

TEAM COACHING INSIGHT:  
Team Members



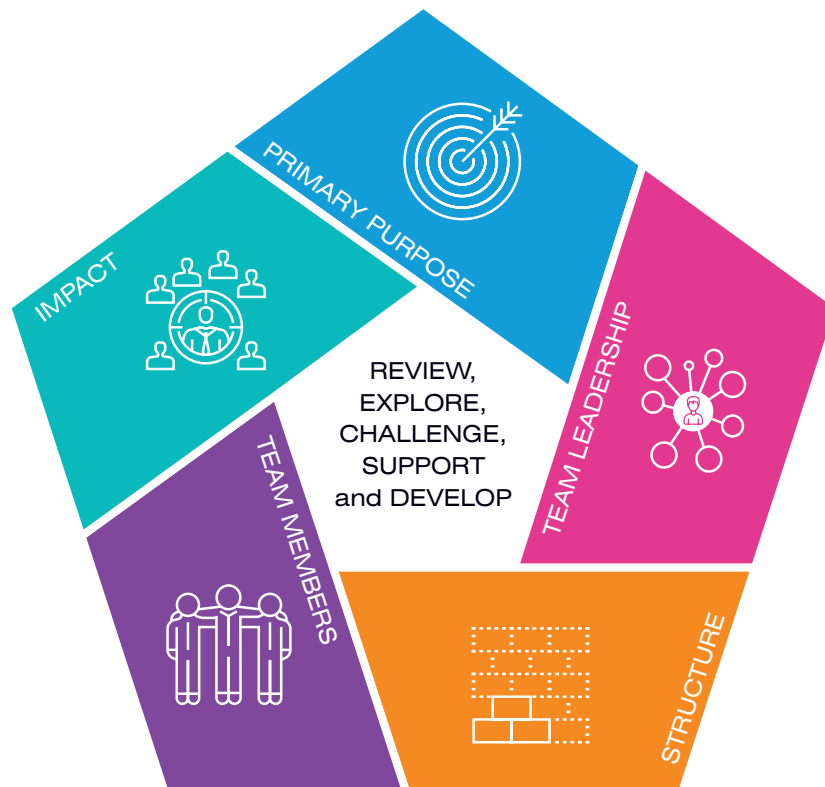
## Team Members

*In this fourth paper on Acorn's guide to Team Coaching we look at the critical factors affecting how and why Team Members best contribute to and/or derail effective teamwork. In doing so we highlight opportunities to build beneficial, and discourage unhelpful, behaviours. Our purpose here is the ongoing engagement and development of team behaviours that contribute to the purpose.*

*People are enabled to get the job done by creating the right conditions for team working. Our previous papers (see [www.acorncoaching.com/insights](http://www.acorncoaching.com/insights)) have highlighted the right context of a clear, meaningful primary purpose; inspiring, team oriented leadership and enabling structures. However, we all know that people only really become team members when they choose to and have understood and accepted the differences between working individually and working as a team. Katzenbach and Smith (1993) call this conviction.*

*It's important to select and develop people who like to work collectively as a team toward the team's goal. This is not about personality types and compatibility, this is about motivation, a preference for working in a team vs. individually and the supporting knowledge and skills for working in teams. Core team skills such as active respectful listening, speaking openly and cooperation; to skills such as collaboration, concern for team development and interpersonal awareness are essential and must be developed if the team is to become a high performing entity.*

### The Five Dimensions of Teams



## Team Members

### Commitment (responsibility for the team and its development)

Commitment, (Lencioni 2002), is more than intellectual agreement, it is giving loyalty to this team in pursuit of team performance results over and above other work loyalties and individual achievement.

This is a strong statement with considerable implications for potential team members. Team members risk much (achievement, status, prestige, etc.) by sharing control with their colleagues.

West (2012) describes commitment as “*full participation*” towards achieving the team’s goals, positively supporting colleagues, creating confidence, ensuring good relationships in both the team and with the wider organisation.

### Selflessness vs. individualism

Lack of commitment is often apparent from the individual’s behaviour towards the team. We can ask, for example:

- Does the individual prioritise functional meetings/work above team meetings/work?
- Or leak team conflict?
- Or criticise team colleagues and/or decisions outside the team?
- Or overly defend their own functional position against the team’s primary goal?
- Or appear to dismiss their colleague’s contribution to meetings (roll their eyes)?

Indicators such as these above very likely show that the individual is more committed to their own agenda than they are to the team. Strongly individualist employees are best employed in individualist roles, effective teams need team players.

### Social harmony

Tolerating anti-team behaviour, for the sake of social harmony is misguided since it actually pushes people apart (Lencioni 2002 and West 2012). When we sense that someone is not taking their role responsibly (not committing), without always realising it, we withhold our own commitment to the team.

Typically, this is characterised by lack of real progress e.g. excessive analysis and putting off decisions for “lack of information”; which causes energy and commitment to evaporate and performance to dive.

It is also worth being aware that teams that seek social harmony as a goal may well be disguising a reluctance to focus on the team’s task performance goals, or, that there is a lack of sufficient clarity, compulsion or challenge in the team’s task performance goal.

## Team Members

### High performance ethic

Successful teams have a high performance ethic and consequently put ideological (technical / functional etc.) differences centre stage (Katzenbach and Smith 1993). This puts the team's performance ahead of their own egos, by offering their thoughts openly, in faith that their colleagues will support them whilst potentially challenging their ideas.

They engage in thorough debate to work the differences through, arriving at a deep and rich understanding of the issues and then they choose to collaborate for the best way forward. Because, when everyone has been heard and understood completely, then they will happily commit to the team ahead of their own initial positions, make a joint decision, and support it both in and outside the team.

Performance and commitment issues cannot be tolerated and must be challenged.  
(Lencioni 2002)

### Leaders challenge

In the early days of a team it falls to the team leader to insist that team membership is predicated on full commitment. Expectations of robust ideological debate and the enabling behaviours can be set and the leader exemplify them. The leader then reacts firmly as soon as consistent signs of lack of commitment occur.

In particular, drawing attention to the indicating behaviours that have been observed, how they undermine the team and emotional safety (see the previous paper on structure), that teamwork is the only way to succeed at this task, and how the team's goal is more important and worthwhile than other work or personal egos. The desired outcome needs to be full commitment to, or departure from, the team.

### Mutual accountability

However, the team leader doesn't bear all responsibility for rectifying anti-team behaviour. In a committed team, members will want the team to succeed and do not like to let each other down.

Also there is a strong tendency to conform to the norms of the majority (Asch 1956).

Further, team-member's expectations of the desired performance ethic in each other, mean they often challenge those who don't meet that standard. Thus, commonly held performance goals create a powerful positive force for demanding commitment, focusing on results and improving performance.

## Team Members

### Trust and risk

*“Trust in teams is vital to team members’ preparedness to cooperate”* (Korsgaard, Brodt and Spienza 2003). Trust (emotional safety) between team members enables people to risk being completely open and honest, about their ideological thoughts and about their strengths and weaknesses; and vulnerability and trust are characteristics of highly effective teams. (Lencioni (2002), and Katzenbach and Smith (1993).

Whatever their history, each new team has to develop their relationships and trust in each other from the ground up. It’s not that people are naturally suspicious, just that the work place has taught people to be self-reliant, circumspect and political. This is especially true for people in more senior roles.

Factors that build trust include: being trustworthy (reliable, dependable, loyal, respectful); being vulnerable (open and honest about one’s own strengths and weaknesses, and one’s thoughts and feelings); extending trust in others; having a climate of emotional safety (from the previous paper, a protective structure in which the team can be completely unguarded); and a leader who leads with their own vulnerability and trustworthiness and promotes trust within the team.

### Purposeful time and effort

Trust is built over time. So time together needs to be seen as an investment, a necessity for effective teamwork and an urgent priority. Members should resist the temptation to save time by sending emails, or making phone calls or excluding “unnecessary” members from meetings.

Although fast and efficient in the individualist workplace, such communication socially distances team members from each other allowing the team’s focus to wander and blur. Where trust is required (team performance), it is more effective to communicate face to face as often as possible. Meeting face to face breaks down barriers, builds relationships and develops the team.

Time together should include both work and social contexts. Socialising is an easier environment in which to get to know people better. (West 2012; Lencioni 2002).

### Baggage handling

If feelings are running very high about business issues, then acknowledge the fact with the team, set the expectation of ideological debate and start with a social element to the team’s meeting.

Meet in a neutral offsite space, and have everyone deliver a short potted history e.g. sporting, cultural, and community interests, personal achievements, education and career highlights.

The leader should go first to set the standard.

Eating together around a table for the whole team; and taking part in facilitated experiential activities also get people talking, which breaks down barriers and tensions before moving on to the business issues. Additional subsequent social meetings, perhaps around lunch, deepen the relationships.

The research is clear (Hinds and Mortenson 2002 in West), that once even a basic social bond is created, e.g. social proximity, it is harder to maintain a “them and us” attitude.

Remember this isn’t about being warm and fluffy, or intended to embarrass: This is about building trust in order to achieve team performance so attendance and participation should be of highest priority.

## Team Members

### Ideological conflict

The above work to build commitment to the team, mutual trust and emotional safety is invested to achieve this next key dimension of team-working, which is ideological conflict. Not the interpersonal conflict that can flare up in any organisation but the conflict of ideas and diverse perspectives about issues within the team's task.

Each individual within a team brings the value of their knowledge, skills and experience; from which they form an opinion.

The point of a team is to benefit from the synergy that can come from the joint expertise of the team members. Often each individual's opinion is from their unique perspective, and their colleagues can add further value through their own contributions. These differing perspectives can be at odds; thus conflict.

Ideological conflict as described above should not be stifled, but heard out in full, otherwise how will the team gain a full understanding of the issue and make the best decision?

### Conflict resolution

If there is any reluctance to verbalise the last remaining concerns, or suspicion that someone is withholding their ideas, (shyness, similarity with other people's ideas, urgency) resist moving on, instead try to discover what it is.

"Mining" for conflict gets it all out in the open where it can be dealt with and, as Lencioni says, *"avoids the destructive hallway conversations that inevitably result when people are reluctant to engage in direct, productive debate."*

Decisions do not require consensus, again the research shows that when people feel they have been listened to they are quite prepared to commit to decisions that don't accommodate their views. This is the goal, full commitment to the decision made.

Challenge and stop all debate that is not about issues but about personal position winning or losing. A win-win, collaborative, conflict management approach is the key to success. (See the previous paper on the team-leader's role for further discussion of conflict management).

### Awareness/acceptance of others values and diversity

According to the research (West 2012) the broader the range of functional/professional diversity that the team can live with (diversity raises potential interpersonal conflict), the better can be the performance (richness of understanding, level of innovation).

Cultural diversity can increase creativity, but only when language and values differences are sufficiently accommodated so that cohesion is not negatively affected.

Gender diversity also provides mixed results (Carli and Eagly 2011). Results indicate that with more women involved, team's report team functioning more positively. (Promoting participation and involvement of all, although men are more likely to interrupt women in meetings, paying less attention to their contribution).

Such value differences have often been learnt in early life and manifest in many subtle (and unsubtle!) ways. Being more curious about value difference enables people to establish better foundations for team relationships, so that the value of diversity can be fully harnessed.

## Team Members

### Emotional awareness of self/others

Whilst diversity can improve creativity and innovation through ideological conflict, it will negatively affect performance if it undermines the team's mutual trust and cohesion. Therefore, time and effort in developing the skills of effective teamwork is highly important. In particular developing emotionally intelligent and secure members with an orientation to collaborative problem solving and team-working.

Emotional intelligence is the ability to understand the impact that the team is having on oneself and also the impact one has on the rest of the team. With heightened emotional self-awareness and social-awareness (empathy), comes the opportunity for improved self-control resulting in increased security (emotional safety) which allows greater risk taking and improved stress tolerance.

The more emotionally intelligent the team members the greater the chances of success in high stakes situations. (Goleman 1999).

### Team working behaviours

Finally, clear rules help set expectations and a basis for team relationships focused on performance. The actual rules decided upon will be contextual. For the key team meeting, it may be helpful to consider the following:

- Attendance - no higher priorities, no staff substitutes
- Participation - no interruptions to make phone calls, texts, emails
- Ideological conflict - get it out in the open, don't allow it to fester and no sacred cows
- Confidentiality - the only things that leave this room are what we agree will leave this room
- Facts are friendly - no such thing as bad news
- Focus on the end product - stay on topic and ensure information is relevant
- Everyone does real work - no passengers

Achieving the performance standards of a highly effective team takes sustained desire and effort. Team members must, therefore, believe that the team's mission is important and that team work is how they can best achieve that mission.

If any of the above are new skills to be learnt, team members will get there quicker and with more confidence when given positive feedback, recognition and reward for stepping in the right direction. For example, shy people speaking up, bravely challenging the elephant in the room.

In addition, it should be noted that it is never too late to develop team working behaviours, no matter how experienced the team member may be.

## Team Members

### Summary

Team Performance requires interdependency, the synergy of diverse skills producing more than the sum of the parts. For this to be possible team members must fully commit to their team, and realise their success is dependent on team performance results.

Commitment comes from trusting and being trusted, which in turn is built on vulnerability; on the candid admission of where our abilities are strong and where our weaknesses require the help of others.

Commitment, trust and vulnerability in the members, enable the team to benefit from the full diversity of its member's knowledge, skill and ability in particular when opinions differ and ideological conflict arises.

Such conflict thoroughly explores difference, and mutual trust allows the team to explore potential solutions and decide on the best solution. These are the responsibilities of the team members.

### Selected Bibliography

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Acorn Coaching & Development Ltd.  
Wildman House  
127 Highgate  
Kendal LA9 4EN  
UK

Telephone. +44 (0) 1539 741 511  
Email. [mail@acorncoaching.com](mailto:mail@acorncoaching.com)  
[www.acorncoaching.com](http://www.acorncoaching.com)

