TEAM COACHING INSIGHT:
Primary Purpose and Leadership

Primary Purpose and Leadership

Our first paper began this series on developing Highly Effective Teams by demonstrating the return on investment gained by achieving a high performing team in contrast to a highly effective group of individuals.

We gave an overview of the benefits and challenges in becoming a high performing team, and highlighted the role of Team Coaching in accelerating and supporting their development.

In this the second paper in the series we turn our attention to the importance and impact of Primary Purpose and Team Leadership in creating an effective team.

Primary Purpose

Imperatives

The Primary Purpose is important in that it has caused the team's existence. Within this dimension of our Team Coaching model, the team and its leader have to lay the foundations of the twin imperatives; achievement of the primary purpose and developing effective teamwork.

Reality Check

Unfortunately, much of this is assumed to be so obvious it doesn't need stating and that great teamwork arises spontaneously. Neither is true. The first instance leaves team members with vague and differing understanding of what their objectives are. There is confusion about what they are doing, resulting in lack of direction, frustration, inaction and demotivation.

Differentiation

Secondly, in top management teams especially, there is often insufficient differentiation between the purpose of the team and the aims of the organisation; team members return to habitual strengths in their functional roles and/or their contractual obligations, neglecting their roles and responsibilities of enabling effective teamwork.

Involving the team in the process of constructing a well formulated primary purpose neatly disarms these traps and sets the expectation and ground rules for real teamwork.

Social Loafing

Finally, in this section we want to mention a subconscious characteristic of human behaviour that is most prevalent where there is little intrinsic motivation in the task or when group members do not feel a strong sense of social cohesion.

Known as "social loafing", it is that individuals sometimes work less hard when their efforts are combined with those of others, than when they are considered individually. Those whose work is difficult to identify and evaluate because of their roles in groups, make less effort. However, articulating a clear and unifying primary purpose assists in minimising social loafing. (Rutte 2003)

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Gaining Clarity

"Clarity of team objectives is the most important predictor of success." (West 2012).

Such research, and our experience, (see LLWR for an example), clearly indicate that teams that invest in activity to build clarity and unity of purpose with both task and team, are the ones that are most successful. So how to do this effectively?

We advocate that teams invest time and effort in discussing and exploring the meaning of the purpose or reason for the team's existence. The aim is to strip away as much uncertainty, vagueness, confusion and misapprehension as possible, and to be left with a series of precise statements that everyone understands and agrees to.

This process is a tussle, and requires the leader to facilitate open, appreciative, yet focused debate, to reach full understanding and agreement. Where there is pressure felt to get on with it and seek agreement before everyone is ready, the leader should resist, quest for deeper understanding and not be swayed by dominant voices or apparent time pressure.

Done well, this process transforms a working group into a team and begins realising the performance benefits of teamwork above those of the working group.

Done badly, for example trying to build a team around the concept of teamwork as opposed to building a team round a real team purpose, actually results in a drop in performance below that of the working group! (Katzenbach and Smith 1993)

"Whilst few teams determine vision, mission and objectives, considerable research identifies such planning makes it more likely that action will ensue." (Gollwitzer Bargh 1996)

In practice, and according to the research, we advise creating both a Vision, for how your highly effective team will function, a Mission, that your highly effective team aspires to deliver, and a small memorable set of Objectives.

Distinct from usual objectives, we want these to support effective teamwork, so they should require a team rather than individuals to achieve them, and one should be about team-performance and inter-team working.

Alignment

The bulk of work to create the vision, mission and objectives, occurs during the creation of the team, however, new information, emergent opportunities, mission creep and changes to external circumstances, for example the Covid pandemic, require regular and frequent re-alignment of the team and its objectives.

This is a key application of the central dimension of Team Coaching we've labelled, "Review, Explore, Challenge, Support & Adapt". Fundamental questions being: "Is what we have done and what we are about to do, still relevant and appropriate" (task achievement) and; "What works well about our teamwork and what can be improved?" (team working).

In conclusion, many teams struggle to develop effective teamwork due to lack of sufficient understanding and appreciation of the challenge. However, we have found and the research confirms, "By taking the time to clearly define team vision, mission and, by extension, objectives, those who work within teams have a greater chance of being effective in their work." (Pritchard et al. 1988, Tubbs 1986)

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Team Leadership

The Leadership Gap

In this part of the paper we draw attention to the attributes of leadership that have the greatest positive impact on team effectiveness. And note that the leader, whether intended or not, exercises a major influence on the culture and 'emotional' climate of the team through their approach.

As an example, we have observed a newly appointed leader within an existing team, through their own strong technical expertise, drive the team to focus on very tactical and task-based conversations. This leader gave insufficient attention to his role in promoting effective team-work and engaging with future challenges and opportunities. With this in mind, the leader must be chosen for their leadership attributes, and given organisational support (including coaching and mentoring) to develop leadership skills.

Again this may seem obvious, but many leaders are still promoted to their position on the basis of their technical expertise and individual achievements alone.

Influencing

The pervading view is that leaders exercise influence on performance through their direct interactions with team members, for instance, continually ensuring the team is clear of their direction and objectives. Then monitoring progress, giving feedback and coaching. This is a causal perspective and has real value, but it does not consider that team members can think, decide and act for themselves.

This emerging leadership perspective contends that the leader exercises influence through their creation of positive emotional and structural conditions in which the team thrives, enabling the added value of a self- motivated and empowered team (Hackman 2002). For instance, by modelling skills and attributes such as recognising and revealing feelings, positive exchange, active listening, learning, appreciation and respect, the leader creates a safe emotional environment and encourages team members to adopt and display the same skills and attributes in their own exchanges. (See also Primary purpose above).

Discernment

Top of our list of attributes for team leadership is discernment, clearly lacking in the example above. Discernment is the leader's ability to focus the team on the right things at the right time, e.g.

- zealously directing the team in pursuit of the primary purpose rather than tolerating mission drift

- lifting team-member's attention up to a forward horizon focus, to consider potential challenge responses and opportunities, as opposed to dwelling on tactical functional and technical considerations

- promoting holistic interdependency to manage the team as a team, rather than as individuals engaged in solo tasks

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Inspirational Leadership

The traditional leadership role is characterised by setting out expectations, rewarding successful completion, and taking corrective action should things go wrong. Whilst transactional leadership is important to ensure acceptable standards, e.g. pay, working conditions and colleague relationships, it is hardly inspiring.

The leader of an aspiring high performing team needs the team to be pro-actively engaged, to invest their trust in the leader, to perform at a high level and to contribute to the team's goals.

Inspirational leadership occurs when the leader recognises and makes the most of the tasks intrinsic motivators. For example;

- modelling conviction and consistency with the team's vision, appealing to the team on an emotional level as well as a rational level.

- inspiring motivation by articulating the values, meaning and optimism of the team's mission. As exemplified in the activity of creating the primary purpose above.

- stimulating intellectual engagement by encouraging creativity, challenging assumptions, asking the team for ideas and suggestions about how to achieve the objectives and how to develop team performance.

- mentoring and coaching each individual team-member, listening to concerns, and providing the resources and skill development they need.

Managing Conflict

Conflict can be beneficial and desirable; it can also be destructive. The benefit to teams includes; innovation, collaboration and improved performance. This is more likely in a diverse team (see below), therefore the leader needs to be adept at conflict management.

Moreover, the leader should "mine" for conflict (Lencioni 2002) to overcome the natural reticence to disturb apparent harmony which prevents team learning. Interpersonal conflict, however, needs decisive resolution to minimise damage.

Compromise is not as good as a win-win and for all conflict, a collaborative resolution where both party's needs are met is the ideal. "Getting to Yes" (Fisher and Ury 2011) provides great guidance. They propose to remove the emotion, focus on the rational and manage the conflict.

Where the stakes are high, the leader may need the support of a professional mediator.

De-railers

Some people have real difficulties in working with others, e.g. volatile, close minded, aloof functionally entrenched and so on. Persistent or intractable offenders are best removed from the team.

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Cautionary Notes

Psychometrics are frequently used for compatibility and have real value in providing a language to discuss difference and raise tolerance. Research has not found causal links between personality diversity and high performing teams.

The well-meant and inclusive action of recruiting all the heads of functions to the top management team, must be tempered with a reality check of their propensity for team work.

Functional heads are frequently independent high achievers and great tacticians. A surprising number struggle to differentiate between their team role and their functional role, which interferes with their teamwork and their holistic and horizon thinking.

Conclusion

The leader must be chosen for their leadership attributes, and given organisational support to develop leadership skills. Their inspirational influence creates the positive emotional conditions in which the team strives and thrives. Their discernment focuses the team on the most important matters to progress both the purpose and team performance, and their management of conflict and diversity drives task innovation and team performance to the benefit of all.

The next paper explores the dimension of Structure and the impact it has in shaping, developing and supporting high performing teams.

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