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### TEAMS 14.2

# Creating High Performance Teams

I believe that one of the major reasons many teams don't perform to expectations, is because of the assumptions we make about teams. We assume that if we put a group of people together and call them 'team', they will know how to behave like one.

Even without including those who are carrying emotional baggage, mental health problems, psychoses or compulsive disorders, people are incredibly complex. If you have ever tried to motivate a sales person, inspire a student or reason with a child, you will appreciate how complex.

For example, bring a group of people together in team. What has now happened, is that you have just brought together bundles of preconceptions, fears, egos or perceptions of inadequacy, all of which they are probably unaware of. Some will have a range of victimisation behaviours, some will have seething emotions just below the surface, with a wide range of unknown and probably quite subtle triggers. And because we look on teams almost as an extended family, you can add all the problems they have within their families to the mix also.

Because what behaviour we demonstrate on one arena, we will demonstrate in other arenas. In other words, if we tend to bully smaller members of our family, we are more likely to bully members of a team we perceive to be weaker or less powerful than us. In addition to the individual 'stuff', you now have the group dynamics to add to all this.

And we assume that if we call them 'team' and give them an objective to go for, it will all fall nicely into place. In fact, in my experience, more teams fail the team test than succeed. And yet, most of the problems experienced by teams could have been avoided if a few steps had been taken to set the team up properly in the first place.

The following strategies will help reduce many of the barriers which teams experience as they start to perform, and help them reach a high level of performance faster.

### **Identify the purpose of the team**

Identify clearly and succinctly what the team has been set up to do. In sport, it is easier as the focus is in winning the next game. However, an even higher purpose can often be more powerful, such as to qualify and win at an international tournament. But a team such as a sales team, who are all competing with one another, and sometimes with their manager, do not deserve the title of team, as their only common purpose, if you think about it, is to make their company more successful.

Do you really think that this is going to motivate them! Working together to beat a rival company is very often more powerful at pulling a sales team together.

Not only should the purpose be clear, it should also be measurable.

Identify what would happen to the organisation at large if this team were to be

outstandingly successful. Give them something to aim for. None of us want to be in just a job, we all want to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

And teams often set this expectation, that team members will be swept along on an energy which is aiming for something big. It's higher, bigger more worthy than what we would aim for as individuals.

While the purpose is the overall goal, what objectives will the team need to meet in order to measure its progress? Unless there's a plan and/or list of objectives, how is this team to be measured? What successes will it celebrate along the way? How will it know it has been successful or one step nearer its purpose? How will it know if it is moving further away from its purpose?

## **Connect with each other as Human Beings**

Firstly, let's cover what I don't mean here. I don't mean that everyone should sit together and learn about one another's past and wallow in sympathy. I don't mean group hugs, spending weekends together to get to know each other. This can be agony for people with a preference for introversion.

What I'm saying is this, it is very easy to criticise someone when you know nothing about them. This is why, during wars, the military give the 'enemy' a nickname such as wogs or japs. It dehumanises the 'target' and makes it easier to kill them. If they suddenly become a man with a two-year-old daughter and four-year-old son, the job of killing becomes much more difficult.

And it's the same with teams. If you are passionate or very focused on achieving what the team is aiming for, and one of the team members seems not to be participating or contributing, it is much easier to be judgmental if you know nothing about that person except what you have observed in the workplace. If you like, in our mind that makes them similar to a work machine. And we won't have any tolerance if they don't appear to be doing their bit.

One of the ways I start to refocus teams, is to get them to connect with one

another as human beings. They become a person with a family, with likes and dislikes, with personal problems, challenges and successes. Once you have got to know that person a little better, it becomes more natural to be more tolerant, to talk to that person in an effort to improve the performance, to support them rather than turn against them.

Connecting with the human being opens communication, reduces instant, unthinking criticism and ensures that team members make more of an effort to encourage 'team' behaviour.

## **What will it take to sustain the team and its members?**

If this is a team within an organisation, what support and commitment will be required, and by whom? Will other people have to help to cover the work for some of the members? Will Managers from other areas be asked to sacrifice one of their workers occasionally, and will they do it willingly?

How much does the rest of the organisation know about this team and its work? And when they know, will they care?

## **Who should be appointed to the team?**

When creating a team, we often overlook important people to the team simply because the work they do is not obviously a direct part of the team. But their expertise could be incredibly valuable to the success of the team. For example, if you create a temporary team for a marketing or customer service project, the organisation's receptionist should definitely be on it. She or he will know much more about the customer's perceptions and problems with the company than any other single person.

An architectural firm creates a team for every project. On that team is an architect, a marketing expert, a business manager as well as representatives of some of the other trades which will impact on the project.

Cross-functional teams are becoming more and more practical and desirable within organisations. Picking one person from every department to create a team, can dramatically

improve communication within an organisation.

### **Who should lead the team?**

Regardless of what option you choose, the team needs a leader, especially in the early days to formation. The team leader may initially be the Manager who created the team but isn't actually on the team. The team may choose its own internal leader who all agree on and are all willing to follow. Once the team is performing, it may very well move into becoming a self-directed team. Some teams choose to rotate the leadership when they feel that they are all focused and of equal ability.

### **What rules need to be established?**

Apart from clarity of purpose, this is one of the most crucial steps.

Identifying values that all adhere to, creates a steering mechanism within the team which helps identify correct moves and strategies which will keep the team on track.

Some of the discussion about values may cover how to manage difference of opinions, telling the truth, dealing with conflict and irritation, being reliable and considerate both in time keeping and team responsibilities, confidentiality and being bound by team decisions.

### **What feedback loops need to be in place?**

Feedback to the team in order for it to achieve its purpose is one loop. But those in higher authority need feedback to ensure that they, and the rest of the organisation, can see that the team is succeeding in its mission.

Members can be easily motivated, but more commonly demotivated, by the comments and perceptions of those within the organisation about their team.

### **What training will the team need?**

There are two types of training to consider here — functional training as relating to their job or what they are being asked to do within the team and team development training.

In my experience, very few teams know how to handle conflict effectively. And the quickest way to destroy a team is judgment and withheld communication. But because people are trying to be good positive team players, they often don't like to say things which they think will be interpreted as negative and unsupportive.

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