



"Bump-Set-Teamwork" Or, "Everything I Know About Business Teams I Learned on the Volleyball Court"

By Dave Blum

Every week for nearly ten years now, I've spent my Sunday afternoons playing pick-up volleyball in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. The group's official name is the San Francisco International Volleyball Club, but it's not as organized as all that. There are no league tournaments to compete in, no trophies awarded at the end of a successful season. Our interest lies simply in laughing and joking with friends, and playing the game that we all love.

Each week Sunday volleyball is a Homeric epic, a Shakespearean tragedy. There's laughter and tears; emergent heroes; flaring tempers; and occasionally, some truly superior volleyball.

If ever there was a spot to observe teams and team dynamics in action-in all their glorious successes and ignominious failures-this is the place!

What follows are 10 things I've learned about teams and teamwork from my decade of weekly volleyball in the park.

1) Play by the rules.

Every business team has its own culture, its own ground rules. Likewise for a pick-up volleyball group. In our Sunday volleyball games, the rules are simple:

- 1) No kicking the ball (too many people get whacked in the head by would-be World Cup stars).
- 2) No "net balls" (ie. if a serve hits the net, the serve is invalid and passes to the other team).
- 3) The second ball is for the setter (meaning that the back row people should always pass the first ball on their side of the net to the "setter," the middle person in the front row, so that he/she can "set" the ball up for the two flanking "spikers".)

4) No "jungle ball" (ie. no shooting the ball over on the first ball. The goal for each possession should always be three touches: "bump (pass to the setter) -set-and spike".

5) No leaving the court in the middle of a game (once you're on the court, you stay there 'til the end).

Although these rules are not posted per se, all new volleyballers to the field are quickly informed of the appropriate protocols. Failure to comply is met with stern looks and abundant sarcasm.

Work teams operate in the same way. New team members learn rapidly about the group's "cultural norms," whether it is "one person speaks at a time" or "no laptop-use during meetings."

Q: What are your team's ground rules? How are they communicated to new team members? Who enforces them, and in what way?

2) Stay in place/know your space.

Volleyball, when it's played right, is a game of synchronized movement. Each team member has only one position at any given time (although these positions rotate during the course of the game). At all times, however, you need to know not only what your position's responsibilities are, but also the space you're expected to cover. Moving into your neighbor's area tends to result in high-speed collisions followed by animated finger-pointing. A team in rhythm covers the entire court, holds to its positions, communicates like crazy and flows into the "holes" where a ball might drop.

Successful office teams possess much the same dynamic. Team members know both their positions and their responsibilities at any given time. As responsibilities change, teams flow into the duties not being covered, making sure no tasks fall into the cracks.

Q: How clear is your team about job duties? Does your staff stay in their respective spaces or do they encroach upon other peoples' responsibilities? When positions change, how successful are people at picking up the slack and covering the holes?

3) Expect sudden change.

In a perfect world, your opponents would always pop the ball over the net in a soft, lazy arc, where your relaxed and able teammates would be ready for a controlled bump-set-and game-winning spike. In reality it rarely works out that way. Those crafty, presumptuous folks on the other side of the net have a tendency to smash the ball away from you toward the furthest corners of your court. Or worse, they'll "dink" the ball ever-so-softly over your blocker's out-stretched arms. Sudden change is to be expected in volleyball, just as it is in the office. Your team has to be ready to stop on a dime,

respond to the volleys that the marketplace throws at it, and pick itself up again before the next shot comes blasting in its direction.

Q: How flexible is your team in the face of an evolving marketplace? What are you doing to anticipate change? How can you increase your team's readiness and responsiveness to the unexpected?

4) Think outside the poles.

Three times now you've leapt up to hit a spike, only to be ruthlessly denied by the other team's best blocker. Perhaps it's time to try a different approach. If you've been going cross-court, consider hitting down the line. If the blocker simply has your number, try dinking the ball over him. Or perhaps it's best to simply swap spots with your setter, giving your opponents a different look at the spiker position.

Innovation is at the heart of volleyball, and this is vital for business as well. You've tinkered and tinkered on a product, only to watch your market share eroded by the on-rushing competition. Perhaps it's time to try a new approach, scrap the old product and think up something new, ..."outside of the poles."

Q: How successful is your group at generating innovation? What mechanisms do you have in place for encouraging new ideas and different approaches? How long does it take to put an innovative idea into practice?

5) Feedback "sets" success.

One of the Sunday players, Max, has all the athleticism to be a superior volleyball player. But Max is stubborn. He has his own style of playing that disregards many of the generally- recognized volleyball forms and techniques. On spikes, for example, Max's arms windmill about, his legs scissor, and the ball tends to trickle over the net with barely a whimper. Max, you see, refuses to seek or accept feedback. Over the years, his resistance to outside advice has left people reluctant to even offer him suggestions. He has "maxed" out his latent ability, so to speak.

A volleyball team, like a business team, is an excellent place for mentoring. In our Sunday games, beginners often ask advanced players for advice. And in turn, advanced players work with newbies on the sidelines, administering drills, sharing tips and providing feedback. Most of the advice-giving and -receiving occurs off the field, rather than in the heat of battle, when people can be the most sensitive. In business teams as well, feedback should be a regular event, done appropriately, gracefully, and "off the field."

Q: What mechanism do you have in place for mentoring in your office teams? Are team members encouraged to seek out advice and ask for help? Is feedback specific, appropriate and private?

6) When it's "your bad," admit it.

Jim passes the ball to Randy, the setter, who sets the ball perfectly to Suzanne, the spiker, who crushes the ball for a clean winner. High-fives and pats on the back are exchanged-but wait: Suzanne admits she touched the net on the way down. The spike is invalid and the service goes over to the other side.

Honesty matters at Sunday volleyball. If you touch the net, you 'fess up. If the ball goes outside of the net pole (rather than passing over the net between the two poles), you acknowledge your error and surrender the point. If you "double hit" the ball or "carry it," the mistake is yours and must be admitted.

Successful work teams value ethics, as well. Honesty is perhaps the key component to the building of team trust. From trust flows vulnerability; from vulnerability flows asking for help; from asking for help flows more trust, and so on. When it's your "bad," step up and admit it.

Q: Does your work team place a high value on ethical behavior? Is there a method in place for admitting mistakes without fear of retribution? Do people hold each other accountable for high standards of honesty?

7) Values vary with the player.

Penny comes to Sunday volleyball for the social interaction. She spends most of her time on the sidelines, catching up with people and sharing the potluck snacks. When Penny does step on the court, competition is the least of her interests. She tends to chat with those around her and laugh at her own inconsistent play.

Agnes has a different agenda. Her priority is to play high-energy, high-level volleyball, challenging her limits and her skill level. Rarely does Agnes sit out a game. And when she steps on the court, it's all business. Talking is a distraction. The game is the thing.

Volleyballers tend to split along these two value lines: those who come to socialize and those who come to compete. Put another way, there are those who care mostly about the process and those who care mostly about the task or the result. Blending these two divergent value systems is one of the greatest challenges of pick-up volleyball.

Business teams must also blend an assortment of diverse value systems. Our values tend to develop in our formative years, around age ten, years before we enter the workplace and join our work groups. A key challenge for every business team is recognizing "where people are coming from," in terms of their value systems and upbringing.

Q: Who are the task-oriented people in your team? Who are the process-oriented team members? How successful are you at motivating these two value orientations? How do you get the two personality types to understand and appreciate the others' orientation?

8) Contribution takes all forms.

The spiker has the highest-profile position in volleyball. He is Steve Jobs presenting the new iMac. He is Donald Trump opening a new skyscraper. The success of your team's "point" inevitably relies on the spiker hammering down the ball, "bringing home" the goods. But not everyone has the combination of height, leaping ability and eye-hand-coordination necessary to be a strong spiker. Fortunately there are many other ways in volleyball to contribute. Some people are superior at digging (receiving opponents' spikes and keeping them in play). Others are excellent at blocking, passing or setting. A team composed entirely of spikers seldom wins, as the ball rarely makes it up to net in a position for them to whack it.

Work teams also derive their strength from diversity. Not everyone can be the star, delivering charismatic presentations to the CEO. Teams also need their support people, their technical experts, their production staff. It takes everyone working together to make the star presenters look good.

Q: Is your team balanced in regards to knowledge, skills and abilities? Do you have too many "stars" and not enough "support," or vice versa? How do you ensure that the proper balance of skills is maintained? How is each type of contribution acknowledged?

9) Pick 'n role.

Rick is neither the best blocker, the best passer, the best digger, the best setter or the best spiker. Nevertheless, he has an important role to play in our Sunday gatherings and every team is happy to have him as a member. Rick, you see, is the volleyball clown. When Rick is on your team, you know you're going to have a fun and laid-back atmosphere. He's apt to dive and skid across the grass. He's bound to leap in the air and hit the ball with his head. He's certain to keep a steady stream of jokes and teasing going that will have you all in bent over in stitches. You can expect that when Rick is on your team, everyone will stay loose, relaxed, and fluid. Their level of play is likely go up.

All teams, whether in volleyball or in business, have roles that need to be filled in order for the team to move ahead. (For more information on team roles, see Dr. Clue Teambuilding Newsletter March 2003: "Rockin' Teams Know How to 'Role' With It"). On a volleyball court, for example, you often need someone who will play the role of Coordinator, moving people around for optimal effect while getting them focused on a common goal. In business, as well, a Coordinator is key to team success. Other necessary roles might include a Harmonizer-someone who can mediate conflict- and an Encourager, who concentrates on recognizing and appreciating people's contributions.

Q: What are the roles people play on your work teams? How are people recognized and appreciated for the specific roles they play? How successful are you at creating teams that include both task and group-maintenance role players?

10) Concentrate on your side of the net.

You look across the net and it's obvious your team is outmatched. There are Mark and Harry-the group's best spikers. And next to them are Mary and Louise-the two best setters. In the face of a sure blow-out, what are you going to do? Tend to your own business, that's what. In volleyball, as in business, you can psyche yourself out by worrying too much about the competition. Set your own goals. Work on your own skills. Concentrate on your own team's processes and procedures. The results will come. The fact is, you never know what might happen in a game. The folks on the other side of the net might have an off day. And lest we forget, a well-organized, highly-mobilized David has been known to knock off an over-confident Goliath from time to time.

Q: How preoccupied is your team with the movements of the competition? How reactive are your actions to other organizations in your field? What can you do to keep your team's efforts at self-improvement high and their worry about the competition low?

Despite the many similarities outlined above, pick-up volleyball is, of course, quite a bit different from teams in the workplace. A volleyball team inevitably has as its goal the defeat of the opposing side. Both teams, in other words, are involved in a zero-sum game. In the work world, however, collaboration with the so-called "competition" is an ever-present option. A variety of win-win scenarios in the business arena (e.g., joint ventures, cooperative marketing agreements, etc.) are simply not available in competitive sports. Moreover, volleyball is primarily a recreational activity. Business teams present their participants with something more: the potential to do meaningful work, to make a difference, to strive towards a cause that matters to them.

One last thing that both volleyball teams and work teams share is a sense of community. Whether you're out in the park or huddled around a conference table, the sense of belonging you feel when you're part of a team provides considerable emotional sustenance.

It's your serve.

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