
HOW DO LEADERS BUILD TEAMWORK?

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The pursuit of teamwork and collaboration has become a holy grail in modern organisations. Is it achievable? Is it worth it? And what can leaders do to make it happen?

In May 2022, Adam Bryant in NYT Business reported on his interviews with more than 500 CEOs about what makes an effective team. It was a more useful list than often is produced by this method. Many CEOs privately admit to me that they are puzzled by teamwork, especially when it comes to their own executive. Bryant's research does suggest some important ingredients for teamwork, including having an agreed understanding of what success looks like; developing shared values; operating with respect towards each other, and; being willing to have difficult group conversations about progress and about working relationships.

Bryant's research challenges some popular current myths among senior executives about recruiting the best people and letting them "do their thing", or the elusive idea of "getting the right people on the bus".

Although removing a member is sometimes exactly what a team needs to flourish, it can be a costly and overused safety valve which also signals a failure of teamwork and leadership. Rather than represent progress, it can often become a revolving door. What a tricky puzzle!

I prefer studies which are based on actual systematic observation of teams and are brave enough to offer a theory about how to build them. Google uses innovative teams a lot, and a decade ago it engaged in the extensive Aristotle Project, which was an attempt to understand how to build and develop high performing teams at Google. This project concluded that there was one ingredient which ultimately determined the success of teams, and this was whether team members experienced “psychological safety” to fully contribute to the operation and outcome of the team. They concluded that a relational dimension determined objective performance.

The Human Dynamics Lab at MIT observes thousands of teams and emerged with a parallel conclusion to Google, that open and constant communication between all members was the secret ingredient for high performing teams. They use computers to track this sociometric and plot this team characteristic diagrammatically, and it reminds me of representations of healthy neural pathways in brain studies. They claim, and offer some validation, that they can predict in advance which teams will achieve a certain objective outcome, such as who will succeed at a marketing or investment pitch, without knowing anything about the task other than this communication quality within the team.

I occasionally use the Symlog instrument with teams. I am one of the very few accredited presenters who still offer it in Australia. Symlog, which means systematic multi-level observation of groups, was developed some time ago by Harvard academic Robert Bales. It has one major advantage over many of the more recent surveys which are readily available – it attempts to capture and represent diagrammatically, the relational working *dynamics* occurring at a particular time in a team, a group or an organization. Many other useful psychological instruments are *static*, and are attempting to capture certain properties about individuals, such as styles, attitudes, qualities or competencies, and the impact they may have on others. Some of my psychologist friends compete with the dismal science of economics, and are actually very pessimistic that folks can change many of these aspects in any substantial way.

Before the notion of values-based leadership was popularized in management circles, Bales realized that behaviours that occurred in any working group were shaped by the specific values that members held about working with others. He understood that these dynamics could become normative and culturally fixed over time, but he also recognized they could change a lot and at any time, through simple actions by individual members and leaders. Bales offers a guide on the more constructive and high performing values and behaviours, as well as those which contribute to polarizing dynamics in groups, and which undermine team effectiveness. These notions of *constructive and polarizing dynamics*, and the advice about *leadership interventions* to

shape and change the dynamics, are some of the great insights from Symlog.

Bales was also edging towards another insight about teams that other academics, such as Ron Heifetz, William Isaacs and Otto Scharmer, have explained more fully. Most individuals, teams and organizations are engaged in *work avoidance*. This is not an accusation of laziness. In fact, busyness is often a classic tactic. The work avoidance that is prevalent in many teams is the avoidance of openly acknowledging, discussing and changing the working relationships or dynamics that are occurring in that team. Why would professionals engage in such ineffective avoidance activity? Because open discussion of these matters can get emotional, cause anxiety, or conflict or embarrassment, and managers are worried that once milk is spilt from the bottle you can't get it back into the bottle. These fears have some foundation but are greatly exaggerated, and they pale compared to the personal, relational and performance rewards on offer for engaging constructively in the exercise. These fears also are the reason why expert facilitation of the process can be helpful as a short-term intervention. I sometimes use a modified version of *group-as-case method*, which I learnt from Ron Heifetz, to address work avoidance in the teams with which I work.

There is a diagnostic question which Leaders of teams need to be asking themselves regularly: What is really happening here? I regularly use a *dialogue method*, which I learnt from William Isaacs, Otto Scharmer, and some great mindfulness teachers, when I work with groups. A Dialogue framework provides both a way of understanding

what is happening in a group, and it provides simple but powerful strategies for altering those dynamics. I use dialogue in its' strict sense of speaking and listening, but I also use it in a more expansive sense of how folks are communicating, relating, problem-solving and creating together. I have written extensively about the nature and power of listening. I will not repeat myself here other than to reiterate that individuals including leaders, groups and organisations have typical or normative ways of listening. Often it can be judgemental, disempowering and non-productive. One of the most powerful leadership acts is to attend to the ways that folks, including ourselves, are listening, and to help shape or re-shape ours and theirs. A Dialogue approach challenges the tired stereotypes of what leadership looks like!

Bill Isaacs argues, that we can think of group dialogue as having certain stages, and that there are acts of leadership which can move groups through these stages. Stage One is Normative and Stage 2 is Positional. Neither of these stages is particularly high performing, although Stage 1 can be efficient in the short term, and Stage 2 is at least more honest and offers a seed of better things to come if you ever get there. Some simple leadership acts which can move groups beyond a normative (I sometimes call it polite) way of operating, is to be a bit rebellious and break some of the norms and rules, or to name some of the elephants which are being studiously ignored, or to paint an inspiring vision or burning platform for change. Stage 2 is more heated but too much of it is exhausting, and some simple leadership acts to help a group work their way through this and move forward, are the ability to stay calm and tolerate anxiety or conflict, and the willingness of a few people to

suspend judgement and listen respectfully to alternative positions. Groups will usually either slide back to the humdrum security of Stage 1, or make the break to Stage 3 which is Reflective.

Stage 3 is a more constructive and less driven way of operating, and it allows for more serious debate, a search for insight and joint problem-solving. The simple leadership acts from here are for most folks to join the few and suspend judgement, to engage in genuine listening which strives to understand things from the perspective of others, and to loosen the grip of their own egos. Stage 4 is the High-Performing Generative Stage of Dialogue or Group Dynamics (I sometimes call it the nirvana stage for teams), and it is characterized by alacrity and innovation. The Leadership acts required here are for most folks to park their egos and engage in generous listening towards each other, and a willingness to be playful, less meaningful and more creative. This entire process is neither linear nor mechanistic. It only happens with acts of leadership. I have participated in this process many, many times with teams and groups in organizations, and participants often experience it as a transformation of the team.

CEOs and senior managers will often contact me about problems they are having in their team with one or two managers. They will invite me to coach the particular team member. I do plenty of coaching, but I regularly advise the CEO that they will get a bigger bang for their buck if I work with the team itself, and it will be a much quicker process if they give me a day with their whole team. It reminds me of counsellors who often recommend that to be successful with the problematic child, it is better to work with the whole family. Some CEOs are dubious about

this method, and worried about the potential fall-out. They also argue that it is too hard to get the whole team out at the same time. Yet, I have a lot of success with this method! And the folks at the MIT Lab have found that many organisations structure things to militate against teamwork, such as rostering breaks one at a time, which kills the chance of fostering the very communication which is the key to high performing teams. Yet, it must be remembered that building effective teamwork also requires plenty of one-on-one work and corridor conversations by a leader. This is just another exquisite paradox.

Speaking of tricky puzzles, this Article began in that particular format of mine, until it grew a little too long. The initial puzzle affirmed the truth of the statement that: It takes leadership to build a high performing team. It also affirmed the statement that: Leadership is often more distributed in high performing teams. And it posed the question: Are leaders needed or not in high performing teams? I will give you a practical answer to that question. Recently, I have been working with a group of leaders who have been successful building highly effective teams with great dynamics in their own divisions. The CEO moved many of the leaders to a new division, and their new restructured teams fell apart. It was as if the divisional managers had forgotten how to build a high performing team. In fact, they had not forgotten this. They were engaging in wishful thinking and had forgotten that teams need to be built in the first place. Effective teams don't just grow on trees. It takes active leadership to build a team.

On a corporate workshop, one senior manager was described as a polarizing and tough individualist by her leadership group. Her response

to me? “I don’t come to work to have cups of coffee with everyone.” On another occasion, one CFO kept lobbying me during breaks to move on to the strategic decision-making part of the workshop, because he didn’t intend sending Christmas Cards to any of his work colleagues. This nervousness about working relationships can be quite revealing, but it also misses the point. The Richmond Tigers and the Geelong Cats turned their scrutiny to the quality of relationships when the clubs were both in the doldrums. If as a subsequence, and perhaps even a consequence, they had never won a football game or the odd three or four AFL premierships each, few people would have considered them high-performing teams.

It can be thrilling and rewarding to be part of a high-performing team.