How to Build Superior Team Performance

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"The authors believe that one of the most neglected aspects of organisational development is the building of a strong team culture. There are huge opportunities for leveraging team culture in driving performance, often overlooked because of inadequate funding, poor investment of resources, and sometimes because of a disdain for adopting 'soft skill' development. Organisations can be steered using two key strategies towards unbelievable performance within a team and between work teams. This article will focus on how to build a strong Team culture that can permeate all levels, and the authors discuss how practical and common-sense approaches to developing a team culture can reap huge benefits for all organisations."

Team building – is it neglected or overlooked?

It's difficult to know the difference between neglect and indifference and it is sometimes only when things are going wrong that many organisations consider the whole issue of team building and development. Team building may be considered a 'nice to have' activity, but not seen as a necessary soft skill requiring learning and development. In reality, most people,

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when they start working in a business of any size, will be rewarded for their administrative, procedural, technological and task-driven skills, rather than their team working skills. If any L&D activity is undertaken it tends to be on task-driven skills.

Building a strong and positive team culture is committed to when things radically need improving, or where there is seen to be a serious lack of team cohesion, impacting performance.

Building a team culture is too important a topic to be left to chance, yet few organisations consider it as a major driver in the development of the performance of their organisation.

It is very easy to neglect some of the most important issues and stages of team development and suffer the negative consequences of not dealing with issues timeously.

Never enough time

Is there ever enough time to balance task vs team development? Many L&D (learning and development) budgets are focused on enabling people to rise quickly up the learning curve and develop their technical capability to complete a variety of tasks efficiently and effectively. There appears never to be enough time for creating and building cohesive teams that can produce outstanding performance.

Assessing team health

A major element of many 'organisational reviews' measures the relative ability to work with or despite negative relationships in and between specific functional teams.

You have probably witnessed dysfunctional teams in action, and the impact this can have on performance. It does not just affect business results, but can create a 'negative' culture where norms and standards are ill-defined or, worse still, defined by groups or teams more in tune with meeting their individual or collective needs, rather than organisational objectives.

What are effective teams?

Developing cohesive teams is central in integrating organisational and personal objectives. People bring with them a variety of skills and experiences to work, yet we fail to capitalise on these. Team leaders should know that developing the synergy of their whole team is critical if they want to achieve outstanding results. What follows focuses on what we consider imperative in team building. It is not rocket science, but managers who lead teams may not appreciate the effort that has to go into creating and building high-performance teams.

Natural functional or task teams, and project teams?

When we look at team building, we ask "Is this a natural work team, or a group of individuals who have been brought together short-term and then disbanded when the project is completed?" It's important to know the difference. Task-based teams work together on a semi-permanent basis and are natural work teams. Project-based teams or groups may be brought together for that one project, and members can easily be dispersed back to their functional responsibilities when the project is completed.

You will need different strategies to develop each 'team' depending on their role, the degree of permanency in that

role, and whether they are tasked to work with a project and install or implement it.

To focus on how to get the best out of 'natural teams' and 'project teams', we will focus on two key issues:

1. Team maturity
2. Team composition.

We find that these two issues are central to building effective teams and improving performance. Most organisations neglect to maximise the return from adopting learning from both elements.

Team maturity and team composition

As already stated, very few of us work in isolation. Most of us work in teams and depend on each other, and the team, to do our jobs and achieve results. In an effective team, there should be a high degree of interdependence between team members. That being our aim, it makes good sense to look at team maturity and the dynamics that can arise, and how this can aid you in improving performance.

Four stages of team maturity

Let's discuss the role you can take in shaping the building, regulating, training, coaching and developing teams and their members. In management, it is very easy to focus on the task, rather than how the task is completed. It is very easy to neglect some of the most important issues and stages of team development, and suffer the negative consequences of not dealing with issues timeously. There are four stages to team maturity, and they are easy to remember – Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing.

Individual commitment – there's no 'I' in team

Not everyone will focus on being a great team member, simply because their preference is not to be a team player. It may be that their personality type prefers to work alone, not enjoying collaborating with others. Although you can accommodate people's individual preferences, your role as a manager is to build a highly functioning team. One element of this is defining standards. Although one person may prefer to work alone, the task and the organisation requires people to become strong team members, not team busters.
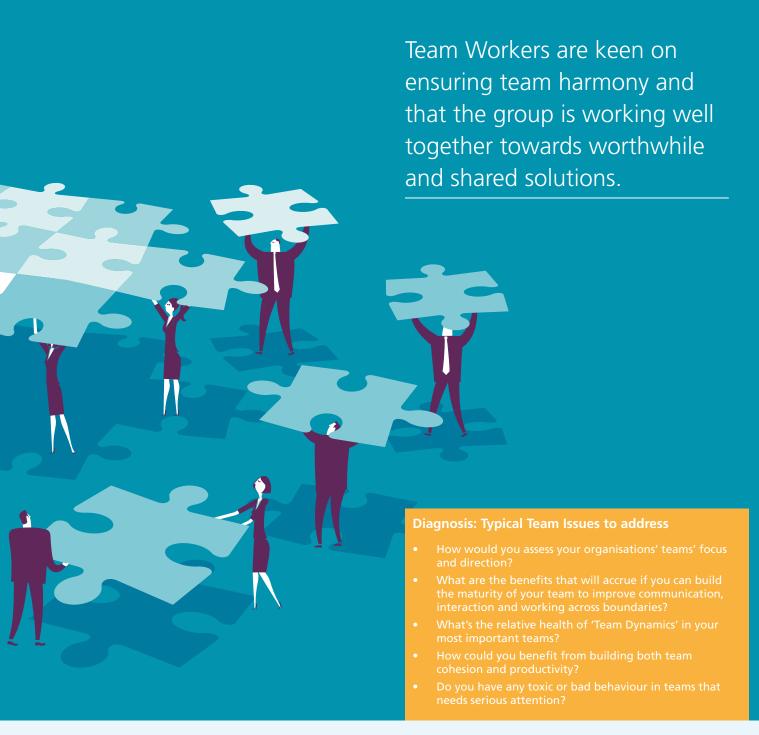
Training in team dynamics

You must be alert to these personality types and how their influence can be counter to desired group performance. We can wrongly make assumptions that all strive to be team players and operate as a cohesive team. Sometimes the ambitions of the team are just not realised, because the team leader has not taken charge and shaped and built that team.

A major factor could be that the leader or manager has had little or no training in team and group dynamics. If this is the case and shared across the organisation, you have a problem, because you will be failing to build the synergies which cohesive teams can impart to the wider organisation.

Assessing team effectiveness

We are going to use the four-stage Tuckman model, which

Team Workers are keen on ensuring team harmony and that the group is working well together towards worthwhile and shared solutions.

Diagnosis: Typical Team Issues to address

- How would you assess your organisations' teams' focus and direction?
- What are the benefits that will accrue if you can build the maturity of your team to improve communication, interaction and working across boundaries?
- What's the relative health of 'Team Dynamics' in your most important teams?
- How could you benefit from building both team cohesion and productivity?
- Do you have any toxic or bad behaviour in teams that needs serious attention?

suggests that when teams are initially created, they should progress through four distinct phases, leading to team maturity and effectiveness.

In reality, many teams or groups do not successfully progress through all the phases to become what we call a true 'high performing team'. Instead, they are often only partially effective in achieving their objectives. Most people and managers focus on the 'task' rather than the 'how'. If you are going to embark as coach or trainer in team development, then you will have the responsibility as team leader or manager to shape the process.

Successful team development is not an accident

The team cannot be left to develop accidentally. It is a process which has to be guided and facilitated by the team manager. More teams could benefit from stronger direction and guidance. Consider how much energy and time your organisation has invested in developing strong, cohesive teams. Okay, it may have devoted resources to improve CRM (customer relationship management), IT skills and specific job-related knowledge, but compare this with the commitment to actual team development. Often, this variety of development is an afterthought, yet, if completed, could have a massive impact on business performance.

So, what do you need to know to develop effective teams? A good start is diagnosing how well a team is performing – so let's look at the four stages of development.

Stage 1: Forming

Stage 1 is when a group comes together for the first time or a

new team at the start of a new project. If there is insufficient investment in supporting the team to evolve positively in a structured fashion, the team will fail to develop the norms or rules for working together effectively. The team manager has control but also has to be flexible enough to accommodate different working styles, combine the experience of the team or group members, and assess how best to position them to deal with the difficulty of the task to be performed.

In this first stage, the team may not be very productive and may lack focus, which is why the direction has to be clarified and training undertaken for the team to work.

Not all team members automatically behave in a strong team manner. It could be they lack direction, motivation and a coherent plan of how to work together. A team may have a formal leader with little experience in the role. Every team needs leadership, a direction and strategy for working together. Some teams just gel, but they are in the minority. What is needed is a team leader who can bring three key skills or attributes to the team: direction and focus, energy and motivation and finally, aligning all resources to achieve the objective.

Stage 2: Storming

If a group or team is floundering, you will need to progress through 'Storming' because there is probably a lack of leadership or direction. Intervene and provide structure. Push the team through stage 2, the Storming phase, where people openly and critically review their performance and may take the lead to improve. Often teams have to go through this stormy phase to clear the air about what is hindering performance. The reasons for groups or teams underperforming are many and include a lack of direction and clarity in its purpose. Roles, responsibilities and reporting relationships must be clarified or reworked or reassigned. Whatever is not working needs to be addressed very quickly, otherwise morale in the team will plummet, and building team motivation in the group will be difficult. The team leader or manager has to be decisive, take action and demonstrate honesty and candour in fixing what is not working. The sooner you progress this stage, the better.

The Storming stage is where you confront confusion, ambiguity, and lack of focus, to air conflicts and grievances. Team members need to be involved, engaged and empowered but, most importantly, they need firm leadership, purpose and direction. At the end of this stage, you need to put the past behind you and move onto the positive third stage, which is Norming.

Stage 3: Norming

Norming is where you actively develop standards of performance. Norms are about setting and accepting standards in the shared way we work together. Listen to every point of view, let people blow off steam and then make decisions about the direction they need to take.

Focus initially on key roles and responsibilities – who is reporting to whom, and what are the work standards by which individuals and the overall team will be judged? If this comes from the team, so much, the better. The great thing about collaboration with the team is that when you ask a team to develop work norms and standards of behaviour, they usually

set higher standards than you might set for them.

1. Here are some things to do. Test others for their understanding of behavioural standards to which the team will adhere, and clarify and resolve issues openly.

2. Explore opportunities for team development and maintain a balance between the business agenda and having fun.

3. Ask the team to test new ways of working together.

A great deal of learning takes place, as the team evolves and steadily improves how they work together, and the creation of the 'unwritten' rules or norms, will promote a positive move forward. These positive unofficial 'norms' can often carry more weight than official protocols and processes. If this process is managed well by the team leader or manager, team members will work together to develop a productive and cohesive work team.

Stage 4: Performing

When you have worked through Storming and Norming, the natural progression is to stage 4, which is Performing, when positive norms evolve and are embedded, and the team will go on to become highly valued because you have coached them through to maturity. That is the Maturity model. It is well worth working with this and coaching people through the process.

Review of team maturity model

The diagnosis of team maturity can be undertaken using a variety of tools such as 'Questionnaire Analysis' – assessing relative symptoms of issues for resolution and other behavioural metrics based on team problem solving and decision making effectiveness, process flow and Interaction Analysis, which is what takes us to the next stage of diagnosis.

Team personality types

Now let's move onto the behavioural roles that people can play within the team. Professor Meredith Belbin developed the concept of team types while working on special projects with NASA in the 1960s. His research suggested that an effective team needs a variety of types of styles and skills to make the team effective. An effective team is composed of differing personality types. He characterised nine special team roles, four with an external orientation and five focused internally in the team. Here we have a brief version of those roles and how they contribute to team performance. Use the analysis wisely as results can be outstanding. The correct balance of people and personality types will create a high performing team.

A team with too many Team Workers will devote too much time to testing each other's opinion, ideas and assumptions.

[Having] too many Team Workers means you could end up managing a social club where the interests and needs of members take over to the detriment of the task.

Four team types operate effectively on the boundary of the team and include the Coordinator, Shaper, Plant and Resource Investigator. These people offer direction and are very comfortable working across groups and functions. They naturally gravitate towards external contact and relationships.

Coordinator or Chair

The Coordinator is the diplomat, who will chair or referee team dynamics. The Coordinator will provide structure and be supportive in moving things forward without offence. Coordinators know the right thing to do and will be fair with team members. These people are good at bringing people together, understand the administrative and task demands of the group, and generally take all ideas and opinions into account when conducting or closing off business. Most teams need a Chairperson.

If the team does not have a person who is responsible for coordination, then the progress of the group is at risk. You will have to develop people to occupy this role. Too many 'Coordinators' are not a good idea because they will want to organise and reorganise things and could develop a bureaucratic nightmare in the team.

Shaper

The next role is the Shaper, who will add drive and motivation when the team lacks focus. You need a Shaper in a team, especially if you don't have anyone to coordinate things. Be aware that they add energy, but also create conflict when people are dragging their feet. Shapers tend to be driven by achievement, and they like to take responsibility for results. Shapers are impatient if they think that progress is slow, or people are not giving their 100%. Shapers make things happen, but too many of them in a team can create an 'interesting' climate and even cause hostility between people. If you have several Shapers, you will need to manage them carefully and ensure they have enough to do and are not writing their own agenda

Plants

Plants are 'ideas' people. They are innovative, generally tend to be quite introverted, keeping their ideas to themselves. They are very much the 'innovative professor type' who have unique or even innovative ideas and like to break free of the self-imposed rules of the team failing to think outside the box. If you have too many Plants, the team might not progress. There may be too many ideas on the table and no one available to bring everything together. If their ideas are rejected without careful thought and consideration, the Plant may take personal exception to this and withdraw from the group. What is very common is that some groups have very few, if any, Plants within them. Generally, the personality style that contributes to Plant type behaviour is not always encouraged in organisations because they have their 'head in the clouds', are disruptive and unorthodox, even though their contribution is vital. Even nowadays, companies employ very few Plants.

Resource Investigators

Finally, we have resource investigators who are great networking people. They form relationships with a variety of people both inside and outside the organisation and generally are the 'go-to' person if you need something done. Their creativity and 'can do' nature is fantastic at forming partnerships and relationships outside the team, and they are brilliant at sourcing resources to make things happen.

So, consider what happens to the team if you have no Resource Investigators? Resource Investigators get on with things and don't wait for the approval. If you have too many, you could have chaos, with multiple people pursuing numerous agendas. Too few will create solutions which are too narrow and inward-looking.

Managing these four externally orientated types is interesting. Consider, if you have too many or too few of each type – what dynamics will be created within the team? What happens if you have too many of one type over others? Consider the dynamics and how to manage them.

Key Roles according to Team Type	
Controlling	Coordinator & Shaper
Organising	Coordinator & Implementer
Effecting	Shaper & Implementer
Planning	Completer Finisher & Monitor Evaluator
Thinking	Monitor Evaluator & Plant
Exploring	Plant & Resource Investigator
Liaising	Resource Investigator & Team Worker
Supporting	Team Worker & Specialist
Perfecting	Specialist & Completer Finisher

Internally Focused Team Members

Now we are going to introduce you to five characters who are focused internally and are the heart of the team. They are Monitor Evaluators, Implementers, Team workers, Completer Finishers and Specialists.

Monitor Evaluators

They are good at data analysis, critical thinking, questioning assumptions, taking things apart, challenging the thinking. Like the Shaper, they can be abrasive, but at their heart is the need to assess and weigh things up and get the right answer. They will develop a depth of understanding which is unrivalled. They bring a fresh way of looking at traditional problems and display critical thinking. A team with too many will devote too much time to testing each other's opinion, ideas and assumptions. When you eventually arrive at an answer, after

the much-informed debate, it will be a very well thought out answer. With too few or nil Monitor Evaluators, the team could easily go down the wrong path.

Implementers
When Belbin first developed his model of 'group personality types' he referred to these people as Company Workers but decided to change the name to Implementers because the original term depicted staff of lower status. The emphasis is on people who roll up their sleeves and commit themselves 100% to getting things done right. Their focus is on implementing ideas – not just talking about them. Procrastination is not in their nature. Implementers are focused on getting things done and making a difference. In our experience, you cannot have too many Implementers, but you can have too few, which will mean that ideas never translate into action.

Team Workers
Highly valued for promoting team harmony, they are real 'people, people'. Energetic and enthusiastic, they believe it's equally important to balance task and relationships when working together. Team Workers are keen on ensuring team harmony and that the group is working well together towards worthwhile and shared solutions. They will value harmony and effective working relationships above task competency and completion.

They are vital to the team because their enthusiasm for others and optimism for the group will promote team longevity. They will know the right thing to say, put people at ease and be concerned about people individually and collectively. A word of warning, too many Team Workers mean you could end up managing a social club where the interests and needs of members take over to the detriment of the task. However, too few or no team workers creates isolation, coldness, a formality and a clinical atmosphere in the group that is not going to do much to provide energy to the team.

Completer Finishers
Completer finishers have an eye to detail and make sure every 'i' is dotted and 't' crossed. They tend to be a little introverted and not a major focus of energy to the group – but they are vital to its functioning. It's all very well to have Shapers braving new territory and Plants with lofty business ideas, but if the detail is not right, the whole project can come crashing down. Completer Finishers are good with sequential thinking. They will track through consequences from A – Z and ensure that all ideas are validated. They may appear to be slow, but they are displaying patience and tenacity. They want it to work. Working with Monitor Evaluators and Implementers, they form a very strong bond to successfully implementing solutions.

Too many Completer Finishers will slow things down, and every decision will be explored in minute detail. Too few, and projects could collapse because of failure to apply due diligence.

Specialist
Finally, we have the addition of the Specialist, who is a person who adds technical input only. Specialists are available for specific input and producing technical input. Too many specialists can result in a stalemate, a zero-sum game with

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discussion and debate but no decisions or actions taken. Too few and you don't reap the rewards of precise data, leading to project failure.

Summary: team maturity & team composition = team effectiveness

There you have it. An approach to exploring team effectiveness using two major models.

The Team Maturity model using the four stages is extremely powerful. Too many teams in many sectors and organisations do not achieve a high state of team maturity and effectiveness. Assess the effectiveness of your own teams' organisational performance. How does this compare with what they are capable of achieving? Could they function at a much higher level?

Team composition and team personality types and interaction analysis demonstrate that we could achieve more by focusing on assessing personal strengths and interactions and whether they are utilised effectively in group working and problem-solving.

Knowing and working with both approaches is critical in understanding the dynamics behind a team's performance. If you have a specialist project composed of people from a variety of functions, locations and specialisms, you have to manage the dynamics of the team managing personality differences and interactions. We find training people in understanding their 'type' and how they contribute to a team is fundamental to effective team performance.

You will quickly be able to identify whether and why teams are working well. Combine the thinking of team types with team maturity, and you have a very powerful set of tools for managing exceptional team performance and culture.

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About the Authors

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