



Are Teams & Teamwork Being Taken Seriously?

There is a lot of discussion around present events (this is being written during the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic) and the fact that businesses will have to change the way they work in the future. There is also a lot of debate about moving to more remote and virtual team working and with many workforces 'off the road' or 'out of the office' just now, this move to remote team working is already happening. In fact, this change has been happening for a while now and this move to more remote team working is only being accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. So where does this place the future of work-related teams?

It is generally accepted that teams are vital to the productivity of business and are needed to gain competitive advantage whether they be physical 'workplace' teams, 'geographically separated' sales and project teams or global 'virtual' project teams. Despite the present pandemic the vital importance of high-performance teams will not diminish – in fact with the potential for companies to downsize due to

COVID-19 then the importance of creating and sustaining high performance teams will most definitely increase. And this will happen both in remote and virtual teams as well as workplace teams where they meet physically.

So why is team development not on every organisation capability plan and why is so little done to continually develop the skills of team leadership in team managers and leaders? Now, I expect some of you reading this to highlight that most management leadership courses do provide information and instruction on how to lead teams effectively. And, yes, I would agree that there are masses of courses, books, blogs, articles, and videos out there that highlight what is needed for organisations, managers, and team leaders to learn more about high performance teams and how to lead them effectively. However, my questions are around just how much is really done to ensure that the learning from these resources is effectively put into practice and sustained? How many organisations have 'Teamwork' as a key company value but in effect do little, if anything, to properly develop team managers and project leaders in how to create and lead high performance teams? How many organisations have team development capability detailed in their company capability or training plan? How many team managers and team leaders really know the essential basics of teams in terms of the developmental models that need to be applied to guide the team from creation to high performance? How many organisations have invested in team coaches?

My experience is unfortunately that a good number of organisations I have knowledge of do not take teamwork as seriously as they should. They have 'teamwork' as one of their values, have it emblazoned on office walls, posters and employee materials but then pass on responsibility for developing the skills of teamwork to the managers and team leaders themselves, under the guise of 'self-development',

citing that the organisation's view is that the responsibility for learning sits with the employee. I am all for 'self-learning' and being 'responsible' but there must be some situations where the organisation actually takes the lead and provides resources and events to enable their team managers and project leaders to properly develop the skills and knowledge that they need in order to produce high performance teams.

Learning about teamwork and developing the skills necessary to create and lead high performance teams, whether they are physical, virtual, functional, cross functional, project or simply one-off task teams, is an absolute essential. A team 'bonding' session in the pub will no doubt be a 'good laugh' but will produce more 'sore heads' than a sustained ability and confidence to guide the team through the recognised team development stages. Conference team-building events such as synchronised drumming, cookery classes, performing the 'haka' or building paper & Lego bridges is simply 'corporate entertainment' and will not deliver the necessary knowledge, confidence, or skill for team managers to create and sustain high performing teams. Experiential team building can work provided the team tasks are appropriate, the facilitation and coaching is first class, and the experiences can be linked back to, and totally related to, experiences in the actual workplace. Vitally they must also produce an action plan that can be worked on when back at work. Having said this, for all this to really work the relevant and basic team 'theories' have to be learned and applied in the first instance.

However, it is not all negative as there are enlightened organisations out there who treat teams and team development seriously and as such ensure that their managers and team leaders have the necessary skills and knowledge about teams and team development. These organisations realise that they must go beyond the traditional leadership courses and they ensure that team development is a core part of their

corporate training and development plan. They may even have dedicated team coaches to support this development or in the event of not having this sort of resource internally, they may engage external team coaching expertise as they realise that they need to have their teams performing at the top of their game. This level of high performance is an absolute must if they are to compete at the top level against their competitors in increasingly tough marketplaces.

So, what do organisations have to do to ensure they have continually high performing teams?

1. They must take all their workplace teams seriously. Creating and leading high performing teams is a highly specialised skill that goes beyond just reading from a book or watching a video.
2. Ensure that 'Teamwork Capability' is an essential component of the Company Training Plan.
3. Ensure that, if there is a competency framework for managers and team leaders, then teamworking is a key competency along with the desired behaviours as descriptors.
4. If the organisation has the resources, then look at having dedicated internal capability that can support development of team leadership and teamwork. Failing that, the company must look for external support to assist in developing their teams.
5. Organisations must make sure the basic team development theory is covered utilising all the key developmental models that have been proven to work both in sports and in business.

Even if the organisation is committed to teams and team performance development, the 'stumbling blocks' to implementing team development may actually come from the

managers and team leaders themselves. The reasons behind this can be complex and I have outlined the following ten reasons as to why potentially team managers and leaders may not take team development seriously.

1. Many managers will manage and lead their teams based on what they **have experienced as a team member over the years**. The teams they have worked in may have performed and hit their targets and goals and hence the manager may have the mindset that says that if they simply do what the previous manager did, then everything will be all right. Given the fact that true high performing teams are not really that common, then the chances of a new manager having experienced that true top level high performance will be quite low. As such the manager may not be aware that there is a lot more to learn about teams and ensuring the team still grow and can reach their full potential. Organisations should always look to ensure new managers can learn about teams and be supported to be able to lead their teams based on new knowledge and enhanced team development skills. External coaches (or in the bigger companies, internal team coaches) can assist in supporting the development of managers to ensure they are more aware of what knowledge and skill is needed to effectively lead teams to high performance.
2. Following on from Point 1, many managers simply lack **a decent level of knowledge of team dynamics, practical motivation theory and team development models**. As I have mentioned already, many leadership and

management courses touch on team leadership and development, but unfortunately the theory can be limited and there is little emphasis on the practical application of team development and team performance theory. This can easily be rectified as there is an abundance of talent available that can provide development courses and programmes in team development so there can no excuse for not putting in the required support for managers and team leaders.

3. Associated with the lack of knowledge comes **a lack of skill in the art of facilitating and coaching the team**. Many managers still take an 'all encompassing' directive approach as regards all team activity especially meetings activity whereby they create the agenda and then run the whole meeting. If the team is lucky, then perhaps, they will get a say in the agenda and perhaps even set the logistics for the meeting up, but how many managers actually share the leadership of meetings in terms of getting team members to effectively facilitate and run the meetings? Many managers are comfortable coaching their individual team members on a 1:1 basis, but struggle with facilitating and coaching the whole team. Again, this can be easily rectified as there are numerous courses and programmes out there where team managers and team leaders can gain the facilitation and coaching skills required.
4. There are also those managers who **simply do not believe that team and individual performance is enhanced by teamwork**. Many of these managers have not played

competitive team sport (or experienced a true high-performance work team) and as such have not experienced the collective power of individuals really pulling together as a unit. As a result, the belief in teamwork is not as enhanced as it could be. Linked to this as well is also a possible **lack of risk taking** in terms of doing things differently and changing some approaches as to how the team tackle projects, tasks and challenges. A good team coach can work with these managers to work on their self-limiting beliefs as well as also supporting development of their knowledge of teams and team performance.

5. Staying on the belief front, **is the managerial belief that focus on the tasks alone will ensure that the team delivers the results** that are being expected. There is some truth in this in that this provides focus, but if an individual approach is taken then the team could be missing out on more effective and efficient ways of working unless a collective approach is taken. Pulling collectively together will ensure faster development of individual knowledge and skill and should ensure tasks are completed quicker and more creatively.
6. Many managers would like to spend more of their time with the team developing their processes, knowledge and skills but unfortunately **will bow to pressure to have their meetings filled with agenda items that are solely focused on 'business' tasks and 'updates'**. Many of these agenda 'items' will be generated by stakeholders



external to the team, but many managers will accept external requests for time on the team's meeting agenda as opposed to ensuring that there is regular protected time for team development. Seeing agendas change at the last minute to include items that the team do not see as their priority can be very demoralising for teams, so team managers must be able to challenge and influence senior stakeholders to that effect. A good team coach can work with the team leader or team manager to work on their influencing and challenging attitudes and skills.

7. Some teams contain quite challenging characters who are quite prepared to put their views and beliefs forward on a regular basis. Even though this can be done constructively **too many managers would prefer a 'quieter' life and as such will avoid such challenge.** They may even become very directive to ensure no response from the team members. I have seen managers avoid and even cancel team development meetings to avoid such instances and the reasons for the fear can be varied. These reasons can centre around an inability to positively manage the team dynamics and conflict; team challenge can create situations (such as idea generation) that may result in changes to the team operating plan which may cause the manager to have to inform and influence senior management; and there may even be a potential fear of being overshadowed by the more dominant, more experienced, and more capable individual team members. I have had experience of managers simply cancelling team development meetings as
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they were afraid that these meetings may expose the manager's failings. I am beginning to sound like a 'stuck record' here but a good team coach or a senior line manager skilled in team coaching can support managers to overcome these fears.

8. There will also be some team managers who **simply lack a decent level of EQ or Emotional Intelligence**. They will possibly have a high IQ, and this may not be matched with the level of EQ required to effectively engage with, and motivate, individuals as well as effectively engaging the entire team on a personal level. These managers relate more to the task involved than they do to the people in the team. They can be masters of process and can make excellent project managers, but leading and managing people effectively can pose a challenge for them and when they are presented with the multiple energies and differing personalities of numerous team members, then this can present real challenges for them. They can resort to micro-management tactics which can and probably will demotivate the team even further and cause further conflict. Team development situations where it is essential for the team to operate at an 'emotional' level can be daunting and intimidating for such managers so there can be a tendency to avoid such situations. Senior managers when recruiting and potentially promoting people into team manager and team leader positions need to ensure that their recruitment processes are of the highest quality so that the right person, with the right capabilities and personality is chosen for the team manager or team leader role.

9. I was made aware of a recently promoted manager who **demanded 'respect' from his team as he was their 'senior' and their 'boss'**. This resulted from the fact that the manager possessed a large ego and with the team being composed of passionate individuals who were keen on putting their ideas forward as well as expressing their frustrations, this proactivity was seen by the manager as a threat to his 'position'. The manager obviously did not like this situation, as in many instances his ideas were being challenged and this was not something he had been used to. As a result, he was not keen on the proposals being put forward as they were not 'his'. He felt that he was not in control of his team and as a result (as he was 'the boss') it was his decision as to how and what the team had to do. The 'I'm the boss' attitude when consistently applied to teams does not work and will result in anarchy and a possible 'overthrow'. I have seen several examples of this happen in my business experience and it usually is caused by a combination of several of the above factors and results in a total task focus and away from any team development opportunities.

10. Unfortunately, and sadly, there are several managers **who simply do not care for their team** (and for the individuals in the team) and as a result little dedicated team development takes place. They have a very selfish individualist approach and are not prepared to support the team or put themselves on the line for the team. When I was a young manager, I remember getting a pretty hard time from a senior manager for the lack of

sales growth that our team was demonstrating. I outlined the key reasons for the lack of growth and outlined the key actions we were taking to increase the growth, but the focus turned to my apparent inability to manage the performance of two of our team who were allegedly struggling. I backed both individuals (who had been Number one and Number two in the company for a different product), but this was seen as being 'weak' by the senior manager. (Nothing could be further than the truth but let us not go there!) After the meeting, a fellow manager said to me that they could not understand why I was 'taking one for the team' as opposed to simply pointing the finger at the two alleged underperformers and saying that I would put them on disciplinary. Their comment of 'you can't let them jeopardise and threaten your position, you have to look after number one' still sticks in my throat, some twenty odd years down the line! My experience of these type of managers thankfully is limited but they are out there, and my own view is that their behaviours need to be challenged by their senior line manager and by their peers. Unfortunately, many senior managers (and peers) will not challenge this type of behaviour as these types of manager are seen to be 'effectively managing performance'. Hmmm.

So, what can be done to ensure team development does happen? Here are four things you can put into action:

1. **Recruit robustly** and ensure team managers are the right people to effectively lead teams to high performance.

2. Make sure you **train and coach** these team managers to have a good knowledge of team dynamics, team models and team performance strategies.
3. **Provide excellent team and 1:1 coaching** (either internally or through external team coaches) to ensure that the skills needed to put the knowledge into practice are developed to the level required.
4. **Provide suitable and motivational incentives** that ensure team development and team performance is rewarded.

With many organisations having ‘Teamwork’ as one of their core values there can be no excuse to not have team development as one of their development priorities.

So, from both an organisational and an individual team manager and leader perspective, there are many potential ‘blocks’ to ensuring that team performance development is high on the agenda. What follows in this book is guidance and information as to how you can overcome these blocks by building your knowledge of teams, team dynamics and team performance strategies.