



## Working as Teams Rather than Groups

### Overview

“Teamwork” is commonly used in businesses and other work settings, but observations and empirical data do not support that organizational leaders know how to create, support, or use teams effectively. Many times, people are assigned to teams but the collective body works as a group, where individuals on the “team” contribute their parts without integrating their efforts with those of others assigned to the team. Many leaders have a “group” rather than team mentality, which immediately limits what people assigned to teams can accomplish. This paper should help leaders at different organizational levels understand these differences and the key attributes of high-performing teams. This paper also addresses the value of team charters in building cohesiveness and collective identity within a team.

### The Major Differences between Groups and Teams

Teams are small groups of people who have complementary skills and hold themselves mutually accountable for team results (Robbins & Judge, 2007). Furthermore, teams share a common purpose, goals, values, and approach. Some may argue that this definition could apply to groups, but the major difference is that people within groups are not necessarily accountable to others, with the exception of the leader who assigns a task or responsibility. In short, not all groups are teams, but all teams are groups because similarly-minded people are bound together through mutual accountability toward achieving a common purpose.

In a classic *Harvard Business Review* article, Katzenbach and Smith (1993) delineated several key differences between groups and teams. **Groups** have a strong, clearly focused leader with individual accountability for individual work products. The purpose of the group is invariably the same as the broader mission of the organization, and the purpose of the group is to discuss and delegate tasks that are performed outside of the context of the group (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Committees are good examples of groups.

On the other hand, **teams** share leadership roles because individual and mutual accountability exist. Rather than individual work products, collective products result from work that is done together. Teams have a specific purpose, which extends beyond mere discussion to actually accomplishing work together (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Sports teams are visible examples of this definition in action; no team can survive on a handful of stars. Everyone must contribute for the team to be successful; so it is with business teams as well.

Unlike groups that can be formed at the call of the central leader, teams go through four stages: Forming, storming, norming, and performing (Robbins & Judge, 2007). **Forming** requires getting the “right people on the bus” who have the character, commitment, and technical competence that complement these attributes in others on the team. **Storming** involves brainstorming ideas, appreciating the ideas and value that others bring to the team, and forming a central focus toward which all members direct their efforts.

**Norming** requires establishing operating standards and core values that define how the team members will behave as they perform their roles and execute responsibilities. Norming, a key differentiator between teams and groups, is critical in the **Performing** stage because team

members can expect some conflict to arise. Norms help everyone remember the *behaviors* to which team members are held accountable and which serve as “*rules of engagement*” to which everyone agrees to abide.

### The Value of Team Charters in Building Cohesiveness and Collective Identity

Team members face several challenges as they strive to ensure high levels of morale and productivity. Team charters serve a critical role in achieving the team purpose because charters help to define leadership and management responsibilities and actions within the team. *Leadership attributes* need to address attitudes and behaviors while *management attributes* need to address classic management actions of how the team is organized and staffed to achieve objectives.

Chartering a team appears to be a straightforward process. The charter evolves from the team’s purpose, goals and objectives, which should all align with organizational strategies. These strategies result from the organization’s purpose – its vision, mission and values. The organization’s purpose should be well-defined to set the right course for the strategies that executive leadership approves to pursue. Unfortunately, many teams stumble because team charters are not created at the outset, resulting in missteps and frustration as team members grope to find ways toward their objectives.

Although the constantly changing external environment can be a complicating factor, an effective environmental assessment based on market and corporate intelligence and shared internal knowledge should be part of the chartering process. Team members should review this assessment periodically to ensure strategies and teams are aligned with the organization’s purpose. In short, the team’s purpose and goals depend on the organizational strategies that leaders create to anticipate and respond to the markets, clients, and customers with which the company engages.

Jones and Schilling (2000) cited six paradigms of organizational improvement within which 38 different functions, activities, techniques, or practices exist and operate. A team could adopt a number of these practices or techniques, depending on the goals to be fulfilled or satisfied. However, **the effectiveness of any of these elements depends on the human capital that exists within the organization and within each team.** *The human capital that exists within a team is the most critical factor in creating team cohesiveness, developing a collective identity, and achieving results.*

Many times, a “rush to judgment” or a rush to get things done does not allow team members to establish their collective identity and singular purpose. Collective identity is crucial for team cohesiveness, which directly affects team morale and productivity (Walker and Schutte, 2004). Cohesiveness is linked to the team’s perception of efficacy which “favorably affects goal-setting, strategizing, and effort, thereby increasing the level of goal attainment and building further confidence” in the process (Walker and Schutte, 2004, p. 185). *Team cohesiveness stems from the quality of the inquiry process through which team members discover their strengths, weaknesses, and the gaps between what is and what needs to be* (LaRue, Childs, Larson and Goldsmith, 2004). Team cohesiveness benefits or suffers to the degree in which team members participate in the forming, storming, and norming processes.

The most successful teams are those where team members develop their collective identity through a discovery process that sets the foundation for the team culture. Establishing team values is a vital lesson in finding common ground-mentally, morally, and spiritually.

Finding the spirit of the team, from which the energy springs to face adversity, overcome disappointment, and press hard when the need arises, requires time, attention, and diligence on the part of all team members, not just the team leader. Chartering is a team process and a shared creation. Helping each person on the team understand how vital his or her individual perspective can be in helping to create the team's identity is the first challenge leaders must address and resolve.

### **The Attributes of Effective and High-Performing Teams**

Effective teams possess the following 12 attributes (McShane & Von Glinow, 2005):

1. Clear purpose
2. Informality
3. Participation
4. Listening
5. Civilized disagreement
6. Consensus decisions
7. Open communication
8. Clear roles and work assignments
9. Shared leadership
10. External relations
11. Style diversity
12. Self-assessment

The team charter needs to define or describe these attributes so that present and future team members understand the "rules of engagement" that govern team behaviors. Charters also need to be specific in terms of participation expectations, fulfilling obligations to the team and individual members, defining and executing roles and work assignments, and sharing leadership among members. The charter must also explicitly define how team members communicate, collaborate, and build consensus for actions rather than simply take a majority vote, which is something groups are prone to do.

High-performing teams possess the above characteristics and several others. Participative leadership and shared responsibilities that align on common purpose are hallmarks for high performance (McShane & Von Glinow, 2005). High levels of communication with a rapid response, task-focused mentality continually push team members to use their creative talents to do more with fewer resources.

High-performing teams also reflect the attributes of resilient organizations, including a pre-occupation with failure, sensitivity to operations, and deference to expertise within the organization as a whole as well as the team (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). In short, the members of high-performing teams demonstrate "mindfulness" where everyone is very aware of the organizational, social, and environmental settings in which the team operates, and the team takes action accordingly. This awareness begins with the team charter that defines the operating parameters and boundaries in which the team operates.

### **Summary**

Effective teams do not occur by chance. Organizational leaders must make conscious efforts to charter teams that achieve organizational goals and objectives by executing well-defined strategies and tactics. Team charters can be effective tools in addressing how diverse

team members can align their individual talents and abilities to create a collective identity and team cohesiveness. Leaders who understand the differences between groups and teams will achieve shared objectives more rapidly and effectively by possessing a greater appreciation for the individual and collective abilities of team members as well as the advantages of teams over groups.

### References

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