



BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE TEAM

BY ZEMO TREVATHAN

Team can be an elusive experience - sometimes it is “there” and sometimes it is “not”. Part of the problem is that the term is used so loosely, and generalized expectations are applied to it so liberally, that the term is often meaningless. Or manipulative. To set about the process of building an effective team, you have to begin by understanding what a team is, and what it is not, and be clear that a team is what you really need to be building... Not every group needs to be a team, not every team needs to be a team for everything that it does, and not everything we think of as “for the good of the team” is really useful.

Teams and Groups -- Definitions

So let's start with a basic definition: a “team” is two or more people who have shared responsibility for a common objective, and whose efforts towards that objective impact each other and thus benefit from coordination and communication. The key here is that for a team -- as opposed to other kinds of groups -- some level of interaction and cooperation is required for the optimal accomplishment of the common objective. Because, let's face it, being part of a team can take a lot of time and energy - meetings, functions, group emails, lunches, chats, sorting out roles and guidelines and expectations and accountabilities... If there is no real benefit to these kinds of coordination, then there is no reason for calling a group of people a “team” and expecting them to work as one. It comes down to return on investment: it is only worth investing the time and energy into building a team when there is a real and specific return on that investment in terms of increased success with the deliverables of that team.

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Another way of saying this is that it can be wasteful -- as well as downright counterproductive -- to try to make a group act as a team. If a number of staff members have a similar role, for example data entry, and they know it well and simply need to work at a fast rate, taking time to build them into a “team”, would likely decrease their overall performance, and also likely create resentment as opposed to esprit de corps. (For a detailed case study of effectively managing a “workgroup” of this type, see [Performance Management vs. Team Building.](#)) There are many superficial connections or similarities, like similar job function, that are often used as rationales for considering people to be part of a team: simply being part of the same department or company, working in the same office or workspace, reporting to the same person, etc. These similarities or connections do not a team make. Before setting out

to build a team, you have to get a “yes” to the question: “Will coordination and cooperation among these people increase their ability to deliver the key objectives?”

Leadership and Environment

There is one more critical component for a group to truly be a team: they have to be empowered by their leadership environment to actually be a team. There are few things more demoralizing than to be told “you are a team, go for it!”, identify approaches and changes that will generate results, and then find out that the “go for it” was purely a metaphor, and that you must continue to do things exactly as you have been told. If the team *could* benefit from coordination and communication, but those benefits are constrained by directive leadership that favors the consistency and predictability of controlling how staff go about their jobs, then our definition of team still does not apply. This is a “staff” or, again, a “workgroup”.

This is the first vital role of the team leadership - to ensure that the team, from the outset, understands exactly what parameters it is being given by management, and what limitations are set by its environment. A team doesn't have to have full empowerment to do whatever it wants to do, but it does need to have some room for its communication efforts to lead to changes, decisions and improvements, and it needs to know how much room or empowerment it does have. Whether the team is “self-directed” and reporting up to other company leadership, or whether the team has appointed leadership within it, the team must be very clear what decisions are to be set (or already set) by that leadership, what limits are in place for how their objective is defined, and what parameters they must work within to define how they will go about their work. In my 15 years of teambuilding, this has been one of the most frequent causes of dysfunction - an absence of clarity between a team and its leadership as to the decisions and expectations of the leadership. In fact, there have been a number of times where I had to conclude that the team was fine - they didn't need a “team building” at all - other than getting the leader to spell out clearly and explicitly what they were asking for and expecting.

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Of course, it is not always that simple. The goal here is to have clarity from the leadership on objectives, expectations and parameters for the team, and sometimes that is simply a matter of communicating them, but sometimes it takes some negotiation. If members of a team do not feel they have the conditions they need to succeed (and enjoy) at their objectives, it is their responsibility to attempt to influence their leadership to provide the necessary conditions for success. Truly, one of the saddest scenarios I observe - and it is a common one - is the situation when a team has given up (or not even tried) on exerting its influence, and instead devolved to complaining, working around, making do... and taking the frustration out on each other. And, conversely, some of the most powerful team building exercises I have ever been a part of have been marked by direct communication of discontent from teams to their leadership, along with clear requests for support. When a leader hears this type of feedback, pledges to offer the requested support, and (occasionally) even apologizes for what was missing, teams hit incredible levels of motivation and anticipation. They also go forward with a strong reminder of the power of teams.

Another leadership requirement for building an effective team is ensuring that the team has the appropriate skills and resources to succeed. A common error in constructing teams is “throwing headcount at the problem”. Having “enough” people to work on the objectives is meaningless if they aren’t the “right” people with the necessary skills for what is being asked of them. (For an example of a “team” that was constructed this way, see our business case study [Designing a Learning Forum for Facility Managers](#).) It is the responsibility of leadership to make sure that a team has the right skills and resources to fulfill its mission, and to support the team in acquiring additional resources where that becomes necessary. Besides the skills (and available time) that the team members themselves must have, other resources include budget, access to stakeholders and information, etc.

Open Flow of Information

The final pre-requisite of an effective team is a free and unrestricted flow of information among the team members. Leadership plays an important role in laying the groundwork for such communication, and safeguarding this integral resource - it is almost impossible for a team to succeed in maintaining functional and open communication if team leadership is not a sponsor and model of that culture. As with some of the earlier requirements for an effective team, this is one that I commonly see missing in teams who come to me for team building assistance. In these cases, my most important role is to coach the leader. I am very direct with team leaders, and let them know “the single most important variable affecting the success of this team building on your team’s communication is going to be how openly they feel you yourself are communicating.” I do not push team members to be more open than their leaders are willing to actively model and sponsor themselves, and for teams who want to improve communication, it often has to begin with influencing the team leader to set and protect such an objective.

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Surprisingly, the signal that information is actually flowing freely enough to support an effective team is something that many teams avoid like the plague: conflict. If information is truly flowing freely, that means that the atmosphere will be rife with disagreements, varying viewpoints, and -- yes - even conflict. Many people try to equate “open, honest communication” with “politeness, manners, and general agreement” but the research is very clear that too much agreement (harmony) is actually a red-flag: if people are always agreeing, they are likely intentionally avoiding conflict, and if they are avoiding conflict, then they are holding back information and ideas (see especially Janis’s seminal work on Groupthink). Harmonious teams are not necessarily effective ones - in fact teams that put too much emphasis on harmony, getting along, or unity of thinking are unlikely to be very effective. Many of the requests I get for team building assistance are steeped in this assumption - people are looking to have a team building event to help the team “get along.”

If you are seeking to build an effective team, however, the measure can’t be “that we get along.” Sure it is nice, and ideally you’d rather have a team “get along” than the opposite,

but the real question is “what precisely is meant by ‘getting along’ and what is the effect on the team of getting along or not?” A definition of getting along that best matches the objective of being effective as a team would go something like this: “We freely disagree with each other, even argue, because we are passionate about our objectives and want everybody to be heard, and at the end of the day we resolve those disagreements and conflicts and carry forward decisions together.” The key here is that effective teams are unified in their commitment to the objectives, not necessarily at a level of liking each other, being like each other, or being polite. The team needs to build a process that allows and moves beyond conflict, not avoids it. There are a thousand different systems for agreements or ground rules to govern a team’s communication, and many of them contradict each other. That’s all right: You can use any one of them (or no system at all) that works for your team, that supports a team environment in which everyone speaks up, disagrees and argues in constructive fashion, and unites in decisions and actions after discussion.

One more implication of these observations about free flow of information: Diversity equals intelligence. The more like-minded teams are, the more similar the group members are to each other, the less likely the group is to be “more than the sum of the parts.” Synergy, and team intelligence, relies on diversity of styles, views and experiences - otherwise you don’t need a team. But diversity only increases the team’s intelligence when it is welcomed, when the most disparate voices are valued and included. “Representational” diversity, without real voices or power given, does not make a difference.

Maintaining an Effective Team

I have concentrated up to now on the foundations required for effective teams, because you must build - or repair - the foundation first if you are seeking to build an effective team. Another important place to look for assessment of your team and what it needs is towards the results that are being created - the team’s outputs. High-performance teams have 3 different classes of outputs, and absence of any one of the three should be a red flag:

- 1. First, of course, the team needs to accomplish its objectives (or surpass them, if that is ecological in the system).*
- 2. The work of the team strengthens the company by developing talent, increasing institutional knowledge, sharing best practices with other teams, etc.*
- 3. The team generates job satisfaction and enjoyment among its members (and stakeholders).*

Teams that are accomplishing their objectives but are burning people out, “leaving dead bodies”, generating high turnover, etc. are often costing the company more in the long run than they are contributing. Building and maintaining an effective team requires monitoring -- and delivering -- all three of these types of outputs.

There are, of course, hundreds of other elements and factors that have been suggested as vital to the building of effective teams. Most of them are indeed very important... for some teams. Very few, if any, are important for every team. Just as the Gallup research demonstrated that there is no one single effective management style (see Buchanan, et al. **First Break All the Rules**), there is no single effective style or formula for teams. And as a team building consultant, I don’t mind

saying that the wisdom for what a particular team needs to be effective almost always lies within the team. I can bring tools or new models that teams can use in building their own effective process, but the greatest good I have done over the years, I believe, is serve as an external catalyst for eliciting the key ideas from within team members and creating settings where the members can hear each other and decide together how to go forward more effectively, more

Key elements of Building an Effective Team:

1. *Ensure that a team is needed/appropriate. Ask “Will coordination and cooperation among these people increase our ability to deliver the key objectives?”*
2. *Team leadership establishes clear objectives, expectations, and parameters.*
3. *Team leadership provides the necessary resources - skill sets and availability of team members, budget, access to critical information and stakeholders, etc.*
4. *Creation of team culture featuring free flow of information - disagreement and conflict are welcomed and resolved constructively.*
5. *Team not only meets (or exceeds) its objectives, but in doing so contributes to the organizational knowledge and talent pool, and generates job satisfaction among team members.*

powerfully. If you are seeking to build a (more) effective team, that is always a good place to start. Consider each of the foundations and conditions of effective teams that I have shared here - as well as any markers that are particularly important to your thinking or style - and look for ways to set up team communication so that the team’s own wisdom and ideas about its best functioning can come to the surface. And have fun!