



# How to Build Superior Team Performance

2020 is almost over for those of us who lead and manage organisations, and we will shortly be thinking of how we can rebuild a resilient business in the years ahead. As we recover from the current crisis, we each have to make tough decisions based on minimal information. To build a resilient culture, we need to think about how better to enable your people to work together. *Philip Atkinson* believes that team building has a positive and long-lasting effect on the Culture and performance of an organisation. In this two article series, he explores two basic processes for significant team-building and suggests that this is a powerful way to deal with the challenges of change that we face beyond 2021.

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One of the most neglected aspects of organisational development in any organisation is the building of a strong team culture. There are enormous opportunities for leveraging team culture in driving performance, often overlooked because of inadequate funding, low investment of resources, lack of time and sometimes because of a lack of commitment to people development, and demonstrating how organisations can be steered using the strategies and practise leads to unbelievable performance within a team and between work teams.

We owe our success to the people we employ, but are we getting the most from them whilst also helping them achieve their maximum potential? Our view is that team building is critical even if you work alone as a specialist or expert in your field. Even as a technical expert, you have to rely on others (internal customers and suppliers) to achieve the end product of your labours.

This view is based on the premise that individual achievement is usually pretty dependent on working well with others. If this is the case, why don't more organisations invest time in building an influential team working culture?

### **Team building, is it neglected or overlooked?**

It's challenging to know the difference between neglect and indifference and, it is when things are going wrong that many organisations consider the whole issue of team building and development. So, there's never a better time than right now. Currently, building teams does not occupy a lot of time in

organisations' training and learning budgets. Team building may be considered a 'nice to have' activity but an unnecessary soft skill requiring learning and development. In reality, most people, 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.

There is a trade-off between the two, but if any L&D (learning and development) activity is undertaken, it tends to be focused on task-driven skills. Although team development is always an important component, you will not find it as a central theme on induction or orientation programmes offered by most businesses. Building a strong and positive team culture is achieved when things radically need improving or where there is a severe 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 significant driver, thrust and theme in the development of the performance of their organisation.

### **Never enough time**

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

### **Team building is not an automatic managerial gift**

Working with others and getting the best out of relationships is taken for granted, and seen as an unconscious and automatic skill possessed by the average manager, but nothing is further from the truth. Team cohesion and focus on performance is central to whether or not we achieve objectives.

### **Poor team working**

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

We are sure you have witnessed dysfunctional teams in action and the impact this has 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 and how do they differ from groups?**

Team leaders should know that developing the synergy of their whole team is critical if they want to achieve outstanding results. When we look at team building, we ask 'is the team a natural work team or a group of individuals who have been brought together to work on a project, which

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will eventually be disbanded when the project is completed?' It's important to know the difference. Task-based teams work with each other on a semi-permanent basis and are natural workgroups. Project-based groups may be brought together for that short 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' or 'group' depending on their role, the degree of permanency in that role, and whether they are tasked to work with the project and install or implement it. The term 'team' will relate more to a natural work team, and 'group' will refer to a typical problem solving or data gathering group who have been selected especially and are involved in working on special or 'one-off' projects.

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

1. Team maturity and
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 approaches.

### **Team maturity and team composition**

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 as it matures, and how this can aid you in improving performance.

### **Four stages of team maturity**

Let's discuss team maturity and, most importantly, the role you can take in shaping the building of an effective team. This will include you and your colleagues regulating, training, coaching and developing teams and their members. In management, it is straightforward to focus on the task, rather than how the task is completed, and maybe neglect some of the most critical issues and stages of team development, and suffer the negative consequences of not dealing with issues



when you could have done so. There will be things happening in the team that you may not be consciously aware of, but we will explore these behaviours as we work through the four stages of development. This methodology is applied to a variety of organisations and businesses. 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, or may not enjoy collaborating with others and having to adapt to their work style. Although you can accommodate people’s individual preferences, your role as a manager is to build a highly functioning team. Perhaps one element of making things clear is defining standards, so 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 different personality types and how their influence can be counter to desired group performance. We wrongly make assumptions that all strive to be team players and operate as a cohesive team. Sometimes the efforts 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 team leader or manager has had little or no training in the 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**

There are various tools for analysing team performance. We are going to use the four stage Tuckman model, which suggests that when effective teams are initially created, they should normally progress through four distinct phases leading to team maturity and effectiveness. Before we explain how this happens, there may be a ‘wake-up call’ here.

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 ‘task’ rather than ‘how’ the task is completed. 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 that process.

### **Team development is not an accident**

This is not a natural process, so you cannot leave the team to develop themselves accidentally. It is a process which has to be guided and facilitated by the team manager. Very few teams have the correct amount of direction and guidance, simply because too many staff are focused on task completion rather than the process. These skills are not equally and fairly distributed throughout the natural ‘management’ population.

If you doubt this, consider how much energy and time your organisation has invested in developing strong, cohesive teams. Okay, it may have devoted resources to CRM, 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.

What should be the goal is the knowledge that an effective team has strong positive norms that drive it and its members onwards to achieve outstanding results. 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 start by focusing on typical team issues.

### **Diagnosis: Typical team issues to address**

- How would you assess team 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 with other teams?
- Are you willing to undertake a ‘team dynamics’ audit to improve team performance?
- Do you find that you need to work on building both team cohesion and productivity?
- Would you like to know how to get the best out of your key teams?
- Would you be willing to refresh a failing or a toxic group of individuals to build a strong, high-performance team?
- Do you understand the enormous benefits of using team psychometrics and developing a plan for improvement?
- How would you like to improve, build trust in, and between, your key teams?

*In the next article which will be published in the Spring 2021 issue of the Journal, Philip concludes this two part feature by detailing the four stages of team development.*

#### **About the Author**

*Philip Atkinson specialises in strategic cultural and behavioural change. For the last 25 years, he has been engaged as a consultant, supporting organisations in strategic development, leadership, organisational design, post-acquisition integration, Lean six-sigma, quality management and Culture change. He has partnered with a variety of blue-chip companies in industries ranging from pharmaceutical to genetics, the automotive industry to finance and banking and from NHS bodies to Local Authorities and the Third Sector. He regularly presents at conferences and workshop sessions and has written seven books on change management. His articles, books and blog can be accessed on [www.philipatkinson.com](http://www.philipatkinson.com) [www.NFP-Excellence.org](http://www.NFP-Excellence.org) Philip is a Director of Philip Atkinson & Co. Ltd Tel: 0131 346 1276 M: 07779 799286. He can be contacted at [philip@philipatkinson.com](mailto:philip@philipatkinson.com)*