Teamswork:
Strategy in action

Philip Atkinson contends that organisations waste too much time and resources, and focus too much attention on designing overly complex solutions to fairly basic change issues.

Many organisational problems and crises exist simply because organisations have failed in their ability to achieve serious improvement through teams working together across boundaries. It is time to retain some simplicity in managing change. Although 'strategic direction' and 'high energy' are important in building a strong culture, what is required is an 'alignment' where teams work with each other to manage change. The approach of 'teamswork' is more than a return to basics, and is fundamental to building a strong and resilient culture for the future."

Research into organisational change suggests that much of it simply does not work. Key elements are neglected. The climate of change in many businesses often emphasises theory to the detriment of implementation. Instead of committing to a course of action and relentlessly driving for continuous improvement, too many management teams prevaricate or procrastinate rather than adopt an action mindset. Management teams are confused by the 'change methodologies' and are not sure which change or learning strategy will work for them. It appears that management groups are impressed by the need for complex change methodologies and often use a sledge hammer to crack a nut. There is not always a requirement to pursue Six Sigma methodologies of re-engineering solutions. Perhaps all

that is required is a firm commitment to follow through, retain the momentum and sustain 'the basics' of change management.

The basics are simple
Do we know where we are going and have we ensured that everyone else is committed to that same path - the same strategic direction?

Have we the leadership, the passion and the energy to follow that route – despite setbacks and challenges?

How well have we won the hearts and minds of key teams to work up, down and across organisational boundaries to actually achieve the goals inherent in the strategic direction?

The basics for improved change lie in three areas. Focus and direction is paramount. That means strategy. If we don't know where our business is going how can we expect others to jump on board? If an organisation

does not have a clear direction, communicated into the hearts and minds of its people, then things will go wrong. The second component is energy or passion. If the management group fails to lead with commitment, to excite, stimulate and motivate people to work together, then the organisation is wasting its

> The approach of 'teamswork' is more than a return to basics

most important resource – its people. They, the management group, have failed to engage with the emotion that sparks innovation, drive and improvement. The third component which binds the others together is team alignment – that is, working with people in teams across
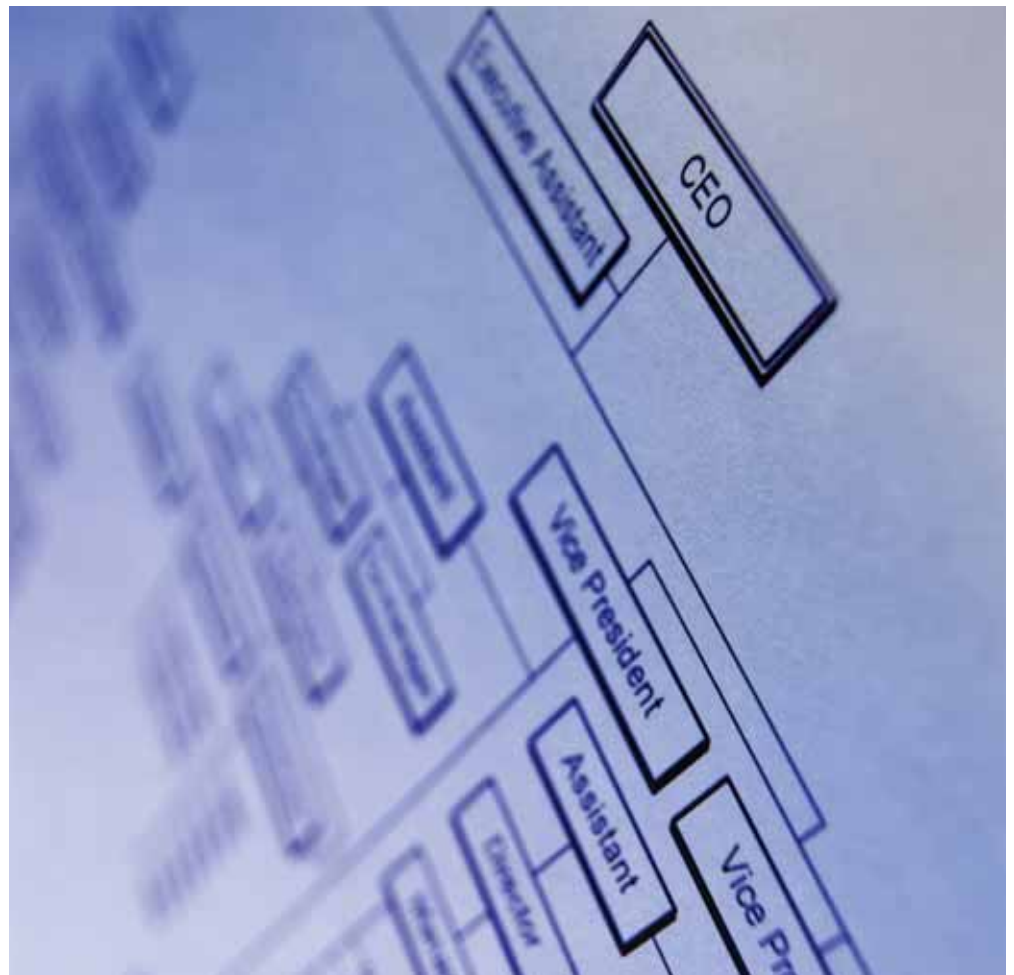
The team must work in harmony

boundaries. We refer to this concept as teamwork.

Effectiveness can be accessed as a simple formula………

Effectiveness = focus + passion + alignment through teamwork

Any team's effectiveness whether in a commercial or sporting context is dependent on those three components. Organisations need to revisit this formula to see where they are going wrong and how they can leverage some quick wins.

Stop looking for complexity when simplicity is the answer
A key foundation of General Electric's approach to continuous improvement is a concept called work-out. Work-out is a process for driving change with the goal of 'speed' of delivery to the customer driven by associates who display 'self confidence' and look for 'simplicity' in resolving solutions. As Albert Einstein quotes "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler".

Creating an effective functioning organisation does not have to be complex. Solutions for organisational ills appear far too complex to the informed spectator, but this can be relatively simple. It is implementation

and sustaining a commitment to change that is difficult. The average organisation wastes too much time worrying about how to cope with change, than just getting on with it and measuring progress against time frames.

Team dynamics and teamwork
Many basic principles of effective functioning are unpopular with management teams. For instance, working with team dynamics is perceived by many to be too basic and obvious a solution. Yet what do people spend most of their time doing? They work with their teams and commit to working with other teams on common organisational problems. Central to this is how teams operate, how they grow, how they can be shaped to become more innovative, and how they can manage change. We refer to this philosophy as 'teamwork'. Very few teams operate in a vacuum. Effective organisation is achieved when a variety of teams are aligned and commit to work together to deliver across boundaries to a variety of consumers, customers and stakeholders.

Diagnosing problems
To examine the core of any organisational problem, simply

examine how people work together. Examine the personality dynamics, the team composition, team rules, team development and decision-making. Within this simple analysis lies the foundation for 'alignment' and effective 'teamwork' across the whole organisation – especially as many organisations have de-layered and have very few levels of management. We believe this approach is critical to developing a healthy performance driven culture. Effective team working can be easily achieved through using a variety of tools. Ineffective teamwork can seriously damage the long term viability of any business. Once the 'us and them attitude' prevails, cross functional working dies and people become much more silo driven, less open to flexible ways of working and the rot of bureaucracy becomes a dominant part of the culture.

De-mystifying the change process
Change management can be very simple. Focus on how teams work together. This will indicate how 'aligned' people are with the 'direction' and the 'energy or passion' of the enterprise. To further create solutions that can work, undertake a fast and foolproof diagnostic of how the organisation is functioning across boundaries.

Adopt a completely seamless process attitude and the solutions to long standing organisational problems will be soon become very apparent. There are three models that we will be discussing that are easily applied to assessing the effectiveness of teamwork in any business and include:

• Team diagnosis
• Interaction analysis
• Team development

Team diagnosis
This is a very powerful method of assessing the hard and the softer elements of how teams work together. We use a variant of the McKinsey's 7 S's[1] model that focuses on the hard S's – 'strategy, structure and systems' within the teams, as well as addressing the softer elements such as the staff, the participants within the team, the style or behaviours within the team, the skills of team members and the shared values that bind the team together. Just by addressing a few key questions one can undertake a fairly rigorous approach to team diagnostics. (See table 1.)

Interaction analysis
Interaction analysis focuses upon how team members interact and it enables the team become more effective by focusing on the contributions and styles of each member. The research investigates measures of leadership in small face-to-face groups. In a simple format the categories of observable leadership which the researcher, Bales[2], identified 'task leadership' and 'people leadership'. Task leadership includes examples such as 'giving information' ie, explaining, summarising and making suggestions, requesting information, asking for details, seeking out new possibilities and asking for clarification. All these behaviours focus on being 'instrumental' in getting the task completed.

To add balance, 'socio-emotional' or 'people management leadership' was also important in maintaining the group's ability to function as a team in harmony. Principally, the behaviours were identified as leading to positive reinforcement of behaviour in the group. Examples include praising and acknowledging the contribution of team members, clarifying any disagreements, and building and reinforcing a positive atmosphere. The behaviours which would overcome the more negatively orientated to win group or team compliance include, setting rules for mutual working, dealing with violations, defining and enforcing standards and limits and rules for managing conflict that could lead to disharmony in the group. This element of 'socio-emotional' leadership focuses on holding the group together.

We can use this approach very

positively to assess the climate and interaction within teams. By understanding 'interaction analysis', we can significantly shift behaviours from negative to positive. We will be aware of the mood and the dominant style or contribution of the group members.

Team development
The four stage model of group or team development[3] is a very powerful process to examine the relative maturity of a team in terms of assessing their 'teamness'. Reading through each stage highlights where team development has been arrested in the past and the action that can be taken to get it back on track. This is characterised by four key stages. Not all teams go through the stages effectively. Here is a brief outline of the process.

Stage 1: forming
This occurs when a team comes together for the first time. This is now becoming the norm in many businesses where virtual teams are formed frequently to work on special projects. If insufficient attention is paid to helping the team evolve in a structured fashion through each of the stages, the team will learn 'by accident' and will develop their own informal network for doing things. Not all the 'practices' to which they adhere will be in the interests of team morale and corporate performance. Here we refer to how the team will make decisions about work output based upon assumptions about people's backgrounds and their experiences. When a team is leaderless, in the formal sense, this can create a major problem. What is important is that, unless a team is driven by a strong individual who values shaping effective team dynamics, the team will evolve by default. Sometimes, the team can achieve reasonably well, but when confronted with a challenge to test their 'mettle and resolve', may not hang together, and individuals will revert to the strict demands of their job specifications. This can lead to the second stage.

Stage 2: storming
This stage is characterised by conflict and disagreement and the eventual overthrow of the old team structure and culture. The old way of transacting business may have been wrongly founded on assumptions of team members, which do not live up to the reality of the demands on the team. Major conflicts may arise

during this stage, especially regarding decision-making, leadership and how resources are used within the group. Critical rifts can emerge within the team, indicating several sub cultures operating in spite of each other. This failure to work together has to be worked through or facilitated. Team effectiveness is radically reduced if no intervention takes place to introduce 'norms' – standards of behaviour which will unite all team members in achieving their goal.

Old assumptions are cast aside and the team starts to learn from both its good and bad experiences. Now, the team has more information on how the individuals work together as a team and this helps them re-structure roles and responsibilities.

Stage 3: norming
As the team operates and steadily improves its ways of working there are certain practices which will be found to work more effectively than others in ensuring that both productivity and harmony are achieved. It is expected that these standards and behaviours will become 'norms' for the team and these 'unwritten' rules can frequently override formal processes upon which the team should operate. Unofficial 'norms' often carry more weight with team members than formal protocols and processes.

Stage 4: performing
If positive norms evolve and are

Table 1

Bales interaction process analysis (IPA)
This is a classic in the study of small group interaction, communication, learning and problem solving. Typically, the types of observable behaviour are:

Task orientated
Giving information
Seeking or questioning for information
Organising ideas
Clarifying ideas
Summarising
Testing understanding
Evaluating
Deciding

Process orientated
Encouraging
Harmonising
Sharing/gate-keeping
Listening
Tension reducing

Individual focused
Blocking or difficulty stating
Seeking attention
Dominating
Distancing

Is your team moving in the right direction?

promoted, the team will progress to become a high performance team. Where this does not happen, the team members need to work together to 'diagnose' the cause of the problem and perhaps go through the whole process again.

An additional stage: mourning!
In several organisations I have witnessed a fifth stage or what I would call the mourning stage. This often happens when teams of people are brought together to work as a special project team. They are united with a common drive and usually a target for implementation. On completion of the project they may

Team composition and team leadership is critical to success

well be returned to the function or operation from whence they originated. Having been chosen for the project team in the first place was recognition in itself and may have been highly motivating on the psychological level – but what happens to the individual post project?

Often we choose the 'high flyers' to become key drivers of a project – you cannot abandon them when they have achieved what you want. If 'team disintegration' is not managed, businesses could be losing their best, most motivated and highest calibre people to their competitors. This is an increasing trend in areas where virtual teams and companies are

created to recognise the need to manage the transition of a project.

Summary
We have explored three approaches to assessing how well a team operates. It is obvious that if we have a highly cohesive motivated team, results will follow. The simple solution is overlooked by too many organisations which prefer the less direct, more complex route to improved performance.

Team composition and team leadership is critical to success. If team development is ignored how can the culture of the business improve? The personality traits of team members are critical in shaping how the team operates. Some people will tend to dominate. Others will be more likely to listen and question – seeking ideas and suggestions, rather than continually volunteering them. Some team members are focused solely upon task achievement, others upon promoting effective harmony within the group. It is important that team effectiveness is assessed. This is especially important where teams operate in key management processes that permeate all functions across the organisation. Some issues that illustrate the importance of adapting a rigorous approach to teamswork include:

What would be the results on the bottom-line if you had seamless teamswork across the areas in the organisation which are currently under-performing?

If you focused all your attention on working with team performance, how many 'process management' problems which you currently experience would be resolved?

If you had superior team working

across the business what impact would it have on morale, motivation, the business culture, customer service and business results?

If you could not fail, what aspect of teamswork would you introduce across the whole business?

References
1 Philip Atkinson & Ian Millar, *Shaping Customer Focus*, Transformations UK Ltd. 1999, Chapter 1.
2 Bales quoted in Philip Atkinson, *Achieving Results through Time Management*, Pitman Press, 1987, pp 88-95.
3 Tuckman, quoted in Philip Atkinson & Ian Millar op cit – Chapter 9.

Philip Atkinson is director of Learning Strategies Ltd, specialising in strategic, behavioural and cultural change. He is a consultant in the UK, Europe and United States, has written seven business books and published many articles, speaks at conferences and runs workshop sessions. His latest book is *How to become a Change Master: Real World Strategies for Achieving Change* (Spiro Press, spring 2005). Telephone: +44 (0)131 346 1276 Website: *www.philipatkinsoncon-sulting.com* and his L&D site is *www.learningstrategies.ltd.uk* email *AtkinsonConsult@aol.com.*