

There's No I in Team, but Team Leadership Requires U

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Success with Teams

I got my start as a consultant during the first half of the 1990s because of the popularity of teams. Actually, I was an internal consultant and driver for my company's push toward what we first called Self Directed Work Teams. Leading this effort for what was then a 1,300-person manufacturing facility was both fraught with frustrating learning opportunities and full of satisfying successes. I asked for the role because it was an opportunity to confirm what I believed about most people in organizations:

1. They want to do a good job.
2. They want to contribute and make a difference.
3. They want to be part of a winning team.
4. Those doing the work usually know the most about how to improve the work.
5. Synergy is real when collaboration flourishes in an organization.
6. If leaders listen (and then act), their people will offer great ideas.

We were able to achieve huge gains in productivity and quality. Our facility became the first-ever winner of the South Carolina Governor's Quality Award, a rigorous assessment based on the criteria developed for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Much of this success was a result of engaging our workforce through the implementation of High Performance Work Teams (note the replacement of the term Self-Directed) across the facility.

What Happened to the Rage that Was Teams?

These positive results provided me with the opportunity to start a consulting business where my first client engagement was guiding the implementation of teams. Today's reality is that teams have lost much of the luster they had in the 1990s, and very little of my current work involves team implementations.

Why is this? Were teams just a fad? Did teams not get the results expected? Were teams just too difficult to do well? All of these factors contributed to a

decline in team initiatives within organizations, but my experience indicates that the last factor is the most significant.

My experience also says that the biggest barrier to doing teams well is not those who would serve on them. More often, an organization's leadership approach is at odds with even basic collaboration and teamwork. Team members usually can adapt to working in teams much more easily than leadership can transition to the style needed to encourage, support, and grow successful teams.

The reality is that coaching and developing individuals is difficult enough for a manager. Coaching and developing both individuals and their interactions and performance on a team is truly a challenge that requires additional skills and a different mindset.

This challenge can be magnified when those placed in management/leadership roles are selected because of their success as individual performers. Perhaps they were excellent engineers, accountants, water plant operators, CAD operators, or project managers. Because they demonstrated the ability to solve problems, make things happen, and do good work as an individual performer, they get a promotion and find themselves managing others.

Answers vs. Questions

When success and the resulting rewards are associated with usually having the right

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answers, it's no wonder that many people believe that good leadership must mean having the right answers. In contrast, one of the most important skills for successfully leading and growing teams (as well as developing individuals) is having the *right questions* to help teams (or again, individuals) discover the answers they need. It is critical for a leader to question, whether or not he/she already knows an answer. Please note that I specifically chose the word "an" vs. the answer because of my countless experiences working with teams where the best solutions resulted only after collaborative team deliberations.

Still a Place for Teams

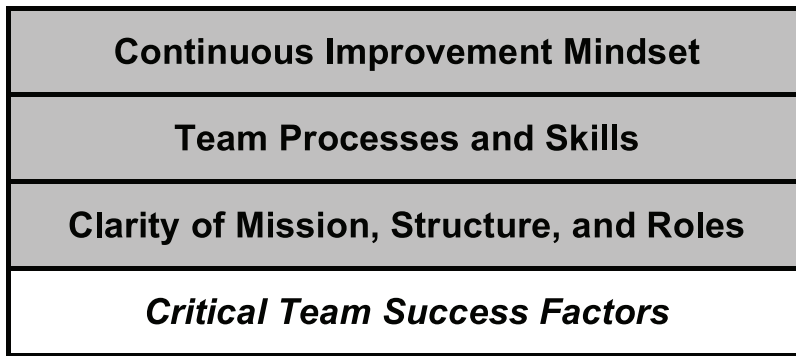
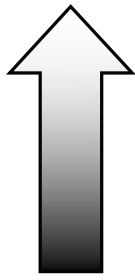
Even though the time is past when teams were seen as the solution for nearly every problem, there is still a place for effective teams. Whether they are called teams, committees, taskforces, or workgroups, the reality

Continued on page 44

Type of Team	Typical Objective(s)	Participants
Project	Definition, design, planning, and execution of a project.	Cross functional: Memberships dependent upon expertise needed. Membership will change during the life of the project
Problem Solving	Investigate, understand and eliminate causes of specific problems	Volunteers or selected participants Often cross functional
Improvement Task Force	Design policies, methods or systems to address a significant organizational issue. Example: Shift Schedule Study Team	Volunteers and selected participants Generally have representatives from various functions and levels of an organization.
Process Improvement	On an ongoing basis, use quality improvement methods to continuously improve a process or processes	Volunteer and/or assigned Generally cross functional
Natural Work Teams	Manage and improve the day-to-day operations of their work unit. These can progress all the way to High Performance Teams.	All members of a natural work unit

Table 1: Common Types of Teams (Utilities and Related Organizations)

Table 2: Critical Team Success Factors



Continued from page 42

is that with rapid change and complexity, there are times when teams, or as a minimum, effective teamwork and collaboration, remain the best road to success. Some of the benefits of a team approach include:

- ◆ Applying more knowledge, experience, and information
- ◆ Different perspectives and approaches to performance challenges
- ◆ Increased commitment and ownership of solutions
- ◆ Increased satisfaction and motivation
- ◆ Improved communication
- ◆ Improved decision making

As a result, individuals who have the ability to lead teams successfully have a vital role to play in the running, improvement, and ultimate success of organizations.

Types of Teams

Teams come in a number of forms. Those most common in utilities and related organizations include those shown in the Table 1.

Leadership & Effective Teams

Providing the type of leadership needed to help a team be successful requires a number of elements. First is for the leader to understand the attributes of an effective team. These are defined very effectively by Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith in their book *The Wisdom of Teams*. They distinguish a team from a group of people with a common assignment this way:

“A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.”

Those in leadership positions need to consider this definition carefully when deciding whether a team can be an effective part of a needed solution. Once this determination is made, there is much work to be done to fully satisfy this definition.

Assembling the right people is an obvious first step. How many people is one consideration; most effective teams have 10 or fewer members. As size grows beyond this number, the difficulty of interacting increases and sub-teams often form, either naturally or out of necessity.

Think broadly when considering “complementary skills.” Skills should also account for knowledge, experience, education, and even behavioral style or personality. Complementary skills come from having some diversity in these attributes across the team members.

After selecting team members, satisfying the remainder of the definition is where the difficult work of leading and supporting teams really begins. To do this, leaders must continuously assess and assist with the team’s critical success factors.

Critical Success Factors

While all of these factors are necessary for success, they begin with the foundation and build as the team develops as illustrated in Table 2.

Clarity of Mission, Structure & Roles

An effective team has a clear understanding of its mission, its place in the organizational structure, and the roles of team members and support personnel. **Leadership’s initial role to support this includes helping the team to...**

- ◆ Understand the organization’s vision and values.
- ◆ Clarify its own core purpose and mission.
- ◆ Identify critical support groups and clarify their roles.
- ◆ Understand the expectations of management.
- ◆ Clarify its own roles and relationships.

Ongoing support requires the leader to...

- ◆ Reinforce expectations for the team.
- ◆ Reinforce how the team affects the organization’s results.
- ◆ Be open to feedback from the team.
- ◆ Facilitate periodic team discussions to clar-

ify roles.

- ◆ Facilitate the integration of new team members.
- ◆ Coach the team to remain focused on their objectives.
- ◆ Ensure that the team understands and meets its commitments to others.
- ◆ See the big picture and the details at the same time and help the team to understand both.

Team Processes & Skills

On an effective team, members have high levels of trust, good interpersonal skills, effective processes for working together, and an appreciation and respect for each other’s differences. **Leadership’s initial support role includes helping the team and individuals to...**

- ◆ Listen to one another as well as openly share ideas.
- ◆ Critique their processes for working together.
- ◆ See one another’s differences as strengths.
- ◆ Provide feedback to one another.
- ◆ Establish expectations and ground rules.
- ◆ Build trust.

Ongoing support requires the leader to...

- ◆ Demonstrate belief in the team concept and serve as a role model for team behavior
- ◆ Observe team processes and help the team step back and look at how it works together (i.e. makes decisions, runs meetings, distributes work).
- ◆ Help the team to value and work with individual differences while staying focused on the task, situation, or problem.
- ◆ Facilitate the resolving of interpersonal conflicts by encouraging (insisting and assisting when necessary) team members to speak to one another openly and frankly about issues affecting the team.
- ◆ Confront situations where people do not adhere to the values of teamwork, collaboration, and mutual respect.
- ◆ Provide constructive feedback and coaching as needed.
- ◆ Set a personal example by treating others with respect and dignity, listening with an open mind, valuing other’s ideas and working together to solve a problem.
- ◆ Keep your word and meet commitments to the team.

Continuous Improvement Mindset

An effective team works towards constant improvement—ensuring that its process is as waste-free, error-free, interruption-free, and safe as possible. **Leadership’s initial role to support this includes helping the team to...**

- ◆ Develop meaningful measures of team performance.
- ◆ Review feedback on its performance regu-

larly.

- ◆ Establish clear and challenging improvement goals.
- ◆ Develop and use disciplined problem solving skills.
- ◆ Arrange time to review performances, set goals, and solve problems.

Ongoing support requires the leader to...

- ◆ Provide benchmark information to the team.
- ◆ Assist with team meetings to update measures and goals for improvement.
- ◆ Provide feedback on team performance.
- ◆ Encourage the team to challenge all tasks and try new methods.
- ◆ Focus the team on learning from its mistakes when things go wrong.
- ◆ Ensure the team gets training in problem solving skills.
- ◆ Encourage (or insist and assist) the team to use those skills.

Investing in Teams

It should be apparent that effective teams require a significant investment of leadership time and other resources. Leading a team successfully involves skills that often go well beyond those associated with good leadership in traditional environments.

Generally, success is not immediate. On the other hand, successful teams and/or a culture built around collaboration, problem solving, and teamwork almost always provide better, longer-lasting, and more satisfying collective solutions.

Each person in a leadership role has choices to make. For teams to be effective, leaders must be willing to give away, or at least share, credit for successes. This can be difficult if the organization's culture seems to emphasize individual successes. It is only when a critical mass of the organization's leadership values teamwork and collaboration that the culture can be reshaped.

Young professionals have the best opportunity to influence this change as they progress in their careers. The challenge is to utilize leadership that focuses on teamwork and collaboration in order to build *organizational* (vs. individual) *success* through an engaged, competent workforce and robust systems and processes.

Ironically, such a leader's best indicator of success is when her/his organization could survive and thrive even when she/he moves on to the next challenge. Would you, could you, will you choose to be such an effective leader?

¹ Katzenbach, Jon R & Smith, Douglas K. *The Wisdom of Teams*, Creating the High Performance Organization, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Massachusetts ◊