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Creating Powerful Teams

Teams are the most common business unit for high performance. Although the word gets used loosely and not always appropriately, there is universal acceptance that teams create opportunities for high performance results. A team's performance includes both individual results and collective work products, which yield sums greater than its parts.

True teamwork represents a set of values that promote individual and collective performance. Effective teams value listening and communicating, sharing work responsibilities, provide support and can even make work more social and enjoyable.

Members are supportive of one another and recognize the interests and achievements of each other. When they are working the way they should, they are incredibly effective in achieving high performance results.

Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith (*The Wisdom of Teams; Teams at the Top*) provide the definition of teams:

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

The essence of a team is common commitment. Without it, groups are just collections of individuals working together but separately. A work group's performance is a function of what its members do as individuals. Such work groups are prevalent in large organizations where individual accountability is most important. They may come together to share information, perspectives and to make decisions, but the focus is always on the individual's performance.

The Evolution of Group to Team

Teams evolve over time and have a pattern of development. During the *forming* stage, groups attempt to define their tasks and decide how to accomplish them. They sort out how the members will relate to each other.

During the *storming* stage, members establish a pecking order within the group. Then, in the *norming* stage, members accept the ground rules and norms by which the members will cooperate. In the *performing* stage, the group has settled relationships and validated expectations and can turn to work for which they are mutually responsible. At this stage the team is capable of more work in concert than the sum of the individual efforts would have produced.

Teams differ from working groups because they require both individual and mutual accountability. While they also rely on sharing information, perspectives, and joint decisions, teams produce results through the joint contributions of its members. They are committed to mutual goals, as well as individual goals, and they share a common purpose.

Teams develop direction and momentum as they work together to achieve a shared goal. Thus they commit to work together towards the same ends, even though each member may participate in different ways.

Working together towards a shared goal can create social ties and enjoyment. This is also an important factor that contributes to high achievement.

A famous study of work behaviors known as the Hawthorne studies revealed that people work better together when they are allowed to socially interact with one another and are given supportive attention.

While this study initially set out to determine whether lighting in a factory affected performance, the results revealed that just the fact that people were being observed and had people interested in them was the determining factor that increased performance. This was called the Hawthorne Effect.

The Hawthorne Effect has importance for executives interested in increasing results without command and control tactics: pay attention to people and their teams, express genuine interest in them, give them opportunities for social interaction, frequent feedback, and stand back and let them perform.

Which is not to say that management should leave them alone. Teams left on their own can be confused. Most successful teams shape their purposes in response to a demand or opportunity put in their path by higher management. This helps teams get started by broadly framing the organization's performance expectations in alignment with the organization's mission and purpose.

Management is responsible for clarifying the challenge for the team, and for being flexible enough to leave the team to develop commitment to purpose, sets of specific goals, timing and work approach.

Meaning and Emotional Energy

The best teams spend much effort in exploring, shaping and agreeing on their purpose that belongs to them both individually and collectively. This activity continues throughout the life of the team. Research on failed teams shows that they rarely develop a common purpose.

The best teams also take their common purpose and translate it into specific performance goals. These goals relate to the common purpose and build on each another, moving the team forward towards achievement and creating powerfully motivating and energizing steps to success. The achievement of goals along the way builds momentum, fosters trust among members and helps build continued commitment

Specific performance goals may be such things as bringing a product to market in record time, a 50% decrease in customer complaints, or achieving a zero-defect rate while cutting costs by 40%. Transforming broad directives into specific goals provide first steps for forming the identity and purpose of the team. As the team progresses with small wins, they reaffirm their shared commitment.

Clarity and Focus

The combination of purpose and specific goals is essential to performance. Each depends on the other. While the clarity of goals helps keep a team on track and focused for accountability, the broader, overlying aspirations of a team's purpose can provide meaning and emotional energy.

When people are working together toward a common objective, trust and commitment follow. Members hold themselves responsible both as individuals and as a team for the team's performance. This sense of mutual accountability produces mutual achievement and all members share in its rewards.

People who participate in effective teams find the experience energizing and motivating in ways that their usual jobs could never match.

On the other hand, groups that are established as a “team” but that do not have a clear common purpose rarely become effective teams. Only when appropriate performance goals are set does the process of discussing the goals and the approaches to them give team members a clear choice: they can disagree with a goal and opt out, or they can pitch in and become accountable with and to their teammates.

Mutual Accountability

Though it may not seem like anything special, mutual accountability can lead to astonishing results. It enables a team to achieve performance levels that are far greater than the individual bests of the team’s members. To achieve these benefits, team members must do more than just listen, respond constructively, and provide support to one another. In addition to sharing these team-building values, they must share an essential *discipline*.

Katzenbach and Smith in their books about teams (*The Wisdom of Teams; Teams at the Top*) talk about five essential disciplines of effective teams:

1. A meaningful common purpose that the team has helped shape
2. Specific performance goals that flow from the common purpose
3. A mix of complementary skills
4. A strong commitment to how the work gets done
5. Mutual accountability

The challenge for top management is how to build effective teams without falling into the trap of appearing to promote teams for their own sake. *There should be relentless focus on performance*. If management does not put the focus on the link between teams and performance, then there is the risk of teams becoming another management fad. Paying constant attention to specific teams and their progress on specific performance goals is the key.

Part Two for January

Eight Keys to Performance

Here are eight key approaches for building team performance that Katzenbach and Smith found in their research of high performing teams.

1. Establish urgency, demanding performance standards and direction
2. Select members for skill and skill potential, not personality
3. Pay particular attention to first meetings and actions
4. Set some clear rules of behaviors
5. Set and seize upon a few immediate performance-oriented tasks and goals
6. Challenge the group regularly with fresh facts and information
7. Spend lots of time together
8. Exploit the power of positive feedback, recognition and reward

The Emotional Intelligence of Teams

Some successful companies have consistently produced the most innovative products under intense deadline and budget pressures by focusing on team emotional intelligence. Many executives realize that

EQ, or EI, is as critical as IQ to an individual's effectiveness. But team emotional intelligence may be even more important, since most work gets done in teams.

A group's EI isn't simply the sum of its members' individual competencies. Instead, it comes from the synergism of members' capacities for awareness and regulation of emotions within and outside the team. These competencies build trust, group identity and a sense of group efficacy. Members feel that they work better together than individually.

To build a foundation for emotional intelligence, a group must be aware of and constructively regulate the emotions of:

- Individual team members
- The whole team
- Other key groups with whom it interacts

The challenge of working with virtual teams

An obvious case for paying attention to team emotional intelligence is with virtual teams. Deprived of most non-verbal and visual cues, communications can be a challenge. This often results in interpersonal relationships that are more problematic. Exacerbating the problems inherent in any team is the fact that virtual team members are often from different parts of the company, different cultures and even different countries.

The challenges of working with diverse team members in virtual environments place even more importance on communication skills and emotional intelligence competencies. There is a great need for building cohesiveness and commitment to a shared purpose.

Working with a team coach, both individually and with the whole team, can help define the team purpose, specific goals and mutual accountability and facilitate communications that lead to high performance results.

Every company faces specific performance challenges for which teams are the most practical and powerful vehicle at top management's disposal. The critical challenge for senior managers is how to obtain maximum performance and in developing the kinds of teams that can deliver it.

Teams have a unique potential to deliver results, and executives have to know when to deploy teams strategically, when they are the best tool for the job, and how to foster the basic discipline of teams that will make them effective. By doing so, top management creates the kind of environment that enables team as well as individual and organizational performance.

Focused Feedback and Follow-up to Build Teams Quickly

Everyone extols the value of teamwork. The need to build effective teams is increasing and the available time to do is decreasing. How do you increase team effectiveness in a climate of rapid change with limited resources? Here is an excellent team-building exercise developed by Marshall Goldsmith (*Team Building without Time Wasting*, Keilty, Goldsmith & Company, 1998.)

Research with thousands of participants has shown that focused feedback and follow-up can increase leadership and customer service effectiveness. A parallel approach has been shown to help leaders build teamwork without wasting time. It requires that team members courageously ask for feedback, have the discipline to develop a behavioral change strategy, to follow-up and to "stick with it."

To implement this process, the leader will have to coach or facilitate rather than be the boss of the project. Members should develop their own behavioral changes, rather than have them imposed upon them.

1. Begin by asking each member of the team to confidentially answer two questions:
 - A. On a scale of 1 to 10, how well are we working together as a team?
 - B. On a scale of 1 to 10, how well do we need to be working together as a team?

Calculate and discuss the results. Research involving several hundred teams in multinational corporations showed that the “average” team member believed that his/her team was currently at a “5.8” level of effectiveness but needed to be at a “8.7.”

2. Ask the team, “If every team member could change two key behaviors which would help us close the gap between where we are and where we want to be, which two behaviors should we all try to change?” Prioritize the behaviors and determine the two most important behaviors to change for all team members.

3. The team members also choose two behaviors for personal change that will help close the gap. Then they ask for brief progress reports from each other monthly.

Progress can be charted. Results have clearly shown that if team members have regularly followed up with their colleagues, they will invariably be seen as increasing their effectiveness in their selected individual “areas for improvement.” The process works because it encourages team members to primarily focus on changing their own behaviors.

Resources Creating Powerful Teams

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