



YOUR TEAM SUCCESS PODCAST

“Staff,” “Employees,” Or “Team Members”: Why Language Matters

Shannon Waller: How do you talk about your team? Do you refer to them as “staff” or “employees”? Listen in for why those may not be the most useful terms to get full engagement and full contribution from your team.

Hi, Shannon Waller here, and welcome to Team Success. Today, I want to talk about the fact that language matters. How you talk about yourself, how you talk about your team, makes a huge difference to how it's received. And this came up because of a comment that my dear friend and support partner, Katrina, noticed from a Year 1 participant in Coach where they talked about their people—I would say their team—as “staff.” And she had a very visceral reaction to that, like, “uh.” So I want to talk about the difference between staff, employees, and team members. And to my mind, they really reflect different mindsets about the people with whom you work. If you're the owner, who's working for you. The team leader, the people that you lead, or a manager. And if you're a team member, how you're referred to. So you can tell immediately where my bias is. Then we lean towards team members, but I will tell you why.

Let's break it down. So what exactly am I talking about? Well, I'm talking about how we refer to the people that work at our organization. So if you're referring to people as “staff,” I immediately think about government. I think about bureaucracy. I think about chiefs of staff. I think of incredibly formalized rules and roles and not a lot of room for creativity or innovation. And remember, this is about how this fits for an entrepreneurial organization, since that's what we're here for, entrepreneurial team success. And so this word doesn't really fit, and it reflects the mindset that people are things. They are there to fulfill a role. It's not about individuality or contribution or Unique Ability. It's about them being part of the staff and doing what it is that they are supposed to do. This mindset and model might work brilliantly for things like government. I think about the White House, things like that. But for your entrepreneurial organization, I don't think that's a great way to approach it.

Now, let's talk about “employees,” a more neutral word. I don't hate it, but I also don't love it. So “employee,” to me, is a thing. You know, I think about FTEs. That's how people talk about their team members a lot. And it's like, OK, that's kind of dispensable. It's replaceable. Again, not unique, not Unique Ability, not individual, not personalized. And certainly if you're talking about them in an accounting format, an FTE is a legitimate description. I never want to be referred to as an FTE. I know my team members sure as heck don't. And again, it's kind of diminishing. It kind of puts you into that thing of like, I'm replaceable. You know, I'm not special for who I am or what I contribute.

So, now that I have trashed “staff” and “employees,” what do you use? Well, when you use the term team member, or maybe I should say when we use the term team member, it has a completely different implication. What this means is that you are part of a team. And if you think about any sports team—any kind of a team that puts on any event, even in theater, there has to be a lot of teamwork—every single person has a unique and valuable contribution to



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make, and you have to work as a team to be successful. Yes, you need to make your own individual contribution, and you have to do that in the context of a lot of other people who are also making their own unique individual contribution. So it is a much higher level of working, of success, and a standard of performance, if you ask me. Think about your favorite sports team, if you have one. You know the individual players, and you probably respect their ability to kick the ball to one another. You know, I'm in Toronto and hockey is on right now in terms of the finals. So are they passing the puck? You know, do they look at other people? Basketball fans, you know, how good are they at directing it to people who are actually free for the shot? So that's what we're looking for here.

If you want to have a high-performance company, the words “staff” and “employee” actually have a very different meaning. And so I think if you really want to grow, if you want to attract the best players—again, use that word very intentionally—and if you want to elevate your mindset and your team's, then the term team member, yes, it's longer to say, oh, well. Deal with it. But it's really critical because how you think about your people is reflected in your actions. And so if I'm being treated as a staff, an employee, I'm probably feel like I'm being treated as a cost. And what does any smart business person do? We try to minimize costs. I'm trying to minimize costs. I want to increase profit. So when we treat people as costs, we diminish them. We look to make them super-efficient. We want to make them as cheap as possible. You know, it's all the things we do with, you know, what you might do with your paper supplies in your company. And by the way, when you are arguing on the basis of cost of something, like where do you get your paper from, then that thing is a commodity. So when we look at people like that, we are commoditizing them. Don't think that's how you're gonna get the best out of them.

Instead, if you treat them as an investment- So, what do we as good people and business people try and do? We want to maximize investments. We want to put a little bit in and get a lot as a return, which is why at Coach, we're so focused on individual growth and Unique Ability contributions and all the things, because we know that when we feed and water and nourish what someone is innately good at and loves to do, it blossoms, it expands, it has contributions in ways we could not predict. It's incredible what happens. But again, only because we have that investment mindset.

Now, you might be thinking, what happens if the person doesn't work out? What happens if they're not great? What happens if they choose not to share their Unique Ability with my company? Well, in that case, it's not a great investment. Doesn't mean it's a cost. And if you're alert, curious, responsive, and resourceful, in our world, you will take action on that. You will see, to use EOS's term, Entrepreneurial Operating System, do they actually get it? Do they understand what the mandate of this role is? Do they want it? Do they care? Do they engage their heart? Is it meaningful to them, what it is that they're doing? And that, by the way, is often the missing piece. In my very fun interview with Kathy Kolbe, she talked about the fact that



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motivation kicks off everything. And motivation comes from the inside. You can't make someone want to do a certain type of work or want to serve a particular type of audience. Either they have it in them or they don't. Whether or not someone cares is very, very personal.

Your job is to find people who are aligned with that, not to try and make someone care where they really don't. They'll give it their best shot, but it's really not sustainable. So you have to make sure they get it, that they want it. And then do they actually have the capacity? And capacity can be mental capacity, it can be time capacity, it can be just bandwidth. Do they have too much else going on? That happens a lot when people are really, really busy. So you can check to see. Now, if they get it, want it, and have capacity and still are not performing at the level that you need, then you need to call it. Then you need to make a decision. And this is where multiplication by subtraction comes in. I had a great conversation with a friend about that the other day. But you need to make a decision and help them find something that they're much more aligned with and can be successful at.

But again, that goes back to the investment, not cost. And the more you treat people as things and not as people, the less you're going to get in the way of results. And it's kind of insidious. I think in a lot of management schools, certainly in my education, you knew they were humans, but it didn't really matter. You know, I did some courses that were part of a bachelor business admin course. And you're looking at people as an aggregate, as a whole; they weren't really seen as individuals. And this is what's different in an entrepreneurial company, is we have the room and the capacity and, frankly, the foresight to treat people as unique individuals with a unique contribution to make, hopefully for our company. Maybe yes, maybe no, that's your job to find out. But we have that. And so if you're not taking advantage of it, you're shooting yourself in the foot. You're doing yourself harm.

And it may be that this is part of your early career. Maybe this is how you were raised. Maybe this is how you were educated. And I'm kind of calling out that it's time for a mindset shift. It is time for a mindset shift to stop treating people as things and start treating them as unique individuals who are investments, not costs. Again, good investments, bad investments sometimes, and we just have to be able to take action and make a decision, but that's really key. By the way, there's a resource that a good friend of mine and former team member at Strategic Coach, Ben Lall, we were talking about this at lunch the other day, a really interesting book called *Leadership And Self-Deception* by The Arbinger Institute. So again, Arbinger Institute, *Leadership And Self-Deception*. And it talks about getting out of the box. And we often put people in a box, and we treat them as though they are only this. But essentially what the book is saying is we're treating them as a thing instead, again, as an individual. So if you want a little bit of reinforcement on this, that's a resource that you might find helpful.



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So, how can you take action on this? Well, I would actually start by asking your team, “Hey, I’ve just listened to this podcast and it pointed out that how I talk about you actually makes a difference. So, let’s talk about how I refer to you. Do you hear me saying the word “staff”? Do you hear me saying the word “employee”? Or do we refer to each other as a team?” And by the way, some of your team members are using the terms “staff” and “employee.” This is not just, you know, if you’re listening you as the owner, you as a leader, this is everybody. This is kind of endemic everywhere. But you kind of need to consciously choose. So you’re taking something from an unconscious level of awareness now to a conscious level of awareness and intentionally choosing how are we going to talk about ourselves.

Now, if you’re like me, I want to be a star player on a star team. That’s what I want to do. And it was really fun, we had a great team event on Monday of this week. And Dan’s like, yeah, I’m just a team member here. This is Dan Sullivan, co-founder of Strategic Coach. He goes, but I just have a unique set of skills, and that’s what I want to do. And I need a ton of other people to make the projects happen that I want to, that I want to be a part of. Which is so cool. It’s really awesome to see that he sees himself as a team member. And that’s kind of how we treat him. I’m in teamwork with Dan all the time for podcasts and for recording our quarterly books. And he’s a fabulous team member. He knows his Unique Ability and he’s absolutely committed to Unique Ability Teamwork. And there’s not a lot of ego in that. I mean, he’s got all the status he would ever need, obviously, as the owner, I should say co-owner and co-founder. But it’s not about that. He just wants to be able to make his unique contribution. It’s not about roles. It’s about Unique Ability contribution. And everyone’s freed up in that case. I mean, I’m in charge of directing Dan sometimes, telling him what we need to do, you know, keeping the pace. That’s my job, as well as asking great questions and pulling all the cool stuff out of Dan. But he’s happy to put himself in my hands to be able to do that. So, kind of model Dan, would be a really good example.

Meet with your team, record yourself if you need to, ask your team for feedback, ask how they feel, although only if they can be really honest and trustworthy to answer fully rather than just being yes people, say, “Oh, no, no, you do a great job. Don’t worry.” And then not actually dealing with the issue. So make sure that you’ve created enough psychological safety for this to be true, because otherwise, you’re not going to get anywhere with this conversation. So you might just need your own self-awareness. You know, pay attention, record yourself, listen, look at how you correspond and, you know, chat or email to your team. Are you referring them to, you know, being a team? Or are you calling them staff? Are you calling them employees? Just know that that diminishes the opportunity for people to show up as their best, again, most unique contributing selves.

So pay attention. Pay attention to what you say. Pay attention to what you write. Pay attention to what you say to other people about your team. Because guess what? Other people hear you, and that gets back to your team. And they’re going to go, “Oh, he says ‘team’ to us, but



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he doesn't really mean it. He's just calling us 'staff.'" Or, "She just thinks of us as employees. We're not really that special or important." And then you're just not going to get the best out of your people. So I just want to kind of bring your awareness. So language matters. And I'm going to suggest that you, if you haven't already, that you elevate your language to be "team" and "team members" and a "fabulous team," a "star team," a "power team," whatever adjective is useful for you, so that people know that they are part of something. They have a unique contribution to make to something great. And I think that's going to be a big part of how you get where it is that you want to go.

So I hope this has been useful. I hope it's interesting. I'm excited to hear any comments that you have. So please let me know at questions@strategiccoach.com. And as always, here's to your team success.