

High Performance Teams: Separating Truth from Myth

Part 3: Optimizing Team Performance

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(Editor's note: In previous articles, we discussed Team Principles 1 through 7, which address the fundamentals of teamwork and team development. Part 3 addresses the principles for maximizing team effectiveness).

Most organizations that work on improvement waste valuable time pursuing perfection, sacrificing excellence in the process. Teams either work on areas or processes that they excel in (because there's neither openness nor safety to discuss the real weak spots), or they focus on resolving crisis as a definition of team development. Each of these processes is less than optimal.

When a major league baseball team practices, what do their star players focus on? **Recovery.** The coach drills them with difficult scenarios to improve the team's ability to recover from crises in actual games. This includes developing each player's ability to respond, as well as the team's ability to cover each other in the event of a breakdown. No team, on the field or in the workplace, can succeed by responding to breakdowns with panic or flight. Hence:

TEAM PRINCIPLE #8

The measure of a high performance team is not only based on the effectiveness of their performance, but is based as much on their ability to recover when crisis hits or changes occur.

Therefore, focus on recovery during your team development sessions, and have the "plays" worked out beforehand.

Notice that to recover, we have to coordinate our efforts, utilize our resources optimally, communicate pertinent information effectively, and trust that each member of the team will carry out their predetermined role and function.

Yet, how many organizational teams work on these aspects of their team's performance? Most that do team-building think that learning activities, listening, and the styles of the other team members will improve the relationships on the team to produce more effective results. While this can help, it is clearly insufficient.

The second key focus of team development is **Consistent Excellence.** One might confuse this with maintaining the status quo, but it is distinctly different. As any top performing athlete or musician would relate, you must continually redefine excellence in terms of the outcomes that you expect; it is the only way to keep up with or surpass the competition.

This inevitably requires that a team must continually change and never accept current levels of performance (or current processes) that work good enough. Like any top performing athletic team or music group, the team must first develop a consistent standard of excellent performance, regardless of the ever-changing circumstances around them. When organizational teams run into an external obstacle, it sometimes becomes a point for blame. Yet, when an athletic team encounters bad weather or a music group suffers an equipment failure, it becomes a rallying point and opportunity to initiate the recovery steps they've practiced, so their performance is minimally affected.

TEAM PRINCIPLE #9

To optimize team performance and keep up with competition, teams must continually work on and redefine their measure of consistent excellence.

For an athlete, it means redefining their goal and readjusting their processes in alignment with the new paradigm for expected outcomes. This redefinition leads to changes in equipment, nutrition, form, communication and measurements to attain these new expected outcomes. Every top team and its members continually redefine excellence and work towards this new state, both together and as individuals. Ultimately, measurement is a coach's best feedback mechanism for their team's self improvement.

COORDINATING YOUR TEAMMATES

All teams are made up of individuals who have unique skills and abilities. On an athletic team or music group, individual performance is used as a basis for determining how the team should function in order to optimize performance. They don't use this against each other; it is used for the effectiveness of the team.

In organizations, too often people think membership on a team implies equality and fairness, but this is not the case. First of all, it is neither appropriate nor effective to treat each team member the same, because you then deny them the opportunity to manifest the fullness of their unique qualities. Secondly, I've never been on a performing team where everyone participated equally or had equal "power" or influence. On a baseball team, pitchers and catchers make more decisions than all other players (other than the coach). Also, infielders generally direct the actions of outfielders. This doesn't make one player better than another; they fill different roles to maximize their team's success.

Some organizations believe that, by implementing teams, the manager's or leader's role will now be taken over by the team; this is also not the case. The finest athletic teams and music groups have leaders, who provide the direction, motivation, parameters, guidance/coaching, and discipline. These requirements are the same for organizational leaders in a team environment.

However, there is a fundamental paradigm within organizations that results in less effectiveness, no matter how much time and energy is spent on team development. The traditional hierarchy has been blamed for many of the performance problems in

organizations. In response, organizational structures have been redesigned, but with limited or no improvement. The problem is not the structure, but in the application within the structure.

You see, we assume a vertical accountability with a hierarchy that permeates all other organizational designs. Unfortunately, vertical accountability can never be optimal, because the only accountability is to the manager or leader.

On any high performance athletic team or music group, team members are accountable to each other for making and keeping agreements for supporting one another, for holding each other accountable when agreements aren't kept, and for challenging one another to their next level of successful performance. This does not change the leader's role; it is in addition to the vertical accountability that already exists. Rarely does this culture exist naturally within organizations, yet it has a significant impact on the improvement of both teams and individuals, which we will examine further.

Most of us have experienced making a mistake without knowing it until someone else informed us. When a team member is not performing up-to-par, who notices first? **Their teammates.** Since recovery is a key to high performance (like on an athletic or music team), the quickest mode of recovery is to have the discovering team member point out the difficulty. However, in most organizations, it isn't safe to do so without hurling egos or causing feelings of disloyalty. Typically, teammates would rather tolerate poor performance than to critique one another.

If the person receiving the feedback doesn't know how to modify their approach for better results, the next fastest way to recover is again through the team members. Through coaching or assisting (but not doing the job for them), a poor performer may get clear about their problem, thus allowing them to see new, alternative solutions.

Once again, many organizations aren't set up for this type of coaching. It is either regarded as outside the scope of the team member's role, or it is not allowed by a controlling manager. In either case, without a safe environment for feedback and coaching from teammates, the team's performance is almost always compromised, no matter how much team members like, trust and respect one another. Thus:

TEAM PRINCIPLE #10

To recover quickly and optimize team performance, teammates must formally establish interlocking accountability to provide each other feedback and coaching as needed.

Once team members have supported a poor performer with feedback and coaching, if the problem continues, it becomes the responsibility of the leader to provide direct coaching and to establish the boundaries for improving performance. Hopefully, the leader's perspective, skill and encouragement (along with the incentive of clear deadlines) help the poor performer to improve responsively.

Unfortunately, many managers abdicate their role with the onset of empowerment, or the organization avoids dealing with such problems in an attempt (once again) to be **fair**. This begs the question: "Fair to whom?" When a leader or organization does not deal with a performance problem, everyone loses. First, the poor performer stays in denial about their ability, which ultimately catches up to them in the next downsizing. Secondly, teammates must increase their own efforts to maintain an effective operation, which can threaten their own survival in the organization. Finally, as the team compensates, the y must adjust their process to accommodate the poor performer. This is like trying to jog with a leg in a cast; after a while, the good leg collapses under the added strain. Ultimately, the team is in a constant state of recovery and crisis, while the poor performer is ignored or supported to maintain their poor performance. Ironically, leaders will sometimes implement a team-building effort to resolve the problem, while they still avoid their role as the leader.

TEAM PRINCIPLE #11

Even in a team environment, when an individual's poor performance is ignored by the leader and/or organization, everyone loses; team members will break down when they must overcompensate for their teammate's poor performance.

In summary, "teams" is not the issue...there is no decision about whether or not to establish a team environment in your organization. Various teams of people already impact one another through the exchange of services and products, information, resources and their activities. What is critical is that we ask, "How effectively do the teams function together to achieve our established business outcomes?"

Team-building programs to enhance awareness and skills will always come up short in addressing this effectiveness. What is required is the dedication and commitment of each leader and team member to recognize and work through the breakdowns and crises that arise.

I don't call this effective teamwork. I call it effective and efficient performance.