

CHALLENGES FOR BUILDING EFFECTIVE TEAMS

In the preceding chapters, we have described what can be done to make teams more effective. We have placed particular emphasis on the ability of teams to change (engage in team building), which we have described as a meta-competency that is crucial for changing team context, composition, or competencies when necessary to improve team performance.

In this final chapter, we summarize what we believe are the important issues for managers, team leaders, and consultants as they help teams they work with be more effective. We also discuss the challenges that all of us will likely face in the future as organizations and their environments become more complex, while the need for teamwork remains high.

Implementing the Four Cs: The Key to Success

We have found that the key to the development of effective teams is successfully managing the Four Cs that we discussed in part 1. Leaders of organizations must be willing to create team-friendly environments for teams to function effectively. This means that they must do the following:

1. Identify the kinds of work activities for which teamwork is likely to prove essential to accomplish the task. Tasks that require reciprocal interdependence between team members typically need strong, well-functioning teams.
2. Use the structure of the organization to reinforce team membership in accomplishing the organization's goals.

This means organizing tasks by teams when teamwork is necessary and assigning accountability to those teams.

3. Select team members on the basis of clear criteria for team membership. We recommend that potential team members be considered based on their technical expertise, interpersonal skills, and motivation to help a team function effectively to achieve its goals. Remember that teams need people to play both task roles and relationship roles for the team to function effectively over time.
4. Train managers and team members on the dynamics of effective teams and team leadership. Too many managers assume that if we just put people together on a team, they will know how to function effectively. The information on effective team dynamics in chapter 4 should be presented to team members and discussed as to how they might apply to their specific team needs and goals. Assigning a team a task to perform without providing sufficient training is much like putting an athletic team out on the field to play the game without ever practicing.
5. Reward team members for team performance. Much like Bain & Company, organizations need to highlight and reward successful teams to create a culture that encourages teamwork. Team progress should be monitored and feedback obtained from team members to track not only team performance but also their feelings about participation on the team. Part of an individual's compensation or performance review needs to be tied to his or her performance on the team.
6. Set aside time for teams to be involved in regular team-building activities. Like the credit union we discussed in chapter 3, organizations need to be willing to set aside time for team development and be willing to pay for it.

7. Help teams develop a competency at team building.
Learn to diagnose problems in team functioning as they arise and engage in team-building activities as needed to solve those problems. A variety of problems afflict teams, including interpersonal conflict, the Abilene paradox, and role confusion. Consequently team members need to be able to diagnose such problems and have the ability to identify the appropriate team-building activities for solving those problems and improving team performance.
8. Use appropriate technologies, particularly in the case of virtual teams, to communicate, solve problems, and make decisions.
9. Periodically review team performance, even if there are no apparent problems. We suggest the regular use (generally once a year) of the surveys found in this book—the team context and composition scale (figure 3.1), the team competencies scale (figure 4.2), the team-building checklist (figure 5.1), and measuring alliance health (figure 14.1). If these instruments indicate problems, then the team can engage in some type of team-building activity to solve the problems and improve performance. We have found that role clarification is a particularly useful exercise as a periodic check to see how team members feel about their roles and what might be done in the team to help each other function more effectively.
10. Provide support to help managers and team leaders improve team performance. This means that providing access to internal or external consultants or other resources can help the manager guide the team through the team-building cycle discussed in chapter 5.

We believe that if organizations, team consultants, and team leaders take these ten suggestions seriously, we would see

improved performance and higher satisfaction for those who work in a team environment.

Challenges Facing Organizations of the Future

A number of trends will challenge organizations as they try to make their teams more effective:

- The lack of teamwork skills in tomorrow's workforce
- The increasing need for teams to work together in cross-cultural teams, in virtual workplaces, and across organizational boundaries
- The increasing need for team leaders who can manage team diversity inherent in a global economy

We briefly discuss each of these in turn.

Finding and Developing Employees with Team Skills

One of the challenges facing leaders of organizations is to find employees with the ability to work effectively in a team environment. They typically rely on our educational institutions to provide their prospective recruits with the skills needed to carry out their work. However, in our experience, few educators train students to be effective team players. Moreover, there is increasing evidence that more recent generations—Gen X and Gen Y and millennials—are terrific with technology but are often very self-focused and do not develop the interpersonal skills or patience to work effectively with others in teams. They also typically expect and need lots of praise to stay motivated and are not adept at handling critical feedback.

Our experience in working in academia for several decades is that most education systems undermine the development of

team skills in their students. Students are encouraged to work independently and not collaborate with one another. Grades (performance) are explicitly tied to individual performance. This creates an emphasis in self-interest—rather than an orientation to collaborate with others—that can work against the kinds of behaviors needed for successful teamwork. Jerry Harvey, in a rather controversial chapter titled “Encouraging Future Managers to Cheat,” argues that the emphasis on “doing one’s own work” has a negative impact on the cooperative spirit needed in organizations today.¹ Harvey argues that “cheating” is often defined as helping someone else with an assignment or doing their work for them. Thus, the only “good” student is one who works alone without collaboration or help. Moreover, grades typically are based on individual and not group performance, and thus group-oriented work is not rewarded. And even when an instructor makes group assignments, often he or she offers little or no training to students to help them function effectively as a group in carrying out the assignment. Thus, in our experience, due to the lack of thought, preparation, and training for group work, most student groups function rather poorly, and many students see group work as “dragging them down” and hurting their grade point average. Rather than a positive or even neutral view of teams, students graduate with a rather negative view about the role of teams in achieving goals.

Furthermore, the key interpersonal skills needed to function in groups, such as communication, problem solving, and conflict management, are not part of the curriculum. Students often are well prepared for the technical aspects of a team assignment but ill prepared to work through the difficult interpersonal issues that must be managed in any team. Uncooperative team members are avoided rather than confronted, social loafing is allowed to take place, and conflicts are swept under the rug or allowed to remain unresolved. Students know that the semester will soon end, so they can sweat it out until the end of the semester, the class will

end, and then they no longer have to deal with those group members.

We believe that educators need to be more skilled in team learning and development and need to provide meaningful assignments that allow students to develop team skills and have positive team experiences. This may be particularly important in the future, because many students will not have had the experience of positive team experiences in their first learning environment, the home, given that about 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce and many still-intact families are rife with conflict. In such cases, students' "team of origin" will not have provided them with a positive view of being dependent on others, since those others (family members) may have let them down or even inflicted harm. Given that our first experience and view of what a team is comes from our experience in our families, one must wonder how effectively the families of the future will be preparing children to live in a world that requires teamwork. Such a condition makes it imperative that educators strive to help students develop a positive attitude toward group work and the development of skills that will allow them to function effectively in groups.

Unfortunately, not all families or educators will prepare future generations to work effectively in teams. Hence, it will likely be up to organizations themselves to develop training programs to orient employees to teamwork and provide them with the skills necessary for success in a team environment.

Teams Without Clear Boundaries

In chapters 13 and 14, we discussed the important role that virtual teams and alliance teams are playing now. We believe that there will be a continued trend for the use of these types of teams in the future. Organizations will find it increasingly important for individuals who are not in the same physical space to work together. Hence, they will have to learn to function effec-

tively as virtual teams. Furthermore, joint ventures and strategic alliances will continue to be important features of the strategies of many firms. The creation of effective alliance teams to manage their shared interests will be critical for the success of such ventures.

As we have noted, building trust, developing effective means of communicating and problem solving, and creating common incentives for group members to work together are key aspects of developing successful virtual or alliance teams. Technology will likely continue to advance and will speed and improve communications, whether it's through handheld video communication, teleconferencing, or more effective e-mail systems, allowing people to effectively coordinate their work. The ability of organizations to use communication technologies to coordinate effectively will likely be a source of team success and may give a competitive advantage in the future. Moreover, when the boundaries of the team are more ambiguous, the need for monitoring team performance and engaging in team-building activities likely will become even more important.

Globalization and Teamwork

The globalization of industry will make teamwork more challenging in the future. Teams of the future will be composed more and more of members who speak dissimilar languages and have dissimilar cultures, values, and approaches to solving problems. In chapter 12, we noted the cultural differences in how people view relationships, power, uncertainty, and other factors that are important for individuals to communicate and coordinate their efforts effectively. To the extent that we find more multicultural teams in the future, team building will become more important. Creating a context that creates incentives for team members to work together will be critical for success, as will creating a common understanding among team members of what effective team dynamics are and of how they should function effectively

as a team. Moreover, developing a common language whereby team members can understand one another and communicate effectively will be crucial. Thus, team-building exercises such as role clarification likely will prove to be important activities for such teams to succeed, given that different cultural values and language may foster misunderstandings among team members, making effective performance difficult.

The nature of work in the twenty-first century and increasing globalization will continue to make team-building activities a high priority for managers in the future. Without such an emphasis on teams, the likelihood of success on the part of global organizations will be reduced.

Conclusion

Throughout this book, we have described what can be done to improve the effectiveness of teams. In our experience, much of our own personal success, satisfaction, and also frustration has come from working on teams. Teams that work well give us energy, motivation, and a sense of accomplishment. Those that function poorly leave us feeling frustrated and unwilling to expend our best efforts to see the team succeed. To make a team successful requires not only the knowledge that we have presented in this book, but also a commitment on the part of individual team members to take the initiative to make their team function more effectively.

One of our father Bill Dyer's favorite, yet sad, lines in literature comes from *Walden*, when Thoreau writes, "The mass of men [and women] lead lives of quiet desperation."² To avoid such feelings of desperation, Bill's vision of a better world was to help family, church, and work teams function in such a way that members of those teams felt the rewards and satisfaction of collaborating with and supporting others to achieve meaningful goals.

For those of you who are working on an ineffective team, we encourage you to change your team for the better by speaking up to encourage the team to develop new ways of functioning that will help improve its performance. It takes courage to say, “I don’t think our team is functioning as well as it could. What can we do to make it function more effectively so we can have a more positive team experience?” The ideas presented in this book have proven effective in improving team performance, and we believe they will prove helpful to you as you encourage your team to diagnose its problems and develop plans to improve its effectiveness. Our hope is that this book will provide you with both the motivation and the information you will need to improve your team’s performance.