with others in a large group or on the Internet, that’s the worst-case scenario.

- **Confrontational Courtney.** These people are the ones that interrupt otherwise comfortable and constructively critical conversations to challenge each detail. If it’s not the project timeline, it’s the budget; if it’s not the strategy, it’s the tactics. Put Confrontational Courtneys on the spot by assigning them a challenging task and closely watching (read: nicely scrutinizing) their execution.

- **Doubtful Dan.** Always in need of reassurance, Doubtful Dans like to come up with worst case scenarios and then talk about them to a lot of people. Reassurance from time to time might be necessary, but be mindful if Dan’s doubts turn to mistrust or suspicion.

- **Negative Nancy.** The glass is never half full with Negative Nancys. Theirs may be an issue easily reconciled by taking time to talk to them. It may just be a self-esteem issue you can help with on a more personal level, so before you write them off completely, find out more about them and be prepared to mentor them a little bit.

For the Clays, Courtneys, Dans and Nancys, mitigate their risky behavior as soon as you see it. If it’s a minor one-time thing, a water cooler walk-by will suffice. However, if the general pessimism is ongoing, waste no time addressing it. You can do so by saying a few words at the next team meeting without naming names, scheduling a smaller group meeting and making a few more direct remarks, or you can send an invitation for a one-on-one meeting and some assertive reminders about the culture of team spirit you’re working hard to implement and how their behavior is not conducive to its growth.

We’d be remiss if we didn’t mention bureaucracy. It’s not an office personality, but bureaucracy impacts employee engagement, investment and collective team spirit. Slow decision-making at the individual and team level is detrimental to forward momentum and slow-moving organizations don’t inspire much confidence from their employees, particularly if they’re on the lookout for weekly or monthly wins. Do what you can to create a fast and effective decision-making environment to keep progress—and productivity—humming.

**Be like Branson. Coach, be coached and cheer a lot.**

Team spirit, at the most basic level, is all about people. It’s about assembling the right individuals, engaging them, and rallying them by giving them shared purpose. If you want to pull this off, you have to like working with people and...
you have to genuinely care about them, too. In fact, Richard Branson was once quoted as saying “Having a personality of caring about people is important … You can’t be a good leader unless you generally like people. That is how you bring out the best in them.”

If you don’t like and care about others, how can you expect your team to do the same?

Like Branson, you may have had an idea, one that led you to found and run an incredible business, but an idea is nothing without the right people to turn it into a reality. Creating and selling a compelling product or service is heavily contingent upon the buy-in of the people that make up the organization. Are they individually happy? Are they engaged? Do they help one another? And, most importantly, do they believe in your mission?

The mission is a bonding agent for the team, a shared goal that keeps them motivated. The lucky teams have a strong and reliable leader to help them along the way. As team captain and leader of the pack, team spirit starts with you.

Be like Branson. Work hard, play hard, and practice often. When you do, you’ll experience the ultimate game-winning: When one of your own cheers you on before you have the chance to encourage them. That’s team spirit.

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