

THE WISDOM OF TEAMS: Creating the High Performance Organization

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Team is a concept well known to everyone. Elements of teams are both obvious and subtle. Some of the common sense findings related to teams are:

1. *A demanding challenge tends to create a team.* The hunger for results and performance is far more important than incentives, team leadership or team-building exercises. Teams need a challenge.
2. Teams can be used to recommend things, to make and do things, and to run things; each needs the "team basics".
3. *Teams at the top are the most difficult.* Long-term challenges, demands on time and ingrained individualism work against executive teams; yet, they are still needed there.
4. *Most organizations intrinsically prefer individual over group accountability.* Job descriptions, salary schemes, career paths and performance evaluations focus on individuals, instead of teams.

Some of the authors' uncommon sense findings related to teams are:

1. *Organizations with strong performance standards seem to spawn more "real teams" than one's that promote teams per se.* Focusing primarily on the goal of "becoming a team" seldom works; need relevant results-oriented work for the team to become a team.
2. *High performance teams are extremely rare.* A high degree of personal commitment to one another differentiates high performance teams.
3. *Hierarchy and teams go together almost as well as teams and performance.* Teams are the best way to integrate across structural boundaries and to both design and energize core ideas and processes.
4. *Teams naturally integrate performance and learning.*
5. *Teams are the primary unit of performance because they increase*

responsiveness and quality that is beyond the reach of individuals.

Part I, Understanding Teams, examines why teams increasingly matter to the performance of an organization; Part II, Becoming a Team, describes how and why the performance of groups vary; and Part III, Exploiting the Potential, explores how and why teams are critical to addressing changes in skills, values and behaviours.

Teams outperform individuals acting alone, especially when performance requires multiple skills, judgments and experiences. Real teams are deeply committed to their purpose, goals, and approach. Team members are also highly committed to one another. Groups become teams through disciplined action. They *shape* a common purpose, *agree* on performance goals, *define* a common working approach, *develop* complementary skills, and *hold* themselves mutually accountable for results.

Although the arguments for teams are many, there still is a reluctance found in three primary sources: (a) a lack of conviction that a team can work better than other alternatives; (b) personal styles and capabilities make teams risky; and (c) weak organizational performance ethics. Teams do demand a merging of individual accountability with mutual accountability. They do require time to agree upon a common purpose, goals and approach. Yet, there is a discipline to teams that can transform reluctance into team performance.

One consideration is *size*. Large groups of people cannot develop the common purpose, goals, approach, and mutual accountability of a real team. When they try to do so, they usually produce only superficial "missions" and well-meaning intentions. Large groups need to be divided into small subgroups each with a significant performance goal to tackle. Another consideration is *complementary skills*. A team needs a mix of technical or functional expertise skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and interpersonal skills. A third area of team discipline is *commitment to common purpose and performance goals*. These set the tone and aspiration of the group. Specific goals define a team product that is different from the organizational mission and the individual job description. Specific goals also allows the team to achieve small wins as it pursues its purpose. A fourth area is *commitment to a common approach of how they will work together to accomplish their purpose and goals*. Each must contribute to the group product; they must decide on who will do particular jobs, how schedules are set, what skills they need to

develop, how the group will make decisions, modify its approach and evaluate its work. In addition, group members, overtime, will assume different leadership roles, such as challenging, summarizing, integrating, and supporting. The final component of team disciplined action is *mutual accountability*. When people do real work together toward a common objective, trust and commitment follow. Consequently, teams enjoying a strong common purpose and approach inevitably hold themselves, both as individuals and as a team, responsible for the team's performance.

The Team Performance Curve illustrates that how well any small group performs depends on the basic approach it takes and how well it implements that approach. {Insert Fig.1 1.1, page 84--make smaller}. A **working group** has no significant incremental performance goals or need that will require it to become a team. The members interact primarily to share information or to make decisions to help each individual perform within his/her area of responsibility. The **pseudo-team** is a group for which there could be a significant performance need but it has not focused on collective performance and is not really trying to achieve a desired result. A **potential team** is a group for which there is a significant performance need and that is really trying to improve its impact; however, more clarity is needed about purpose, goals, or approach.

Real teams have small numbers of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, goals and approach for which they hold themselves accountable. **High performance team** is a group that meets the conditions of real teams and has members who are also deeply committed to one another's personal growth and professional success. Other indicators of team success are themes that convey meaning about their identity as a team, high enthusiasm and energy levels, event-driven histories, personal commitment and results.

Common approaches to building team performance include:

1. Establish urgency and direction;
2. Select team members based on skills and skill potential, not personalities;
3. Pay particular attention to first meetings and actions;
4. Set clear rules or norms of behaviour (such as all contribute, confidentiality, no finger pointing, but constructive confrontation);

5. Set a few immediate results-oriented tasks and goals;
6. Challenge the group regularly with fresh facts and information;
7. Spend lots of time together, especially at the beginning;
8. Use positive feedback, recognition, and incentives.

Team leaders need to:

1. Keep the purpose, goals and approach relevant and meaningful;
2. Build commitment and confidence;
3. Strengthen the mix and level of skills and encourage risk-taking;
4. Manage relationships with people outside the team and remove obstacles to the team;
4. Create opportunities for others; and
5. Do real work.

Leaders do not blame or allow specific individuals to fail and they do not excuse away shortfalls in team performance. Team leaders believe that success or failure is a team event. Obstacles that teams face can be loss of energy, a sense of helplessness, a lack of purpose or identity, unconstructive discussions, meetings in which the agenda is more important than the outcome, cynicism and mistrust, finger pointing at others outside the group. When these issues arise they must be confronted. However, do not try to solve team problems without relating them to performance. People need to "work together better", not just as an end in itself, but in order to improve performance and achieve a worthy goal. When troubles arise, the team basics of purpose, goals and approach need to be revisited. Small wins need to be celebrated; new information needs to be shared and sometimes team membership and leadership needs to change. Facing obstacles and getting unstuck can serve a valuable role in revitalizing a team.

Most of the objections to pursuing the use of teams do not offset the advantages they offer. Teams strengthen the performance capability of individuals. They improve the basic management processes of budgeting, planning and evaluating. Teams are practical and they get results. Turn those potential teams in your organization to high performance teams.