

# Building Successful Teams

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Baird Brightman PhD

## *A group of people working together is not necessarily a team*

People working together do not always do their best work together. Teams can stumble and fall short of expectations for a variety of good reasons. When this happens, what should the team leader do? Start blaming/firing people? Schedule a team-building retreat? Hire a coach? Hope for the best?

In working over the years as a team member, leader and consultant, I have noticed that the same obstacles to team success keep appearing over and over, and they result from the assumption that a group of people working together equals a team. In the military and professional sports, a rich menu of resources (thinking, time, equipment, people, money) is invested in the start-up, development and operation of teams. This is because the team is the foundation unit of the whole operation. Success depends directly on the state of team readiness, and the costs of team failure are terrible and swift and public. Team failure is so costly a scenario that everyone from the top down is concerned on a daily basis with preventing it.

In the modern organization, teams operate more like a pickup game on the fly. A group of people is rapidly assembled, often drawing from different (sometimes competing) business units, hastily given its marching orders, and expected to perform at a high level. The underlying assumption here is that teams are nothing special, and all you have to do is give a group of people some work to do and you are good to go. The truth about work groups is a bit different.

Left to their own devices, human groups are vulnerable to a variety of action patterns due to the natural history and evolution of the human brain over thousands of years. Think of the brain/mind as a problem-solving organ designed to enable our species to survive and thrive in the face of environmental threats and opportunities. While team leaders think their people are coming to work each day, team members are mostly aiming to satisfy certain priorities of their own. As one team member cleverly noted: *There may be no "I" in TEAM, but there is a "ME"!*

If the team environment enables its members to satisfy their own priorities AND fulfill their work responsibilities in a balanced fashion, there will be peace on earth. If not, there will be war. Here are some of the common routines people employ when they perceive the team environment as failing to balance the legitimate requirements of ME and WE:

- Withholding of performance outputs (*quid pro quo*)
- Indirect expressions of anger with plausible deniability ("passive aggression")
- Formation of subgroups and cliques sharing common grievances and pursuing redress for same
- Flight (mental absence, "sick days", job search)
- Rage against the machine (theft, espionage, violence)

The value of maintaining good team *esprit de corps* derives directly from preventing these costly repercussions of team dysfunction. The best way to do this is a combination of prevention (perform regular check-ups and maintenance like your mechanic, dentist and primary care doc) and early intervention at the first signs of team dis-ease.

Worklife Strategies' **Team Consultation** program first measures the keys to team success, and then engages the team's energy and talent to address any obstacles to team success. The "team-building" process is not some artificial training exercise (climbing a virtual Mt. Everest or saving the rainforest) but rather a focused effort to build up the team's infrastructure for sustainable success. A **Team Consultation** can be initiated (a) in the early months of a team's life to make sure the start-up phase is optimal and to prevent early failures (b) on a periodic (e.g. yearly) check-up basis to catch and address emerging problems early, and (c) when team problems appear and solutions are not readily visible.

## **TEAM CONSULTATION**

Worklife Strategies' **Team Consultation** focuses your team's intelligence and energy on building a successful team. The consultation cycles through 3 critical phases: Assessment, Planning and Action.

### **PHASE I. Assessment**

First you need to determine whether your team has all the active ingredients required to succeed (HINT: most work group don't). A team assessment is rapidly conducted using two proprietary web-based instruments:

- Team Success Inventory: assess the 21 foundation components of team success
- TeamScan: assess the local team work environment

In some cases, targeted interviews aligned with specific assessment findings are recommended to drill deeper into the team's constitution.

## **PHASE II. Planning**

Once the assessment process has clarified the main challenges to your team's success, you can decide what to do about them. Based on a detailed review of the assessment data, the team will be tasked to develop a structured Action Plan to address one or more obstacles/challenges to team success. The consultant will frame action planning as a team challenge and facilitate the planning process (another opportunity to learn how the team works together ... or not). Creating the action plan is a very dynamic "team-building" episode as people work and make decisions together in support of their shared success. Clear action steps, timelines and assigned responsibility create a map for movement from the current to the desired level of team functioning. Some action steps will be taken completely within the team; others may involve people within the organization and external resources.

## **PHASE III. Action**

Once the Action Plan is finalized and ratified, nothing can be allowed to stand in the way of its successful implementation. The team's members/leader and key organizational stakeholders must own and execute the plan. The fact that the team members build the action plan themselves (rather than having it imposed on them) increases the likelihood of ownership and successful execution ("If YOU build it, you will come"). The consultant continues to facilitate the action phase as another robust opportunity to observe how the team works together (or not) and optimize those operations.

## **CASE STUDY**

A healthcare team was failing to meet critical requirements for quality, cost and speed. Team members completed the on-line consultation surveys which revealed the following obstacles to team success:

- Vague definition of team success
- Weak team performance management
- Lack of customer focus
- No ground rules for team behavior
- Dysfunctional relationship management practices
- Default work style favoring a lack of competitiveness, urgency and discipline
- Work strain/overload

### **The Solution**

The team and its sponsor agreed that the situation needed to improve quickly or the team needed to be re-staffed. The following intervention plan was developed and implemented with good results:

1. Create clear metrics for quality and financial performance and provide continuous feedback to the team
2. Develop and institute best relationship management, project management and process improvement practices
3. Align incentives with team performance
4. Establish and enforce a set of ground rules and best practices for successful team behavior
5. Reduce work strain by removing low value tasks, automating certain processes, boosting resources and developing technology solutions where possible.

By moving crisply from assessment to planning to action, a **Team Consultation** creates a platform for building and maintaining high-performance teams that can deliver a strong return on an organization's investment.

### **AUTHOR**

Baird Brightman PhD helps people succeed by strategically managing the human side of work. Educated as a behavioral scientist, Dr. Brightman has worked as a researcher, health professional, leader and consultant. He has been a lecturer at the Harvard Medical School and an executive education instructor at Harvard University. Baird consults with private clients on managing their work and career, and with business clients on talent leadership and team performance.

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