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CONTEXT

Laying the Foundation for Team Success

We have discovered that successful teams are found in organizations in which senior executives know how and when to emphasize and support teamwork and have well-thought-out strategies for assigning people to work in teams. Unfortunately, most organizations pay only lip-service to developing high-performing teams and do little to create an atmosphere that fosters successful teams.

In this chapter, we discuss the first C of our Four Cs model: context. By creating a context for developing effective teams, managers are more likely to achieve the successful team dynamics and team results they desire.

The Context Problem: Why Teamwork Often Doesn't Work

Over the years we have surveyed dozens of personnel and human resource managers in both large and small companies and gathered data from hundreds of managers about their organizations' efforts to improve team performance. Although most report that their companies believe teamwork is important, only about one-third were engaged in a serious effort to initiate team-building practices that would improve team performance. When the managers of the other two-thirds were asked why they didn't spend much time and effort to improve their teams, they reported the following problems, listed in order of the frequency of response:

1. I don't know how to build a more effective team.
2. I'm concerned that the possible negative effects will outweigh the benefits.
3. I don't feel that developing an effective team is rewarded in our company.
4. My subordinates feel they don't need it, and it takes too much time.
5. I don't have the support of my boss to spend time in team development.

Let's look at each of these:

1. *I don't know how to build a more effective team.* With the business world's emphasis on teamwork, it is interesting that the primary obstacle to team building is that managers feel they do not know how to build an effective team. Virtually every recent publication on organizations and management has emphasized the importance of effective teams in achieving high levels of performance. However, rarely do these writings describe exactly how to develop effective teams. There is almost a sense that because everyone agrees that teams are important and almost everyone has participated on some type of team, everyone must therefore understand how to put an effective team together.

Very few academic programs deal with understanding team processes and dynamics. Students—whether in undergraduate courses or in MBA programs—are assigned to work in teams, and often the team product is graded. However, few professors know enough or take the time to help these teams deal with the problems and group issues that often occur. Frequently in these class teams, a few students do the work while others coast along and get undeserved credit; in other cases, conflicts and problems arise, and because the team does not know how to handle them, the students wind up with strong negative feelings about team projects that they carry into the business world.

To overcome this lack of skill and knowledge in developing teams, some organizations have a speaker come in and talk about team building or circulate a book or other information. However, most people find it difficult to engage in complex activities just by reading or hearing information. They need some direct experience and some clear examples of what to do. It's one thing to read about how to hit a fastball of a major league pitcher; it's quite another thing to actually do it yourself. This lack of practical know-how is a major obstacle. And even when people know how to develop teams, they still may not succeed if some of the other obstacles are present.

2. *I'm concerned that the possible negative effects will outweigh the benefits.* Most managers are pragmatic in their approach to taking action: they weigh the possible gains against the costs and risks and usually follow a course of action designed to maximize benefits and minimize negative consequences. Many managers we have interviewed have talked about some of the negative effects of team-building programs they have heard about. Some have heard of (but very few have ever directly experienced) team-building efforts that resulted in a "bloodbath." They heard that the entire session was devoted to unmercifully giving people harsh, negative feedback. The result was a lot of hard feelings and a drop in team morale and performance.

Other horror stories include reported incidents of people quitting or getting fired, suffering a mental breakdown, invading other people's private lives, or spending long sessions talking about their "feelings" but accomplishing little. Moreover, many managers realize that team building might improve morale but not necessarily improve team performance. It appears to them that the time devoted to team building might be better spent working on team tasks directly related to output. With these possible negative effects, coupled with managers' not really understanding how to do team building or clearly seeing the benefits, it is easy to see why many managers do not engage in ongoing team development.

3. *I don't feel that developing an effective team is rewarded in our company.* Another key obstacle is the lack of apparent connections between team building and formal rewards in the organization. For many years, a major oil company had a program of management development for middle managers that included clear instruction about doing effective team building. However, few of these managers implemented their team development plans on the job. When asked the reason, they overwhelmingly replied that their performance reviews by their bosses did not include anything about their team-building efforts. The team building that was emphasized in the management program was not included in either performance reviews or subsequent raises or promotions, and therefore managers could see no personal payoff from spending time building teams. Moreover, the organization did not provide the resources or the time to engage in a serious team-building effort during work hours.

4. *My subordinates feel they don't need it, and it takes too much time.* Our surveys revealed that because many people have never experienced working on an effective work team, they have no standard against which to compare their current team. Many describe their current team functioning as "Okay," "We're doing all right," or "We are as good as most." In a similar vein, many managers believe that team building is a kind of "touchy-feely" activity, not associated with getting work done. As one manager said, "What I need is help in getting a lot of work done with reduced manpower. I don't need to waste time while people talk about their feelings." When the attitude that teams are unimportant is coupled with the assumption that the team building will waste valuable working time, many managers understandably decide that they don't really need team building.

5. *I don't have the support of my boss to spend time in team development.* Some managers in the organizations we studied indicated that although they would like to engage in team building and thought they knew what to do, they did not get any

support for these activities from their bosses. These managers said that their bosses gave the following reasons for not supporting team development:

"It will take too much time from our heavy workload."

"It isn't supported by upper management."

"Team development is not part of the company goals or the performance review system."

"We have heard that it is a waste of time."

"We understand that it requires an outside consultant, which we can't afford."

When your boss doesn't support an initiative, it is virtually impossible to feel it is important.
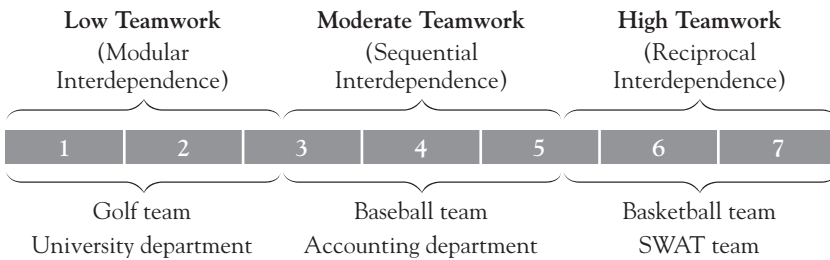
The Importance of Context

What we have learned from our own experience in consulting with teams over the years is that context matters. Without a team-supportive organization context, team development is difficult, even impossible. To create an organizational context that will support teamwork, managers should ask themselves the following questions:

1. How important is effective teamwork to accomplishing this particular task?
2. What type of team is needed?
3. Does the organization's context of culture, structure, and systems support teamwork?

How Important Is Effective Teamwork to Accomplishing This Particular Task?

Although all teams represent a collection of people who must collaborate to some degree to achieve common goals, some tasks

Figure 2.1 Continuum of Teamwork

Low Teamwork (Modular Interdependence)		Moderate Teamwork (Sequential Interdependence)			High Teamwork (Reciprocal Interdependence)	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Golf team University department		Baseball team Accounting department			Basketball team SWAT team	

require more team collaboration than others. Figure 2.1 represents a continuum of the teamwork or collaboration needed for a team to function. The continuum is based on the notion that the importance of teamwork will vary according to the task environment, notably the degree of interdependence required to complete the team's tasks.[1]

Modular Interdependence Sometimes the nature of the task doesn't require the team to work closely together all the time because the team tasks are modular in nature. In these tasks, individuals on the team are connected through *modular or pooled interdependence*, performing tasks independently and pooling only the results to create a team output. For example, a golf team may do some general planning and share information about the golf course and competition, but in the final analysis, play is by the individual performer. Team performance is based on individual performances that are pooled together.

Similarly, an academic department requires relatively little teamwork. Each professor can do most of the required work—teach, research, write—alone. Of course, faculty members share ideas on how to be effective in teaching and research. But the performance of the department, as measured by student teaching evaluations or the number of faculty publications in top journals, is based largely on individual performance that is pooled together.

When important decisions need to be made or departmental goals set that require the efforts of all department members, then those members must function as a decision team. However, these situations occur relatively infrequently.

Sequential Interdependence Individuals on teams are sequentially interdependent when one person cannot perform his or her task until another has completed his or her task and passed on the results. Under these circumstances, team members must meet more regularly and consistently to coordinate their work.

A baseball team is an example of a team that requires a moderate amount of teamwork. All nine players must be on the field at once, but for much of the game, the effort is individual in nature. However, whether a batter bunts or tries to hit to the opposite field depends on what the previous hitters have done. Relay throws from outfield to home base and double plays require sequential coordination. Moreover, the catcher and pitcher interact constantly in a coordinated fashion as they try to prevent batters from reaching base.

An accounting or financial department requires sequential coordination. Everyone in such a department must work within a common accounting framework, and the work of one part of the accounting process depends on the work of other parts. The accuracy of the tax people depends in part on how well internal auditors have done their work. Although each accountant may be doing individual work, each sometimes may be unable to proceed without input from others.

Most company executive committees require a moderate amount of teamwork. Historically, for much of their work, the heads of marketing, finance, personnel, and manufacturing have done their work autonomously in their own areas. At key times, they have come together to build a common strategy, set common goals, and coordinate work activities, such as getting marketing

and manufacturing to agree on the type and amount of product that should be produced for the marketplace. However, effective companies realize that success in coordinating product development and manufacturing, or manufacturing and sales and marketing activities, requires reciprocal rather than sequential interdependence.

Reciprocal Interdependence In some groups, the nature of the task requires a high degree of teamwork because tasks are reciprocally interdependent. Team outputs are achieved through work done in a simultaneous and iterative process in which each individual must work in close coordination with other team members because he or she can complete tasks only through a process of iterative knowledge sharing. Thus, team members must communicate their own requirements frequently and be responsive to the needs of the other team members.

Similarly, members of a basketball team are on the court together and must coordinate constantly as they run offense plays and play team defense. Every member interacts with every other member. Thus, one would predict that a basketball team would suffer more from the lack of teamwork than would a golf team or even a baseball team. Indeed, this seems to be the case, as evidenced by the fact that major league baseball teams that acquire a few free-agent stars occasionally come from a low ranking the prior year (even last place) to win the World Series. This rarely happens with NBA basketball teams, which must learn how to coordinate and work together to be successful.

Experience has shown that even having the best individual basketball talent on one team is no guarantee of team success. Consider the events that led to the historic failure of the U.S. basketball team in the 2004 Olympics, which included players like Tim Duncan and Allen Iverson, as well as in the 2006 International Basketball Federation (FIBA) World Championship,

when players like Dwyane Wade and Carmelo Anthony were part of the team. The need for better teamwork prompted the United States to require a three-year commitment from NBA players so that they could learn to work together as a team. Since then, the U.S. basketball team has won the 2008 Olympic gold medal, the 2010 FIBA World Championship, and the gold medal in the 2012 Olympic Games.

Product development teams for complex products such as automobiles, aircraft, robotics, and consumer electronics work together in a reciprocally interdependent fashion. For example, when a commercial aircraft is being designed, decisions regarding the weight and thrust of a jet engine and the aerodynamic design of the fuselage and wings must be made taking each other into account.[2] Team members must share information back and forth as they iteratively solve problems. Similar arguments could be made for a police SWAT team or the surgical team in a hospital operating room. All of the tasks are highly connected, and members cannot do their respective work without others doing theirs in a coordinated fashion.

Understanding the level of teamwork and the nature of inter-dependence required by the task is important for three reasons. First, they dictate the amount of attention that managers need to pay to teamwork and team processes: the greater the team interdependence, the more important it is to make sure the team is working together effectively and everyone understands the nature of the interdependence. Second, by understanding the nature of interdependencies in the team, managers will have greater insight into why certain common problems arise and will know how to fix them. For example, team members of modularly interdependent tasks frequently feel frustrated when team pro-cesses are designed for frequent meetings and interaction. They rightly want to be left alone to get their work done rather than be bothered by group processes. Similarly, highly interdependent teams often run into trouble when they are organized as virtual teams and have no opportunities for frequent, rich interactions.

Third, understanding the different levels of teamwork and the nature of interdependence will allow managers to adapt business and team structures to the nature of the task and thereby prevent some problems from occurring in the first place.

What Type of Team Is Needed?

Once the nature of the teamwork needed for a particular task has been determined, decisions can be made about the type of team needed to accomplish that task. Although there are many typologies of teams that have been developed, we describe three generic team types that are simple yet sufficient to cover the important distinctions: (1) decision teams, (2) task teams, and (3) self-directed teams. The first two types of teams are manager led but differ from each other in the roles that they play in the organization. The third type, the self-directed team, is based on different authority and autonomy from the traditional manager-led team that is merely a tool of the manager to get work done.

Decision Teams All teams have a basic activity and a goal. Many teams in organizations have as their basic activity making decisions. People on these decision teams meet to make decisions about a whole range of matters: defining goals, developing strategy to achieve those goals, giving assignments, allocating resources, cutting or expanding resources for various functions, preparing budgets, setting schedules and deadlines, and so on. It is important for a decision team to understand that the quality and acceptance of their decisions can have an immense impact on many other people. For example, if a top management team is making decisions about downsizing or restructuring and if that group is not open to all information—both hard data, such as the profit picture, and soft data, such as morale—its decisions may be resisted and resented and cause serious problems throughout the entire organization.

Task Teams By contrast, members of a task team must together perform a set of interlocking tasks in order to accomplish an end result—a certain product, service, or activity. Examples are a production unit that is making the total product (such as a Volvo automobile), a SWAT team, a surgical team in a hospital, and a utility company service crew. Obviously task teams also must make decisions, and the quality of those decisions will have an impact, positive or negative, on the team's work. The ability to make effective decisions is thus a key element of all teams. But the task team has the additional function of physically coordinating efforts to achieve a given goal.

Self-Directed Teams Much of organization restructuring in recent years has been based on the desirability of allowing work teams to have more authority to deal with the issues that they face. Such self-directed work teams are also called autonomous or semiautonomous work teams.

An autonomous team does not have a formally designated leader. It can select its own leader, rotate leadership among members, or operate without a leader—a kind of "leadership by committee" process during which leadership functions are assigned to different members of the team.

A semiautonomous team, by contrast, does have a designated leader with a formal title and position, but the leader's role is defined in such a way that the team makes its own decisions and takes actions independent of the leader. This has led to one of the dilemmas of the semiautonomous team: determining the role of the leader if the team has the right to function without the direct influence and control of that formal leader.

Organizations that have successfully adopted semiautonomous teams have begun to redefine the role of the formal leader in some combination of the following:

- The leader functions primarily as a training resource or facilitator to help the team examine how it is working and

give the team the needed training, coaching, or
facilitation.

- The leader spends most of his or her time dealing with
  issues with other units or with upper management. Or the
  leader may increase the interaction and relationships with
  customers.
- The leader acts as a consultant to the team and can be
  asked to help deal with team problems, conflicts, problem
  members, or other concerns.
- The leader may attend all team meetings or attend only
  when invited. The leader may formally open the meeting
  but then turn over the activities of the meeting to team
  members.

It is apparent that some teams are autonomous or semiau-
tonomous in name only; that is, the formal leader is not willing
to relinquish power and continues to function in the traditional
leader role of having all activities flow from and through the
leader. It should also be apparent that the team can find itself
beset with a multitude of problems if team members have never
had training or experience in how to work together as a team.
Sometimes teams are asked not only to plan, schedule, and
coordinate work but also to make decisions about hiring, termi-
nations, allocation of pay raises or bonuses, vacation schedules,
training needs, or awarding time off to attend meetings or other
activities. These issues, which are central to a number of personal
concerns of team members, have proved difficult even for expe-
rienced teams, and an untrained autonomous or semiautonomous
work team can get buried under a load of activities it is not pre-
pared to handle.

We know of one organization using semiautonomous teams
that even made budget cutting and layoff decisions as a team,
decisions typically reserved for senior management. When the
business experienced a serious downturn, the organization's

senior management gave the work teams data on the kinds of budget cuts that were needed to help the business survive, and the teams were then given the autonomy to decide how they would reduce costs, the bulk of which were in payroll. The teams came up with some creative solutions: some team members decided to take unpaid vacations, others decided to job-share or work part time, and still others who wanted to leave the company and had other opportunities were let go, with relatively few bad feelings. By allowing the team to use its autonomy and creativity in the face of a difficult situation, the company was able to weather the crisis and emerge even stronger.

Identifying the Team Needed These descriptions of decision, task, and self-directed teams suggest that managers must think through the type of team they need to accomplish their goals. Should the team be focused on making quality decisions to improve performance, or should its role be to carry out certain tasks of the organization? Furthermore, does the team need clear direction and leadership from a strong manager, or does it need autonomy to be flexible to adjust to various contingencies that may arise? By answering these questions, the manager can help the team understand what role it is to play in the organization and understand what degree of autonomy it has to do its work.

Does the Organization's Context of Culture, Structure, and Systems Support Teamwork?

Three of the most powerful factors in shaping the context for team development are the organization's culture, structure, and systems.

Culture is probably the most significant factor in team development. While powerful, culture is often difficult to detect and change. An organization's culture represents the basic shared values and assumptions held by most people in the organization. It defines what things are viewed as right or wrong,

what is valued, how one gets into trouble, and how people are expected to see the whole corporate world. It is critical to the collaborative team organization that the shared culture emphasize that teamwork is essential and that people at all levels get into trouble if they do not collaborate with others and respond readily as members of the total team. If the culture is either openly or passively resistant to the importance of teamwork, any attempts to foster collaboration, participation, or involvement will be seen as a temporary action or a management manipulation.

In one organization we studied, the culture was permeated by one key assumption or basic rule: no one does anything without checking with Fred, the CEO, first. The rule was clearly demonstrated each time an employee walked past the thermostat in the hall and read the sign: "DO NOT ADJUST THIS THERMOSTAT WITHOUT FRED'S PERMISSION!!!" In an atmosphere in which one must wait for the boss before taking any action, it is difficult to encourage teamwork and collaboration.

Structure refers to the basic design of the organization as represented in an organization chart. It reflects authority, communication patterns, and the responsibility for certain functions in the organization. Organization structure largely determines who works with whom and whether teams are designated formally to carry out organization tasks. Although all organizations have informal groups that form for a variety of reasons, the formal organization structure can encourage and support teamwork, or it can make it much more difficult for teams to form and function effectively.

We have found that organizations that rely on an organization structure that fails to account for the teamwork that must occur across the various functions (engineering, marketing, manufacturing, and so on) tend to foster conflict, miscommunication, and poor coordination. To illustrate, Chrysler experienced teamwork problems in developing new cars up through the early 1990s when it was organized around functional silos in engineer-

ing, manufacturing, finance, marketing, and purchasing. New cars were developed in temporary project teams that pulled individuals from each of the functional areas. However, using this organizational structure, Chrysler took six years to develop a new car, while its Japanese competitors, Toyota and Honda, were consistently developing new cars in four years. The teamwork required to quickly develop new car models simply wasn't there.

To address the teamwork problem, Chrysler reorganized around car platform teams: large car, small car, truck, and minivan. In this way, individuals from the different functional areas worked together consistently within the same team over long periods of time. This structure even brought supplier partners onto the team—giving the supplier "guest engineers" desks and work space within the platform team. This reorganization improved teamwork and coordination within the product development teams at Chrysler. Within three years, they were developing new car models on a four-year basis, just like their Japanese competitors. Chrysler's experience shows that organizations that are designed based on a team concept can use organization structure to bring people together in formal, and sometimes informal, teams to accomplish the organization's goals.

Systems are the agreed-on methods for doing work in the organization. These integrated agreements, or systems, regulate almost all aspects of organization life. Pay systems, evaluation and promotion systems, decision-making systems, and management information systems are all examples of this component. It is critical that the systemic aspects of the organization support team development. People encounter major problems in a company that is attempting to build teamwork into the organization when the pay system is based entirely on individual performance, or if information is given only to individual senior managers rather than all team members.

In one cell phone assembly plant, the work was done almost entirely using an assembly line with no emphasis on teamwork among employees on the line. Costs were high and quality was

low, and top management gave the plant an ultimatum: fix the problems, or we will shut down the plant.

The plant manager brought in a consultant who redesigned the assembly-line system, putting employees into semiautonomous work teams. Just as important, the teams were given information, heretofore kept secret, on costs and quality and given the authority to make changes as needed. As a result, the teams came up with over a thousand suggestions for improvement in the first year after the changes were made. Not surprisingly, quality improved significantly, and the plant recognized cost savings of more than $7 million over a one-year period. Jobs were saved and employees rewarded for improving performance. In this case, changes in the culture, structure, and systems led to improved teamwork, which resulted in significant productivity gains.

In Summary

To create the right context to support high-performing teams, it is important to:

- Identify the type of teamwork needed for success
- Determine the type of team needed to accomplish team goals
- Ensure that the organization's culture, structure, and systems support teamwork

Without the proper context to support teamwork, it is difficult, if not impossible, to develop effective teams. We have found that our efforts to do team building are often undermined by an unfriendly team context. Improving team performance without the proper contextual support is like paddling a canoe upstream through rapids: you might eventually get to your destination but not without expending a lot more effort than necessary.