

# CEED

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## Construction Equipment Distribution

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# Train Like A Pro

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# Team Lessons From

# Baseball



If you're a baseball fan, you wait all winter for spring training. That's where Major League Baseball's 30 teams, which make up a \$36B+ business, hold a series of practices and exhibition games before the regular season. Players work out, practice key fundamentals, get more comfortable with roster changes, develop "chemistry," and build momentum for the upcoming season. And it's not a recent "fad" — MLB teams have done this for over 100 years.

Most organizations would also benefit from an "annual spring training" process for their respective teams: leadership, functional, cross-functional, ad-hoc, etc. Consider the following research from Dr. Eunice Parisi-Carew and The Ken Blanchard Companies: "About 60percent of the time, work teams fail to accomplish their goals. To make matters worse, the experience will create lingering hard feelings among team members."

Please don't get hung up on logistics. Some organizational teams (e.g., special, short-term) should consider doing this training/development as part of their "start-up." Others, like executive leadership and functional teams, might benefit by doing it annually, perhaps around goal-setting time. The key is creating a disciplined, annual practice time outside the pressures and demands of the organization's "regular season." Focus on three objectives: 1) increase awareness of group dynamics; 2) assess strengths and weaknesses of the team; and 3) practice using the same tools and techniques. The payoff could be higher performance and more organizational wins.

Of the hundreds of organizational teams I've had the privilege to consult with, most struggle with four team

fundamentals. Each of these team fundamentals is simple in principle but not easy to consistently execute. Consider the following. Do team members in your organization effectively:

- ▶ "Handle curve balls" when differences of opinion happen?
- ▶ "Step up to the plate" and accept true accountability for results, not just activities?
- ▶ "Decipher signs" to maximize communication with each other?
- ▶ "Turn a double play" and "sacrifice their at-bat" when solving problems?

If you answered "not always" or "no" to any of the questions above, here are some practical tips that can help.

## Handling Curve Balls

In order to successfully hit a curveball, a batter must recognize the pitch, maintain balance by not lunging, and keep their eye on the ball. These fundamentals are also valuable for internal teams to more effectively handle conflict and differences of opinion. First, accept the fact (recognize) that most teams will be made up of many different personalities, beliefs, perspectives, and yes — egos. Learn to identify these natural traits and preferences. Develop a deeper understanding of how others prefer to do things such as communicate and solve problems. The challenge is that it's human nature to deal with other people the way we like to be dealt with. Second, don't lunge when differences of opinion (curve balls) are thrown. Common "lunges" include: a) no decisions are reached or problems solved — team members just agree to disagree; b) energy is diverted from higher priorities; c) morale issues are created;

and d) division is created — more “we/they.” Finally, always keep your eye on the ultimate objective (hitting the ball). Many teams waste valuable time and energy continually debating the different methods or ways to potentially get there, not the objective itself.

### **Stepping Up to the Plate**

Work teams naturally cycle through four phases: forming, storming, norming, and performing. Some teams move through this development cycle quickly. Others get stuck in a particular phase. In addition, when there is any change — players, leaders, roles, deadlines, support resources, etc. — most teams will slip backward in the cycle, but hopefully only temporarily.

When teams are not in the performing phase, there are times when the handoff of information, work in progress, and even responsibilities get dropped. Mistakes happen — just look at the 2,700+ fielding errors committed in MLB last year. That’s when accountability is truly tested.

High-performing teams practice and make sure there is mutual responsibility for accountability. This happens when the leader (baseball’s equivalent of a coach or manager) and each team member mutually practice these six steps:

1. Clarify expectations
2. Define success (quantitatively and qualitatively)
3. Express confidence (ability to successfully complete the assignment)
4. Predetermine a check-in schedule
5. Provide dual feedback (what went well and what needs to change)
6. Reinforce (desired outcomes/behaviors and correction of undesired)

Team members then “step up to the plate” when they pro-actively influence, take ownership, and deliver desired results. That’s accountability! Blaming someone else will get you benched.

### **Deciphering Signs**

It’s estimated that during a professional, nine-inning baseball game about 1,000 signs are communicated. There are signs between pitcher and catcher, coaches and base runners, and different players on the field. Their communication goals include being efficient, being on the same page and avoiding potential disasters.

Research by SIS International discovered that “70 percent of small to mid-sized companies claim that ineffective communication is their primary problem.” The study found that “a business with 100 employees spends an average of 17 hours a week clarifying communication, which translates into over \$500,000 in annual costs.”

Here are a few key communication fundamentals that teams need to be constantly reminded of and practice:

▶ Actions speak volumes. Human communication effectiveness is comprised of three major components: words, tone, and body language. Words are the smallest component. Body language is the largest.

▶ Make sure there is understanding. Studies have shown that 20 to 30 percent of everything that’s said is not interpreted as the speaker intended.

▶ Active listening is hard. In fact, the average human can only go 17 seconds before interrupting or interjecting.

▶ Holding people’s attention is challenging because the human brain has the ability to process information four times faster than we can speak.

High-performing teams don’t just share information, they generate understanding. This helps build relationships, trust, and the exchange of new ideas and best practices. Ultimately, they know miscommunication and/or ineffective communication creates errors — and errors can lose games!

### **Turning a Double Play and Sacrificing an At-Bat**

Ideally, the combination of individuals’ knowledge, skills, and experiences on a team helps them identify blind spots, create new ideas/solutions, implement change, and solve problems. But to do this, team resources must be leveraged (similar to getting two outs on one hit ball) and individuals must find common ground rather than merely stake out their personal claims (sacrifice an individual at-bat).

Two fundamental techniques/processes too often get overlooked or misapplied. These require a little extra up-front investment of time and energy, but if effectively applied they can help avoid misunderstandings, miscues, and missed opportunities later.

1. **Brainstorming.** Many teams have no common processes, guidelines, or time limits for brainstorming. It’s a free-for-all. In addition, a fundamental brainstorming rule is constantly broken: public critiquing. This causes creativity and piggybacking of ideas to quickly decline.

2. **Consensus Building.** It is not the same as 100 percent agreement. It is not using win/lose techniques like averaging, majority-rule voting, or negotiating favors back and forth. Rather, it is when each member of the team can honestly say:

§ “My personal views and ideas have been really listened to and considered.”

§ “I have openly listened to and considered the ideas and views of other team members.”

§ “Whether or not this decision would have been my choice, I can support it and work toward its implementation.”

Too often there is head-nodding of approval in meetings. But after the meeting, verbal and non-verbal communication tells others “I don’t support this” or “It will never work.”

### **Conclusion (bottom of the 9th)**

As MLB Hall of Famer Casey Stengel once said, “Games are lost, not won.” Don’t let neglecting these four team fundamentals lose business performance opportunities in your organization, like it has for so many others.

Don’t practice team skills until you get them right. Practice until you can’t get them wrong.

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