

High Performance Teams: Separating Truth from Myth

Part 1: The Fundamentals of Teamwork

By Mark Samuel

When I was nine years old, I participated on my first team. A little league baseball team. I was a pitcher on the team in first-place. Towards the end of the season, players from the team in last place were dropping out, making it hard to field the nine players needed to have a game. It was decided that a player from the first-place team be picked at random to transfer to the last-place team. We literally drew straws for the "honor" of transferring.

Ever since I was nine years old and transferred from the first-place team to the last-place team, I have participated on and studied the effectiveness of all types of teams, range from athletic teams to music groups.

There are a lot of similarities between the way an athletic team or music group becomes effective (high performing) and the way an organizational team becomes effective. There are also many myths about organizational teams that confuse people who want to develop teams within their own organizations. This article will provide some needed clarity regarding the purpose, use and development of high-performing organizational teams.

During the past ten years, as teams once again became popular in the United States, many of my clients approached me wondering if teams are appropriate for their organization and their culture. I just returned home from Boston where a client said they were piloting the use of teams to determine 'if it would work in their organization.'

This notion about teams is ridiculous, but assists us in developing our first team principle:

Team Principle #1: As long as two or more people in an organization must share information, make a decision, or coordinate their activities with one another, teamwork is already in place within the organization.

Teamwork is not an option for most organizations; it is an occurrence. Sadly, most organizations have been structured to minimize the effective performance of teamwork - without ever knowing it. Now, the question remains, "How do we transform ineffective teamwork into High-Performance Teamwork?" This is where we can learn from professional performing teams that survive or die based on the effectiveness of their teamwork.

Measuring Team Performance

There is one primary difference between an athletic/music team and an organizational team: an athletic or music team has a single purpose that everyone is clear about to WIN. Each team player knows what winning is and has a measurement for winning. On an athletic team, players keep score and track the number of games won, while a music team measures albums sold or contests won. While organizations are measured by profits and losses, the teams operating within the organization are rarely measured for their

collective performance. In fact, many organizations can earn healthy profits while the teams in that organization are failing. This short-term situation of profitability camouflages the true state of crisis similar to a cigarette smoker who feels fine he wakes up to find he has advanced lung cancer.

While most competing athletic teams are measured with points awarded for superior integration of offense and defense, and music groups win contests based on the integration of music quality and stage presence, organizational teams must also be measured by their integration of opposing characteristics. This leads to Principle #2:

Team Principle #2: Instead of focusing on either quality or efficiency (costs) as separate indicators, each team must be measured and evaluated on their integrated performance of quality AND efficiency.

On an athletic or music team, each individual is measured by, and in relationship to the team's performance. Most organizations are only focused on individual performance and assume that higher individual performance will automatically lead to higher team performance. While some organizations are moving to 360 degree employee evaluations, these still are not based on the performance of the team, but on each of their opinions of that employee's individual performance as it pertains to their own function. Thus, Principle #3 is:

Team Principle #3: Not only do high performance teams have a clear purpose and measurement for team success, but each individual on the team is primarily evaluated on their contribution to the team's success.

It has been proven, time and again, on both athletic and music teams, that having the star player does not necessarily result in winning the most games (or contests). It's the use of the star player's performance in relation to the effectiveness of the entire team that translates to the most wins.

What is the Purpose of Team Development?

- The purpose of team development IS NOT to improve relationships on the team so that everyone feels better about participating.
- The purpose of team development IS NOT to empower team members.
- The purpose of team development IS NOT to transfer the accountability from the leader/manager to the employees.

While these are all potential outcomes of team development, none represent the **purpose** of team development. When you watch a team play in baseball's All-Star game, you can be sure you're watching the "cream of the crop." Usually each player has played their position for many years, and has become as good or better than 99% of all pro baseball players. Yet what do these players do daily to prepare for every game? They practice the plays they have mastered and performed for years. **They don't do this to acquire skills; this is done to improve and streamline their functioning as a team.** They practice

communication in terms of their plays, and review their coordination to ensure a smooth operation. They determine how decisions will be made, and review the effectiveness of their fundamentals to keep basic procedures streamlined.