

Building and Leading Teams : Engineering a new paradigm

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The business world of today is changing at Internet speed. In a historical flash, we have seen organizations reengineered, flattened, and redeployed. We have witnessed the stampede to the Internet and the dot-com crash. The new economy is giving way to the next economy right in front of our eyes. The result of these economic forces is that hundreds of thousands of jobs have been eliminated, layers of management have been removed, and companies have repeatedly shifted strategy and focus. People at all organizational levels have been called on to take new initiatives and add responsibilities. Moreover, it now seems as if larger historical, technological, and economic forces are at work, and that the very concepts of job and organization as we have known them are on their way to the historical dustbin. In short, the old game of business is gone, and a new game has taken its place.

Our ongoing work in leadership and management is designed to produce competence in this new game of business. One of our fundamental claims is that the emerging game requires a new set of management competencies that are very distinct from the traditional practice of management. Foremost among these skills is the capacity to coordinate individuals and teams. In this new game, anyone wishing to work as a manager must be effective at

leading teams, and anyone who is not effective will not be a manager for long. The purpose of this paper is to build a new interpretation of teams and what it takes to lead them, so that leaders and managers can access a new set of competencies that will prove critical to ongoing success.

It seems that everywhere you turn there is a new claim being made about the importance of teams and the need to organize business around them. There are TQM teams, self-managing teams, project teams, interdepartmental teams, web teams, design teams, councils, boards, and, with the help of technology, e-teams. As customers become more sophisticated, and economic and competitive pressures increase, companies around the world are confronted with the same dilemma: how do we create and lead more effective teams?

In response to this now-pressing demand, authors of all sorts have produced volumes on the subject of teams. As reading about teams seems insufficient, a host of seminars, workshops, courses, and retreats have sprung up, each offering to provide the wisdom necessary to produce effective teams. The teaching is done by an assortment of consultants, trainers, former athletes, and coaches. As if that weren't sufficient, a host of academics and theoreticians have also waded in. The

demand for these courses and publications and the wide variety of approaches and instructors tells us that real competence in building and leading teams is uncommon, and that there is no standard way to either teach or learn the practices.

In the evolution of our work, we have had the opportunity to coach and collaborate with a variety of high-performing sports and military teams. We have spent over a decade identifying the essential components of high-performing teams and have developed new practices that have proved their worth on the playing field and the battlefield. With this experience and success as a foundation, we began working with business teams and quickly produced the same results. Therefore, when we discuss the process of building and sustaining teams in business, we come not as yet another opinion holder with an interesting point of view, but as proven professionals with a solid record of performance in a variety of arenas.

From our vantage point, it seems that the lack of competence in building and leading teams, and the lack of agreement about how to develop competence, stems from a fundamental flaw in the understanding of teams. The current prevailing wisdom holds that a team is a group of individuals interacting to achieve a particular objective. Influenced by this interpretation, people study various techniques of communication, consensus building, and vision creation. They declare missions, invent strategies, and empower one another. For their hard work they get T-shirts, mugs, and plaques with eloquent quotes and catchy slogans to inspire them.

All of this is supposed to help them generate teams. However, over time, what they are left with is a shelf full of unread books, a collection of mugs, a set of seldom-used tips and techniques, no noticeable improvement in their ongoing work, and a nagging sense that something is missing.

As you might suspect, we take a strong stand against this approach. Its fundamental flaw is that it does not reveal the true means by which effective teams are constituted and maintained. More important, it doesn't allow you to gain genuine competence in building and leading teams. Over the years, we have met too many managers who have given up on becoming leaders of effective teams and whose careers are therefore in jeopardy. But we know there is a way viable way out of this dilemma.

To solve this breakdown, we are offering a new interpretation of what a team is and the role that leadership plays in the workings of an effective team. This will open up the realm of building and leading teams as a new area for learning and innovation.

Our interpretation is based on three fundamental claims:

- Teams are created when a leader declares a mission and the need for a team to fulfill that mission.
- A team is a commitment-based phenomenon.
- Leadership is a learned competence, not an aspect of character.

Naturally we will need to say a bit more about all of this. Let's begin with a look at the essential nature of teams.

The Realm of Teams

The first step is to make a quick examination of the basic types of social organizations. This is important because there is much confusion in business today about the nature of organizations. There are three essential types of social organization that, if not clearly distinguished, can, and frequently do, collapse into a management nightmare. These types of social organizations are teams, communities, and families.

Three fundamental variables distinguish each type of organization.

They are:

- The horizon of time over which nonperformance and nonconformance are tolerated.
- The unique set of commitments that constitute each of them.
- The role of leadership.

Since this paper is about teams, we will say only a little here about communities and families.

The Horizon of Time

Perhaps the most important variable in distinguishing teams from communities and families is the horizon of time over which nonperformance and nonconformance are tolerated. On an authentic team, this horizon is very short. If we look to the simple yet classic example of sports, we can see that those players who do not perform are either quickly retrained or replaced. The same is true of nonconformance. A successful coach knows that a player with an ongoing bad attitude must be removed before he brings down the morale of the entire team and undermines the authority of the coach.

In a community, the horizon of time is much longer. Depending on the nature of the community (which could be anything from a social club to a nation), nonperformance and nonconformance are tolerated for years. Yet at the same time there are guidelines, rules, and laws, which if violated will eventually be cause for sanction.

In a family, the horizon of time is infinite. There may be all sorts of violations of family norms or even declarations of separation, but this does not change the fact that family members retain that status forever.

It is important to understand the difference among these three types of organization. Lack of clarity about the differences is the source of many of the breakdowns in business. Here is what we are pointing to.

We often hear people in business speaking about their desire for a sense of “family” at work. This seems to be a code word for wanting things to be friendly, informal, open, supportive, and not laden with pressure. At the same time, they will also say that they need to have teamwork or want to be part of a team. This means they need to mobilize quickly, innovate ahead of their competitors, get work done, and beat the competition. They want to win! What they can't see is that, in general, these two ways of being are mutually exclusive.

In the idealized family no one ever gets fired. There are no negative performance reviews, no projects that are late, over budget, or behind schedule. There are no pressing competitors, unmovable deadlines, or pressure from the global marketplace. While this is the sort of world we might all want to live in, it is not the one that exists today. And until such time as it does, we are going to have to organize ourselves in a different manner. Unfortunately, many leaders and managers have not been clear, first with themselves and then with their people, about the nature of the game they must play to ensure the ongoing viability of their organizations.

The evidence of this confusion is all around us. In most of the world's large corporations, we have all seen the sense of bewilderment, confusion, and anger that has arrived now that it is time to face the reality of a changing world. People found that when they joined the company, there was indeed a “family” culture in which one could expect a long-term job. Those days are long gone.

In the new economy, a horde of e-commerce and dot-com companies sprang to life, all touting their “one big happy family” work cultures. The market leveling that has taken place over the last few years has driven many of them out of business. Those that remain have come to see that “one big happy family” doesn't always mean one successful business.

Today, if we are going to be competitive in a global market, we must learn to operate as teams and abandon the idea of having a "family" at work. This is not to say that we must move to some formal, rigid, regimented way of work -- those days are also long gone.

What we know is that it is possible to have the excitement and "fun" that many people are looking for in their work while learning the practices of a real team. This may sound contrary to much of what is currently being written and said about the values and empowerment of the new work culture. However, the current blindness to the distinctions of team, community, and family is causing confusion and a loss of dignity in the workplace. There is no need for people to struggle to identify the type of organization to which they belong. The companies that prevail in this new century are the ones that take the lead in generating a new type of working team. Let's look at how to do that.

WHAT IS A TEAM?

If we were to scan the current literature on teams, we would find a series of anecdotes and stories extolling the virtues and performance of great teams and offering means and methods to measure their effectiveness. If we went to the courses and seminars, we would hear more stories and receive tips and techniques that would tell us how to do it just like the "winners." From our point of view, all of this would be a waste of time and money, since you can't generate authentic new competence by hearing stories and getting a checklist of tips and techniques.

We stated earlier that a team is a commitment-based phenomenon. We came to this realization after years of working with high-performing teams of all sorts. We spent uncountable hours working first with winning sports teams and then with military teams to understand what it was that set them apart. On the surface, there was not a big

difference in their physical capabilities, yet they were able to win over and over again. What we came to see, only after much deep inquiry, was that each member of these teams held a specific set of commitments with and to the other members of the team. It was the willingness to make and live by these commitments that separated them from their lesser competitors.

We were able, as a result of this work, to identify the specific set of commitments that are the foundation for an authentic team. Simply stated, the basis for a solid team is not a set of techniques you can get from a book, but a set of commitments that come from the heart. These commitments generate the actions and practices that inspire us to say, "Yes, we want to be a team like that!"

THE NATURE OF COMMITMENT

To us, a commitment is a linguistic move that someone makes. Commitments do not exist outside of our speaking and listening. They are not things that exist in the world. Rather, they are a phenomenon of language. Our claim is that the commitments detailed in the following section are what constitute a team. Simply stated, teams cannot remain teams and succeed in the projects they undertake unless people on the team make these commitments and take the actions that are consistent with them. It is not enough to assemble individuals side by side and call them a team simply because they are occupying the same space at the same time, or wearing the same colored shirts. Nor is it sufficient to provide the same set of individuals with some tips and techniques garnered from those claiming wisdom in these matters. To be and remain an effective team, there must be a set of shared commitments, as it is the ownership of the commitments that will generate the desire to learn and maintain new practices, to stretch the boundaries of performance, and to carry on in the face of adversity. In the absence of commitment, method and technique

become hollow moves in an uninspiring game.

THE CONSTITUTIVE COMMITMENTS OF TEAM

What we have observed is that consistently high-performing teams share a commitment to:

1. Own the Values, Vision, and Shared Mission of the Team

In most organizations, there are clearly defined values and visions. Backed by these statements, leaders declare missions and call forth teams to coordinate the actions necessary to fulfill the mission. When we say that for a team to exist, the members must own the values, vision, and shared mission of the team, we are offering something considerably different from the traditional understanding of a team as a group of individuals side by side, pursuing some common purpose.

To take ownership means that the members of the team do not just talk about understanding, supporting, or buying into the mission, values, and vision. It means that they commit to consistently coordinating their actions to ensure the success of the mission.

Here is an example. If asked, people who work in the same department may have widely different opinions of what the mission of their team is. We would assess, in this case, that there is no ownership of the mission.

Moreover, if people in the same department, when interviewed independently, use the same words to describe the mission, but are not coordinating action to fulfill the mission, we would also say there is no ownership of the mission.

In order to ensure ownership, the manager requests each member's public

commitment to the team's mission. In recurrent review meetings and staff meetings, the manager makes assessments of the team's performance toward fulfilling the mission. The manager is explicit in detailing how ownership or its lack, as shown in the team's actions, is contributing to or jeopardizing the team's performance. The manager also makes sure that his assessment of the team's ownership of the mission is shared with and by everyone on the team.

To own the mission means that actions will be taken to fulfill the team's declared mission. Most important, to own the mission requires that all team members make and speak their assessments of the various concerns, opportunities, and breakdowns.

A few words on excuses are appropriate here. While excuses can serve to indicate a sense of ownership and sincerity, they are not justifications for failing to fulfill the mission, and aren't offered to team members or accepted from team members in this mood. Excuses don't cancel or neutralize a member's commitment to the team. *Owning the mission means managing your promises in a team, even when you cannot personally fulfill them.* This might mean asking for help, suggesting alternatives, and so on. With this purpose in the background, there are continual conversations for action so that the team's mission is never jeopardized.

By taking action in this way, team members produce identities in which both dignity and self-esteem are at stake in fulfilling and having fulfilled the team's mission. Lack of ownership shows up as negligence, lack of passion, and resignation.

Another way of saying this is that team members take personal accountability for the fulfillment of the mission of the team. They choose to hold the success of the team as their primary focus, and all their actions are taken for the sake of fulfilling the mission

of the team, not for their individual, private agendas.

2. Produce and Evoke Trust

Teammates commit to being sincere, to acting on the basis of grounded competence, and to being reliable in conversations for action. At the same time, they commit to having appropriate public conversations when they have negative assessments about other teammates' sincerity, competence, and reliability. That means talking to someone who can take action, not gossiping or rumor mongering.

The manager ensures that each teammate's commitments are managed rigorously. When people are incompetent or unreliable, the manager takes action to redefine their roles in the team and/or provide coaching. When the manager reaches a grounded assessment of insincerity (or lying, for those who haven't seen our work on trust) about someone on the team, she asks for an apology and for repair of the damage produced to the team's identity. Repeated insincerity must result in separating that person from the team. This action is not based on a moral assessment; it is strictly operational. An insincere person poses a problem for the team because he or she can't be counted on. Insincerity produces distrust. Moreover, the manager will lose the respect of the team and the team will lose dignity and cohesion if the manager fails to act and tolerates members who continually produce distrust.

3. Generate a Mood for Success

Teammates commit to generating and maintaining a mood that will ensure their success in fulfilling their mission. Key moods for a powerful team are ambition, confidence, acceptance, serenity, respect, membership, pride, camaraderie, and celebration.

This doesn't mean, of course, that negative moods, i.e. moods that close future

possibilities, will never be triggered. Negative moods can happen to anybody, including the manager. The commitment here is to observe resignation, resentment, anger, arrogance, cynicism, and other negative behaviors, as moods -- as automatic assessments, not as reality -- and to intervene to shift the negative assessment of possibilities.

Effective intervention starts with an announcement of the mood that is observed, followed by an invitation to produce a new mood or to deal with the concern that has produced the current mood.

The manager is the guardian of the team's mood. This is a domain where a manager must be competent. It is not possible to build a great team with a collection of passive players. Managers may address the mood of the team not only in scheduled meetings, but also anytime that moods might jeopardize teammates' commitments. When the manager assesses herself as not competent to intervene or to design a new mood, she won't hesitate to request help from somebody with proven competence.

4. Fulfill the Various Roles in the Team's Division of Responsibility

To fulfill the mission, the team's work will be divided into areas of responsibility or domains of action. Depending on the domain of each member's commitment, he or she will have a defined role. To assume a role means to assume personal responsibility for the successful completion of a particular aspect of the team's mission. It doesn't mean simply taking a title or position.

This doesn't mean that a team member will act only in his or her area. Being responsible for one area does not mean that each person takes action only in that domain or that the person responsible for that domain is the only one able to take care

of it. A person assuming responsibility will make sure that:

Actions are taken in his or her domain in order to fulfill the team's mission. The actions taken in other domains are consistent with the actions being taken in his/her domain. The actions being taken in his/her domain are also consistent with the actions being taken in other domains. Traditionally, management has referred to this as "division of labor." But effective teams do more than divide labor; they divide responsibility, with an understanding that, ultimately, everybody on the team is accountable for the success of the team. This success begins with a commitment on the part of each team member to fulfill his or her declared role.

A key role in the team will be that of the manager. As we have pointed out, the manager's role is to make sure that all team conversations take place effectively.

Often, breakdowns arise not from a lack of competence or lack of ownership, but because roles and responsibilities are not clear to everyone on the team. In football, for example, a team may lose because the quarterback and receiver are "not on the same page." One of them did not fulfill his role.

The manager of a business team must make clear initial declarations of roles. He or she must then clarify or modify roles whenever individual interpretations diverge from the initial declarations.

5. Adhere to the Team's Standards for Performance

In the absence of clear standards, there is no mission and without a mission there is no team. There may be a group or a community, but not a team. The standards that we are talking about refer to both the interactions among the team and the execution of the specific projects undertaken. Each team must declare

standards for assessing performance and learning in both areas and teammates must commit to adhere to these standards.

A similar commitment is required when the operational mission for specific projects is declared. For example, standards for completion, such as time frame and specific conditions of satisfaction, need to be declared, and teammates then need to commit to the standards.

In the conversations on design, the manager should invite all teammates to participate in building the team's standards. Again, when the manager reaches resolution, she makes a declaration and asks for the public commitment of each teammate to these standards. After the declaration is made, only the manager has authority to change the standards. And when this happens, a team-wide declaration must be made. Of course, any team member may request the adoption of new standards, but these may only be adopted with the manager's endorsement.

6. Acknowledge the Unity of Authority

Here we enter into the realm of team politics. By politics, we mean the conversations that generate decisions. The manager has the responsibility to determine which conversations the team will have together, when these conversations will take place, who will be the speakers and observers, and who will be excluded. This is the discourse of organizational power. As we have proposed before, the manager's role is to ensure that the conversations of the team take place. Unless the manager has been granted the authority to play this role, sooner or later these conversations will fail to take place and the team will face the danger of disintegration. We need to be clear that while a manager may have organizational authority to manage the team, the team must commit to the manager as their political authority for the team to function effectively.

On a successful team, people commit to the manager as the team's political authority. This includes the commitment to execute the declarations of the manager. In other words, team members must commit not only to respect the role of manager, but to the person who takes on the role. This commitment, too, must be declared publicly -- out loud, in the presence of the entire team -- by the individual team members.

As part of this commitment, people on the team commit to put into practice the manager's declarations of mission, division of responsibilities, and standards. Of course, this is not license for the manager to be a petty tyrant. On the contrary, in the face of the commitment to produce trust -- which means using the practices we have taught for being open, authentic, and accountable in communications -- tyrants quickly generate resentment and sooner or later find themselves abandoned by the team and removed from a high-performing organization.

As part of her job of making declarations, the manager is responsible for engaging the team in conversations of design. It is in these conversations that each teammate brings competencies and concerns into play as the team invents new possibilities. It is as a result of these conversations that the manager makes declarations. It is with a commitment to the unity of authority that the team takes actions to fulfill these declarations. There is no room for private agendas or any conversations that would harm the public identity of the manager or the team. On a team there is no such thing as loyal opposition.

7. Develop and Carry On the Practices of Learning and Innovation

Each teammate, not only the manager, must be committed to anticipating future breakdowns and future opportunities for the team.

We include here the practices of

planning. In our interpretation, this involves, but is not limited to, establishing periodic milestones for assessing accomplishments, declaring breakdowns, speculating, formulating action, making suggestions, and opening new conversations for action. Additionally, we include here the practices for rebuilding the team's unity when breakdowns occur. A good preventative practice in this regard is weekly review meetings. We will teach you how to run an effective project review meeting at a later date.

The team must also take on the practices for learning and innovating new competencies, both individually and as a team. In sports, we refer to this as training or practice. The manager is always assessing teammates' competencies and declaring with them new opportunities for learning. This declaration leads to the development of learning programs, which produce new competence for the individuals and the team.

The manager's concern for learning is not restricted to building the competence of individual team members. Managers are also concerned with learning new "games" that the entire team can take on. They are always looking to invent new, more challenging missions for the team.

8. Be Concerned for the Future of the People, Team, and Company

A successful team has a commitment from each teammate that extends beyond the completion date for a particular mission. Teams do not survive when members behave like mercenaries, in this case, maintaining commitment only to the particular task and its completion date. In successful teams, members fuse their personal identity with the team's identity and develop a concern for the team's future viability.

Taking care of the future viability of the team includes but also transcends the

practices of planning and training. It entails taking care of the future viability of the company by making alliances both inside and outside the company and, finally, designing and taking care of each teammate's career.

These are the commitments that we believe constitute a team. It is the role of the manager to keep these commitments alive and thereby ensure the viability of the team. It is the manager's job to ensure that the conversations, which generate the commitments, take place.

The team cannot be called together to complete these conversations and generate commitments as though there were some sort of checklist. Rather, the manager must learn to "dance" with these conversations. What we are doing by distinguishing these commitments is training managers to "listen" for what elements are missing or need attending to with the team.

We are not offering another set of rules or procedures about teams. Our interpretation opens the possibility of learning to see the underlying nature of teams that others are blind to.

TEAM LEADERSHIP

In the long run, to be the team leader, it is not sufficient to simply make the declaration of mission that generates the team. The leader must develop her commitment to the mission and her competence to keep people engaged in the conversations of the team. Leadership will become apparent when people grant the leader the authority to lead the team toward succeeding in the mission.

The authority of a manager is granted by the organization or institution, which the manager serves. The community being led also grants the authority of a leader. Invested with this authority, the manager's role is to be a designer of interactions and practices that take care of the conversations

of the team. The manager is not presumed to be "best" at doing all of the team's work, or to be competent in all domains. She should not be seen as always knowing the answers and immediate solutions to all breakdowns. To fulfill the mission, the manager consults with people inside and outside the team and delegates actions to the various teammates.

An effective manager does not need and should not aspire to be perfect. In a team that is seen as having an excellent manager, the manager is not necessarily a virtuoso in each and every one of the team's domains. To excel as a manager is to put together and orchestrate a team that has strong individual competences. To excel as a manager is also to be competent to build alliances and bring in help where competence is lacking.

Further, a team that relies exclusively on the manager's virtuosity is, in the long run, a weak team. It will not grow and produce other strong leaders for future teams. This failure will eventually jeopardize the viability of the business.

In summary, the manager as a leader has to have the boldness to ask for and to hold the final authority of the team for declaring the mission, for assessing performance, and for requesting commitments from the team members. The manager must be clear that his role is to declare what is satisfactory for the team and the mission. The fundamental agreement between the manager and the team must be that the team members satisfy the manager in the performance of their duties. If it happens that the team is assessing whether or not the manager is satisfying them, the structure of the team is disempowered, the manager ceases to be the leader, and the team is in jeopardy.

The manager brings forth partnership in the team concerning the team's mission, standards, and practices -- not consensus! The manager then takes final authority for assessing the teammates' actions and declaring completion.

We are not saying that managers and leaders do not need to listen to the members of their teams or to the organization at large. Attitude surveys and 360 reviews play an important role in checking on the mood of the organization. However, for a team to work as a team, they cannot stop the action to determine whether or not the team members are continuously happy with the work of the manager. The manager needs to direct the team to stay focused on the mission and keep the members in action.

As an ongoing part of his work, the manager needs to be available to hear the assessments of the team and may declare periodic timeouts, during which team members have the opportunity to make their assessments. The manager will then make whatever new declarations he deems appropriate, declare those conversations closed, and get the team back in action. The standard for a team's success is not whether the team is always happy or in agreement, but whether the manager is satisfied with the performance of the team.

In the end, if a manager is to be a successful team leader, she and the team both need to be clear about their roles. The team has been called forth to fulfill a mission. To be a team member is to commit to take and coordinate actions to fulfill that mission. To be a team manager is to take on the responsibility to ensure that the commitments, which generate the team, are always alive. These commitments live in conversation. The manager must also be clear that he is not responsible for producing

permanent happiness, agreement, harmony, or consensus among the team members. Instead, he must produce satisfaction within the team and fulfillment of the mission. In this case, satisfaction is the assessment by the team that their work has been valued; that they have been able to make a contribution of importance; that they have had a chance to learn; and that, in so doing, they have advanced their careers and enhanced their identities. This assessment of satisfaction is what a manager strives to generate. A manager will take this on knowing that, along the way, people will be unhappy, there will be disagreement, and the journey toward fulfilling the mission will not always be fun. This is the dance of teams, a rich domain of learning.

CONCLUSION

In these notes, we have started to build an interpretation that provides a new look at the nature of teams and the role of leadership. We have offered the view that the ability to lead and manage teams is not a quality some are born with and others not. Instead, we suggest that it is a linguistic and somatic competence that can be learned by anyone. You will have the chance to look deeper into the subject of leadership in our paper on that topic, which we will get to later in the course. For now, you have a new interpretation of teams. With this new interpretation, teams and leadership can be a domain in which you learn, increase competence as a manager, and build power in the world.

