

## All on the Same Team

Ex-NBA star Mark Eaton says too much internal competition can hurt business.

By Wendy Cole | May 2009

Admit it: It's your natural inclination to honor top producers in your office—perhaps with a plaque, a special dinner, or even a paid vacation. They've done such a terrific job for the company, especially through challenging market conditions, and they deserve the recognition. Plus, nice rewards may spur others to work harder, right?



Although it's common for brokerages to bestow public accolades in the hopes of building morale, business coach Mark Eaton warns against it. He says singling out individual accomplishments can actually backfire. That's because it tends to undermine a more important business goal: fostering a strong sense of teamwork within your organization.

And if anyone knows about the power of teamwork, it's Eaton, a former NBA All Star who played for 12 years as a center on the Utah Jazz. "Real estate agents actually have a lot in common with basketball players in terms of how we think about our own success," says Eaton, who consults through his Park City, Utah-based company 7ft4.com LLC. "When I started out in basketball I thought about my job in terms of, 'Who's going to pass to me? How many minutes will I get to play? How much will I learn?'"

Similarly, real estate practitioners (and their managers) typically view success in terms of the volume and value of transactions they bring in, he says. Softer business goals like fostering trust among colleagues and reducing noxious rivalries can get lost in the daily chase for leads and listings.

Eaton says that his self-centered approach to winning changed through experience. When he joined the Jazz in 1982, the team was considered a cast-off with a 30–52 record. But the following season, new coach Frank Layden was determined to transform the team into a group of players who cared about each other's success. "He taught us to pass the ball rather than look out for our own interests," says Eaton. "We learned about aggressive defense, taking chances, and running on opportunities." The next year the team improved to 45–37 and four of its players had league-leading statistics—including Eaton, with the most blocked shots.

"If you play as part of a team, the individual accolades will come," he says. "No one cares if you shoot 30 points a night on a losing team."

In business, he says, the same reasoning holds true. "If your company is going downhill, who cares about any short-term profits?" Here are Eaton's recommendations for creating a team-oriented mindset in an office filled with individualists:

### **Communicate a team philosophy.**

Instill a philosophy that if everyone pulls together, everyone will get what he or she wants. If your associates want to become managers, make sure they realize that helping others succeed can help them reach their goal, too. Regularly reinforce the team message in group and individual conversations. It may make sense to pair weaker salespeople with stronger ones for mentoring, but make it clear that all team members are valued. Also, don't allow associates with domineering personality styles to act like they're in charge.

### **Build a sense of camaraderie.**

Holding monthly sales meeting isn't enough to build a true team. You need to have more regular gatherings to reinforce a sense of community. Take groups of practitioners out to dinner once a month, start a softball team, or hold a retreat.

### **Push for Greater commitment.**

Once your group feels more close-knit, ask for an even greater commitment. In a well functioning team, people are committed to each other, not to a corporate mantra or financial goal. Ask colleagues to discuss what is required to take business to the next level and how to get there. Don't dictate from on high. Discuss what the individual benefits will be if the team succeeds.



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