

Creating Powerful Teams – Part One

“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.”

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

The word ‘team’ is a popular word. – and often used loosely and/or 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 – creating a sum which is greater than the 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.

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

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*"Thoughts and action,
aligned fearlessly to purpose,
become crowning achievement."*