Team Development:
A Search for Elegance

BY DANIEL HOLDEN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We spend more time than ever trying to achieve results through teams. As important as they are, it's surprising how little is done to ensure that teams perform at an optimum level. Four critical areas can improve the performance of teams you lead.

Last summer I summoned the courage for the hip replacement surgery I had needed for several years. An MRI (magnetic resonance image) and X-ray confirmed osteoarthritis in the hip joint. At one exam, the doctor asked me to move my leg to determine my range of motion. Almost none! I was shocked. I had made small adaptations over the years to compensate for the slowly escalating discomfort. I bought different shoes for walking, stopped running altogether, stopped motorcycling, and bought a new chair for my office.

I'm pain free now. But I am newly sensitized to the small, unseen adaptations my clients make in the course of trying to get results at work. Nowhere are these adaptations more noticeable than with the teams we lead and serve on.

Most of us live, work, and move through our lives in teams. Leadership teams abound in our organizations. Sports teams, school parent-teacher organizations, church and synagogue boards occupy us after the workday has ended. Civic groups, volunteer groups, professional associations are organized around teams.

As important as team leadership and membership are, it's surprising how little time is spent ensuring that the collective intelligence of a team is greater than the individual intelligence of its members. Isn't this the point of coming together in teams? We want our collective thinking, resourcefulness, and innovation to surpass the outcomes any one of us could have accomplished alone. Often, this is not the case. If we are honest with ourselves, we all have had experiences with teams that are less adept than their members. When good results are achieved for a period of time, they often occur in spite of the team's effort, not because of the team's work.

This article outlines four critical areas of team effectiveness and invites you to examine the health and performance of teams you are associated with.

Results and relationships

We begin with the easiest. Every leadership team is charged with getting reliable products out the door or ensuring that needed services are offered to customers. Results also include making sure innovation happens so new products and services are in the pipeline. When teams create a consistent stream of reliable results and innovative products and services, their organizations have historically prospered. But things have changed. Now, with fewer people doing a greater span of work, in a world where we're looking for time simply to catch a breath and finish anything, relationships have come to the forefront. A significant percentage of leadership effectiveness, and with it organizational performance, can be traced back to the quality of relationships. How much time and effort are required to get something accomplished through others?

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The command and control mindset, a mainstay of traditional organizations, doesn't yield the kind of nimble, responsive results a complex, fast-changing world requires. It depends on hierarchy and a chain of command rather than relationship, dialogue, and trust. Such a chain of command isn't inherently wrong; however, relying on control and permission is not fast or effective enough anymore.

I recently sat in the office of an executive who was trying not to be involved in a series of time-sensitive decisions involving several departments in at least three different organizations. A product had been promised a key customer by the close of business that day. I listened as this executive took a series of phone calls, each more emotionally volatile than the last, and attempted to steer those involved to find a solution to this escalating dilemma. This scenario unfolded during the course of the afternoon. As the deadline approached and it became obvious that everyone was at wits' end, the executive made one phone call to someone no one else had considered. The problem was solved in less than five minutes. This is not an isolated incident. This is how and why relationships matter.

The discipline of relationship requires we learn to build strong bonds with others, connections that are sturdy enough to withstand the rigors that real vision requires. This means allowing others to see both our upsides (vision, hopes, dreams, and expectations) and our downsides (fears, cautions, doubts, anger, and exasperations). This is new territory for most of us. Strong relationships are not bound by organizational hierarchy or the title on a business card. Relationships are forged by discovering shared interests and pursuing an ongoing dialogue that is equal parts advocating (for what you want) and inquiring (into what matters to others). Our shared humanity becomes the common ground upon which we move forward. If this sounds too soft and touchy-feely, I'd suggest you're looking at a side of yourself that needs developing. It can be hard work, not soft and easy, which is why many people don't do it.

Near enemy is a term from the Eastern traditions. It refers to a quality that can masquerade as the original but is not the original. The near enemy of real relationship is politeness, or compliance. People appear nice to others whose approval they need and whose rejection they fear. The real conversation takes place behind closed doors or out in the employee parking lot where it's safe. A form of cheap harmony is created that is never enough to endure the truth telling that vision requires.

Pulled by vision or driven by fear? This second area is a distinct barometer that can help you see where your team may be stuck. At any point in time we are individually and collectively either moving toward something we want or moving away from something we don't want. That's the concept. We're pulled forward by something compelling or we move away from something causing us fear. Most of us are a mixed bag; not surprisingly, so are the teams we lead.

Tim is a senior project director of a billion-dollar, multi-year construction project, the biggest in his company's history. Tim has strong success track record and solid relationships with his team. His project is on schedule and moving along quite well. Recently, citizens in one township complained to a senior state government official, who phoned Tim's CEO. The project disrupted traffic in this town. Tim was not pleased when his CEO called with questions about how citizen concerns were being addressed. In this moment, Tim had a decision to make about whether to stay focused on the vision or react to fear. He chose the latter.

Tim was convinced his CEO would cave in to the requests of the legislator. When his CEO set up a meeting to discuss options with him, Tim opted not to prepare for the meeting because "It was a sham, the decision had already been made." When I pointed out to Tim that he was reacting to a story he himself had made up, he appeared genuinely surprised. In fact, his CEO had no track record of caving and no prior experience of running Tim around under the pretense of wanting his input when a decision had already been made. There was no way of Tim knowing with absolute certainty what the CEO's intentions were, even though Tim was acting as if he knew all of this. The more he ran these stories through his mind, the more aggravated Tim became. Once he realized he was both the creator and victim of his own stories, Tim regained perspective and did what he needed to do to move forward.

We are driven by fear when we:

- Invent stories about others and about events and circumstances
- Run these stories repeatedly across our mind's screen, upsetting us in the process
- Deny we have done this
- Project this inner story onto others who we then justifiably blame and attack

Individuals and teams do this all the time and to the extent it remains outside our awareness, this inner storytelling and meaning making can run the show. (See "Fear or vision?" page 23.) As we will see, great teams and the leaders associated with them learn to pay attention to these inner stories. They either block or serve as the gateway to inspired performance. They seldom have no impact.

The near enemy of vision-pulled action is ego-driven activity. Ambition and the unexamined need for perfection can drive the frenetic activity so typical in many organizations. Each project, every PowerPoint presentation serves as a vehicle to establish or defend the identity and self-worth of its author. A great college coach describes this dynamic as "Playing hard but not asking for the ball at the end of a game."

Great teams develop a capacity for inward self-reflection, stopping periodically to discuss how they're working as a team to expand and deepen their impact in the world.

Focus: Internal, external, both?

Poor teams focus only internally on how people are feeling; they lose sight of the external world. They don't typically seek to understand what has happened: They blame others for events they see as beyond their control. Needless bickering replaces purposeful action.

Good teams make their mark by executing in the external marketplace or service sector. They form the necessary alliances with key vendors, suppliers, and customers and work to guarantee that deliverables are made in a profitable, cost effective manner.

Great teams and leaders go one step beyond this: They cultivate the skill to move into the "in-here-and-right-now" world of the minds and hearts of their members. Like an MRI that looks in on the tissues, muscles, and ligaments of the body, great teams develop a capacity for inward self-reflection, stopping periodically to discuss how they're working as a team to expand and deepen their impact in the world.

This learning does not come automatically or easily. Yet teams that venture down this road make surprising discoveries that yield transformative results in both the quality of results and in the culture left behind in the wake of their activity. Leaders and their teams, when committed to their development, move through a series of progressively higher stages of development, each one built around higher-order thinking and reasoning.

Them-and-us stage. Teams at this stage are marked by binary, either-or

Fear or vision?

Fear-driven indicators	Vision-pulled indicators
Caution and secrecy	Authenticity even when it's difficult
Blaming and attacking	Understanding diverse viewpoints
Excessive control	Expecting others to do great things
Sidelines criticalness	Involvement and discernment
Coming unglued	Keeping perspective
Aloofness and distance	Interpersonal connection
Resistance hidden	Resistance out in open, explored
Separate and competing interests	Alignment and common ground sought

thinking and a tendency to see outsiders as friend or foe, ally or threat. Problems are blamed on outsiders, and attempts are made to mitigate damage by deception, avoidance, and cleverness. Might makes right is the prevailing mindset. It can be nearly impossible for teams at this level to form viable working partnerships or collaborative alliances with others, a critical deficiency in today's world.

Leaders of teams like these would do well to take a firm handle, using position authority to introduce the team to case studies, reputable speakers from within their field, and action inquiry experiments in which they are asked to evaluate the success of higher-functioning teams and organizations. Any movement of team members toward higher-level behavior needs to be publicly recognized and rewarded. Those who persist in blaming others as the enemy can be shown the door to other employment where their behavior is acceptable and their toxicity is better tolerated.

Phil is the elected head of a state education association. He oversees three classifications of employees: management, professionals, and associates. Dialogue between classifications is strictly governed by three separate contracts and monitored by employee representatives. Considerable attention is paid to interpersonal sensitivity and fairness. An honest conversation about the status of work or the performance of an individual is almost unheard of; when it happens, it is often followed by a grievance initiated by the employee rep whose attendance is required. I sat in on a management meeting focused on strategic planning only to find myself in a conversation on threat assessment. I was told this was strategic planning. Many of the threats were, in fact, members of the other employee groups.

Reactive stage. Approximately 70 percent of teams fall into this stage. This stage is marked by a strong desire to live by the standards imposed by the organizational context. Not as binary in thinking and action as the previous stage, the reactive team nevertheless defines itself by the validation it receives from external sources (such as leaders, the system, or the profession). ***I am my achievements, I am my work,*** and ***I am my relationships*** are the prevailing mindsets. Each is a reaction to the external environment. There are competencies embedded in this stage that are good and beneficial. Our billion-dollar project director, Tim, leads such a team. To the extent the team and its members are reacting to signs from the external world, there is an emotional rollercoaster they experience and pass along to others. When results are good, I am good. When results are not good, neither am I.

It can be tough getting an accurate read on the current status of work when this status is seen as a threat to one's identity. Leaders of teams at this stage can teach a team how to assess progress in a detached, impersonal way. *How did these results happen? What did you learn from this? What was your contribution to this event? How can we improve our effectiveness here? What was at risk for you when the client was upset?* These kinds of questions, asked consistently over time, can help a team find its footing and stay focused on desired outcomes.

Dave is the CEO of a financial services organization. His team took individual 360-degree assessments and was still devastated by their scores days later. This is the first sign of the reactive stage: over-concern with how we are viewed by the external world. The team responded to the assessment survey much like they responded to any new, ambiguous information — with silence, guarded communication, and a blend of extraneous conversation about the non-essential coupled with slow, deliberate, somewhat awkward attempts to make sense of the new data. They were at times too concerned with appearing foolish or less than perfect to wade into the new learning that their markets and vision required. This is a successful team in need of more elegant ways of moving forward.

This CEO did his development work. At a recent staff meeting, one of his direct reports acknowledged feeling stuck in a fear of looking stupid. The CEO simply said, "Got it. Now, what's on your mind?" The conversation the team needed to have ensued. Sometimes the most essential talks lie just on the other side of our caution. They can be the shortest conversations because nothing is wasted talking around the topic.

Real synergy is possible here as people learn to examine and then lay aside their egos and fears, needs and concerns to pursue something greater than they alone could create.

Creative stage. Approximately 20 percent of leaders and teams function at this level. This is the first stage where people can separate what they do from who they are. It is a stage where people are intrinsically motivated to move toward what matters to them and to find shared interests with others headed in the same direction. Real synergy is possible here as people learn to examine and then lay aside their egos and fears, needs and concerns to pursue something greater than they alone could create.

We see the beginning ability to compare different viewpoints and approaches and to choose which ones best suit their vision with less attachment to one's own position than in earlier stages. Teams at this stage are focused on execution and finding more elegant means of doing so. They are open to inner exploration if asked to do so. Leaders do well to push the limits, find new challenges and new ways to access the full range of competencies these teams bring to the table knowing that this stage, too, has an ending place beyond which only a few will venture.

Lynn is the vice president of operations in a large, successful public service company. Her team conducted a climate survey and discovered it was viewed negatively by most of the organization. They were seen as overly aggressive, excessively critical, and aloof. After the initial obligatory debate about the validity of the instrument and its relevance to their industry, the team decided to launch a 12-month development initiative in which each leader would participate in executive coaching coupled with two off-site leadership meetings focused on cultivating trust, candor, and alignment on this senior team.

Lynn held people accountable, stuck to the schedule of coaching and team retreats, and built candor, interdepartmental collaboration, and shared results over and above individual performance into the incentive plans. She also suggested each leader get involved in one community organization as a way of expanding their understanding of the larger context in which this organization operated. At the end of the 12-month experiment, there was a celebratory dinner to which leaders, their spouses or partners, and members of the community organizations were invited. The agenda was simple: Speak about what you've been learning about yourself and leadership. There was not a dry eye in the house that night as a blanket of authenticity and intimacy descended over the group. A follow-up survey done at the 18-month mark indicated a 30 percentile point improvement in key performance indicators for this team.

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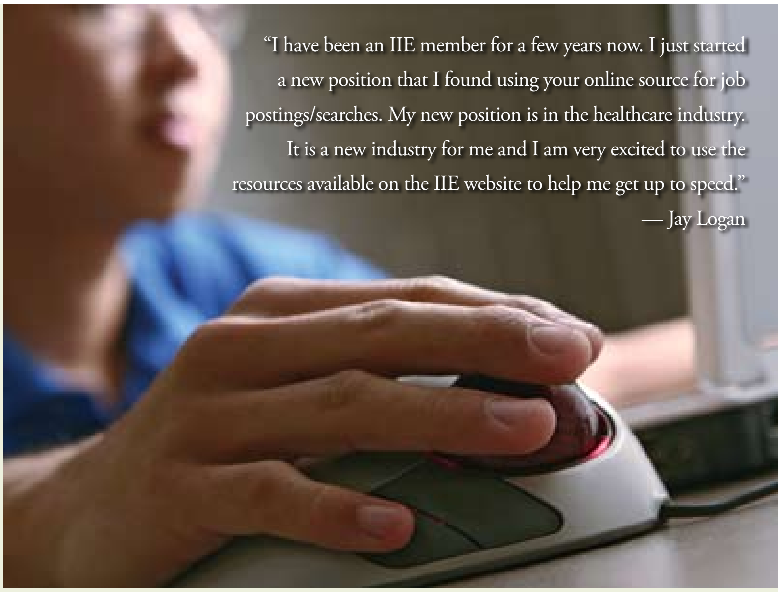
Integral stage. Leaders and teams at this level constitute 5 percent of the organizational population. They are able to grasp the illusory aspect of and inherent complexity of themselves as people and of the marketplace and organization in general. They are able to use many diverse aspects of themselves (hopes, dreams, fears, limiting assumptions, transcendent experiences) as sources of information in their work as well as fuel for their resourcefulness. Everything is connected, in their minds, to everything else. They spot interdependencies where others see only separate parts. Leaders who serve with teams at this level function as architects. They design forums to ensure essential conversations and times for reflection and questioning of assumptions are designed into the workday and throughout the organizational culture.

A senior consulting group meets for dinner the night before an engagement with a difficult client company. The



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client is seen as overly cautious, secretive, and especially demanding about detailing each step in the design and delivery of new equipment. A question is posed: "In what ways are we being overly cautious, secretive with each other?" A candid dialogue unfolds and continues until the restaurant closes. The next day's meeting with the client is a breakthrough encounter. Each side leaves feeling the day has been both successful and strangely restorative and uplifting, unlike any previous meeting.

Each proceeding stage of development looks foolish to the one preceding it. You might make a preliminary assessment of your own development by noting where this description started feeling absurd. Additionally, every team is made up of people at different stages in their development. Every team does, however, come to develop a prevailing orientation or mindset, a way of doing things. Tension, judgment, and misunderstanding can be lessened when the leader understands she is at a different stage of development than the prevailing response of the team. Expecting collaboration from a team at the them-and-us stage guarantees frustration. A team at the reactive stage will attempt cross-function dialogue only when it sees this as connected to results and a threat to its success if they don't. Engage people where they are first, and then work to advance from that point.

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Development and performance

If we want a reliable stream of quality products and services out the door and a trustworthy supply of innovation in the pipeline, then one thing must happen. We must set both performance and development as goals for the teams we lead. I've seen many leaders move onto greener pastures, leaving behind no cadre of wise, conscious, skillful leaders to step in behind them. Regrettably, it sometimes takes the imminent retirement of entire levels of senior leaders to awaken organizations to the need to make development a strategic issue for the organization. Knowledge transfer alone requires this commitment. New, younger leaders are cut from very different cultural cloth than those of us with silver hair. What are we doing to prepare them?

Team development is really a search for more elegant means. It holds a promise for leaders that there are ways of working and being in relationship that yield greater results created with significantly less effort.

Focus on the four areas above to assess team performance. Then mix coaching with periodic time-outs to reflect and strategize; splice team process checks in with major project review and lessons learned discussions; celebrate movement forward. Like my hip pain, team pain begins with a little bit of discomfort, which escalates slowly if not treated. If any of this strikes a chord with you, you know what your work is. Enjoy the journey. ❖

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