

Developing Effective Teams

We've all experienced frustrations with being part of a team - the team spends too much time arguing (or being too polite), going round in circles, discussing options but not making decisions, team members constantly interrupt each other etc. The result is that the team is not as productive as it could be. Most people would accept that effective teams deliver more than less effective teams, but to create a truly effective team takes time and discipline. It doesn't happen by chance, teams have to work at it. This is why we aren't big fans of typical "teambuilding" events. Having fun together is one element of creating an effective team, but it is only a small part. The fun soon wears off and the frustrations within the team soon reappear!

This article sets out to provide a pragmatic understanding of what things need to be in place to create a high performing team and some ideas for how to go about it. It is based on the extensive research surrounding teams and also our practical experience of working with teams across a range of sectors and organisations.

What does the research on teams tell us?

There are now some well established principles around how to create highly effective teams. We'll start with our favourite definition of what an effective team looks like from Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith:

"A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable"

Each part of this definition is important. Another important factor is the amount of interdependence required within the team to get things done i.e. how closely do people need to work to achieve the task. If you don't need people to work together why try to create a team? Effective teams spend time on *how* they work together in addition to *what* they work on. Different team members contribute in different ways to the team's success. In addition to their functional role (the finance person, the production person) team members may also be good at coming up with new ideas, focussing on the detail, providing energy and urgency to the team etc.

How can this help you build a truly effective team?

Our experience shows that team development workshops must be tailored to help the team identify and address its real needs. We help teams through three stages – Diagnose, Discuss and Decide.

Diagnosis - teams are often reluctant to surface issues with each other. We use our own online Team Effectiveness Questionnaire (TEQ) to gather perceptions from each team member prior to a workshop. We may also use other diagnostic tools and experiential team exercises to help the team reflect on how it works together. Surprisingly, more often than not the issues within the team are not down to individual relationships, but a lack of clarity or alignment within the team. Poor relationships may be a symptom, but can often be the result of people working on goals that are in conflict or where there is a lack of clarity on the team's purpose etc. Of course they may also be an issue around poor leadership. Encouraging the team to evaluate how it works together will compensate for poor leadership – to an extent. Where the leader is part of the problem we would advise working with the leader separately (by providing coaching etc.).

Discussion – the TEQ results form the basis of the discussion for the team. We ask them to identify the key issues in their data – both positive and negative.



Decision – having gone through diagnosis and discussion it is important to push the team to commit to doing things differently. As we know change is tough and it may mean individuals have to address aspects of their behaviour. It will almost certainly mean that the team has to decide how to change (or put in place) processes for how it will make decisions in the future, how it will generate and evaluate ideas more effectively, dedicate more time to meetings and so on.

What simple steps can you take to improve the performance of your team?

- Get them together as often as you can. Not for meetings to talk about day-to-day issues, but to talk about how the team is working together. The more people work together, the better they get to know each other. The better they get to know each other, the better they work together. But only go quad biking **after** the team has reached agreement on how it will work together!
- Ensure the team is clear on its overall purpose. Ask each team member to write down on a piece of paper what they think the purpose of the team is – in less than 30 words. Share everyone's thoughts. You will be amazed at how different these can be!
- Discuss and agree team goals. These may translate into individual goals, but they should link directly to the team's overall purpose. Make the goals SMART so that progress can be measured and ensure that the team monitors its own progress towards the goals.
- Help the team understand how each team member contributes to the team beyond their functional role. The Belbin team Role questionnaire is a popular way to do this as is the Myers-Briggs personality instrument (MBTI), but there are many others. If you are feeling brave then a really powerful exercise is to get each team member to give feedback to every other team member on how they help or hinder the team's performance.
- Discuss and agree how the team will manage things such as sharing information outside of meetings, generating and evaluating ideas, ensuring contribution from every team member, handling conflict, making decisions etc.
- Discuss and agree groundrules for accepted standards of behaviour within the team. Is it OK to be late for meetings? Is it OK to interrupt each other? Decisions on these kinds of things will be unique to every team, but will also remove a lot of the tension that might otherwise be present in the team simply caused by bad behaviour!
- Keep raising the bar. You might feel like the team is performing well, but the best teams constantly challenge how they work in an effort to raise their performance.