

The Eight Functions of Teams and How to Leverage Them

By

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You'll be most motivated to spend time on team analysis when your team faces a roadblock, but often that will be too late. A more proactive approach would be to do some teambuilding when things are going well. To do that, you simply ask the members of the team to examine the eight critical functions for high-performing teams, the strengths they need to leverage, and the weaknesses they need to mitigate.

As you analyze the eight team functions, you may conclude that top performers working together are bound to experience anxiety. Usually these people have made their mark through individual contributions, and collaborating may seem foreign to them. In general, you'll find that team members usually experience anxiety from one of two main sources: not accomplishing the task or faulty interpersonal relationships. In their solo work, they didn't have to rely on anybody else to accomplish the work, and they could control the quality of the results without anyone else's involvement.

When task issues create the problem, the team will identify difficulty with goal setting, accountability, or decision-making. Also they will disclose that they are worried about setting priorities, managing time, coordinating efforts, and distributing work. When goals are unclear or vague, or when members can't agree on the goal, strain is the inevitable outcome. Therefore, setting concrete, specific, measurable goals not only contributes to task completion; it also helps to circumvent one of the main causes of the tension and sets the stage for clarifying how to distribute the work.

When faulty interpersonal relationships create problems, members will talk about not being able to trust one another, conflict, and the inability to work cohesively. Usually they haven't been communicating very effectively—at least they haven't been listening to each other too well. Some problems may be temporary, but some may have more permanence. Knowing what to expect will arm you with the information you'll need to determine the degree of difficulty the team experiences.

Most teams go through predictable stages of development, but after days or weeks, the team should be able to perform. (There's no rushing the stages of team development. Each team

must find its own cadence and balance. However, if the team can't perform by the end of six weeks, the leader may need to step in).

The team is then ready to exhibit high flexibility and maximum use of productivity. Energy is high because the team utilizes each member's strengths, and competitiveness does not hamper participation. They now show the maturity to start making their own decisions to move ideas to action. The eight functions begin to work in harmony to create a team of virtuosos, not a collection of egos:



Decision Making / Problem Solving

The most important task of a team is solving problems and making decisions—everything else hinges on these. Therefore, even when leaders turn decision-making over to a group, they retain the obligation to evaluate and influence *how* the group will proceed. The leader's role is to facilitate the team members' best thinking, to challenge them, and to help them think more effectively than if you weren't involved.

No one method for doing this works every time, so leaders should consider the pro's and con's of each approach before advocating a course of action. Usually the nature of the decision or circumstances will determine the process that will be most effective. The leader should help them focus on solutions and stretch them to go where they've never gone before. Here are the alternatives:

Consensus involves members agreeing to support a decision—not necessarily unanimity. Group members begin with different points of view, but after discussion, all members agree to support the same decision. People often confuse consensus decision-making with compromise, but the two differ. Compromise, by definition, involves a settlement of differences in which each side makes concessions—people give to get, in other words.

Compromise involves more of a settling and negotiating than consensus does. Group members give in on some points in order to achieve their important goals. This settlement can result only in partial satisfaction and, therefore, questionable commitment to the outcome

Voting is one of the fastest methods for decision-making, but it presents other problems. Even *majority vote*, which involves over 50% of the participants agreeing to a course of action, can create difficulties if the decision will require the commitment of each person, even the dissenting ones. A worse problem, *minority rule*, occurs when fewer than 50% of the members support a decision, a situation that most often occurs when there are three or more alternatives. This division of support can cause the final outcome to be without substantial advocacy. Both majority and minority rule can cause problems since, in either situation, a significant number of group members may not be motivated to implement the decision.

Sometimes an authority or expert in the group, after hearing discussion of the alternatives, will make the final decision. Typically, if the members recognize the expertise of the person and feel others have considered their contributions, they will support the decision.

However, if these conditions don't exist, the group's acceptance of the conclusion will be tenuous

Trust

Without question, effective decision-making is the engine of the train that drives effective teamwork, but trust fuels the engine. Without trust, nothing happens. Lack of trust compromises the individual's effectiveness on the team, reduces team performance, and increases cycle time—which creates higher costs and lower productivity.

People talk about trust as though everyone agrees on the definition. Some use it to express their confidence in another. In another context it means something more akin to a belief in another's loyalty. The definition of trust that so many overlook—but certainly feel—involves the faith people have in each other not to judge them.

Top performers almost uniformly dread criticism of their work. They want not only to deliver amazing results but also to know others can count on them to do so. Therefore, admitting limitations and asking for help are foreign behaviors to many virtuosos. Allowing themselves to stretch—which frequently invites failure—will happen only when they feel safe. When members don't trust, they conceal their weaknesses from each other and try to cover their mistakes. Instead of asking for help and constructive feedback from each other and those outside the group, they waste time trying to justify their actions. So, what can you do to create the safe haven they need to produce the kinds of results one would expect from a team of virtuosos?

Challenging in the best of circumstances, building trust in geographically separated teams, when face-to-face communication rarely exists, can be daunting. Research suggests that when teams rely on teleconferencing and other forms of communication technology—especially when members do not already know each other—building trust can take two or three times longer than it would if the members met face-to-face. Therefore, the first favor any leader can do everyone is to create and fund opportunities for members to work together in the same location, especially at the beginning of a project. Where trust goes, cohesive efforts follow.

Collaboration

Business expert Ken Blanchard said, “None of us is as smart as all of us.” This means that $1 + 1 = 3$, or a team is more than the sum of its parts. Synergy occurs when the team’s performance or accomplishments surpass the capabilities of the individual team members—the bonus that occurs when things work together harmoniously. When members collaborate, the ideas of one often trigger a response from another person that neither would have thought of independently. Further, the vitality of one individual can spur others on when their own energy wanes.

Where synergy goes, collaboration follows. Collaboration is the "glue" that causes the members to remain with a team, even when there are pressures or influences to leave it. Sometimes the personal attraction among the participants contributes to collaboration, but often there is a satisfaction in achieving a goal that could not otherwise have been attained that causes the cohesion to develop.

Teams that collaborate usually enjoy low turnover and high participation because members desire continuation of the team and its commitment to goal accomplishment. When trust, support, and affection exist among the participants, there is room for personal growth, even if that means an occasional expression of hostility, dissatisfaction, or frustration.

Collaboration usually first appears when team members realize they are interdependent—no one person can accomplish the goal without the input or cooperation of the others. Without this insight, groups tend to operate as committees of loosely connected solo performers, and shared objectives flounder. True collaboration involves more.

When members dig deeply into issues to find underlying concerns, several things happen. First, they discover solutions that no one has ever even considered before, much less implemented. They also stimulate their best thinking and fully explore alternatives. They attempt to find solutions that satisfy all concerned and create an environment in which team members can recognize and utilize others’ talents and expertise.

Leadership

Because leaders are not typically members of the team, their role must consistently remain that of external authority. Even though they exert influence over the individuals and the group, if they interfere too much, they reduce the effectiveness of the team. Ideally, they should communicate their trust and then back up their words with actions by refusing to play a role in squabbles or disagreements.

Teams need leaders, however, both from within the group and from the person responsible for the team's performance. Often leaders will emerge through the stages of the team's development. Sometimes members will rotate leadership responsibility, depending on the nature of the goal. When people understand the priorities and values they need to address, making the decisions and accomplishing the tasks becomes much easier. But it all starts with a crystal clear understanding of what the team needs to accomplish.

Clear Goals

Virtuoso teams care about one thing above all else: results. Input and process pale in comparison to output—the achievement of clearly defined, specific goals. By definition, most top performers are strategists. The very nature of the individual will cause him or her to focus relentlessly on *what* needs to happen before detailing the *how* of the venture.

Goal-oriented individuals achieve impressive results because the satisfaction of a job well done satisfies their own best interest—they need to feel successful. Often high-performing team will need their leader to help them redefine their success measures. Individualistic behaviors need to take a back seat to the team's success, but this doesn't happen automatically or easily.

The team needs to realize their leader values results above all else. If they sense otherwise, the leader invites hidden agendas and self-aggrandizing behaviors. Teams go through predictable stages of development, but they should never lose sight of their long- and short-term goals. If they do, the leader asking “What are we trying to do?” and “What's important now?” will help them refocus on objectives and priorities without becoming unduly distracted by process. It all depends on effective communication.

Communication

On a team of “A” players, message sending—talking—seldom defines the reason for communication breakdowns. Message receiving—listening—does. Smart people often overlook the fact that others have valid opinions that they need to hear. Frequently they prefer pontificating to entertaining alternative points of view.

What can leaders do to mitigate the natural officious tendencies of these people? First, when they try to engage in off-line discussion, force them to prove they’ve heard each other: “What did Bob have to say when you put that idea on the table?” “Explain to me why Susan objects to your idea.” They may not like articulating opposing viewpoints, but they should be able to. If they can’t, it proves either they didn’t listen to the argument, or they never considered it seriously.

Second, leaders should model the behavior they want team members to replicate. Develop the habit of listening first and talking second. Don’t interrupt, and ask open-ended question to help the other person flesh out ideas. Offer your own ideas only after you have given the other people a chance to explore theirs thoroughly.

Star performers realize they can’t get their way all the time, and in fact, consensus building can waste valuable time and compromise results. But members must feel as though other group members have heard and considered their opinions and ideas. Otherwise, conflict surfaces.

Effective Conflict Resolution

When communication and trust break down, conflict occurs. Sometimes it happens anyway. Even though it won’t make people feel good, you should expect conflict and even embrace it. On the one hand, team membership provides a way for relieving pressure because distributing responsibilities and talking with others who share our concerns can relieve tension and reduce stress. Research tells us that groups make more daring decisions than a person working alone would, primarily because of the shared responsibility and blame if something goes wrong. On the other hand, when we try to work with others to accomplish a goal, annoyance is a likely byproduct.

Not all tension is related to goal accomplishment. Often teams experience problems with interpersonal relationships. Frequently stars have short fuses. By nature they are impatient people

who want fast results. It's one of the reasons they succeed. However, their impatience often triggers anger. Anger, like tension, is usually seen as something destructive, something to be avoided. Managed effectively, anger can provide the energy that helps the team move toward action, to mobilize it into action. Healthy teamwork depends on the ability of the participants to give accurate feedback to each other, even when this feedback is negative. Anger helps to do that.

What should you do? Put the issues on the table and have people talk about them. When conflict does occur among team members, it should be settled as soon as possible, because if it is not negotiated to a conclusion, it will shadow all phases of the discussion process and will interfere with the team reaching its goal. This can be particularly troublesome when the team tries to operate under time restraints.

Conflict can be either constructive or destructive. Much will be determined by how members manage the discussion and by how they regard each other. Managed effectively, when the participants view each other with respect, resolving differences can actually help the team function more efficiently, because discussing problems increases awareness, encourages change, and increases motivation. If we don't know something is broken, we can't fix it.

Conflict can also serve to reduce small tensions among the team members. In fact, conflict resolution can enrich relationships. Many times conflict intimidates us because we are afraid that it will cause a major breakdown in rapport. Once we learn the fallacy of that thinking, we become more confident about resolving future disagreements and moving on with objectives.

Accountability

A team of virtuosos commits to impressive results and holds itself accountable as a team without blaming "the weak link." All are in the same boat. Timeline- and deadline-driven, members measure performance by assessing collective work products, and everyone does real work. In short, virtuoso teams commit individually and collectively to results.

Perhaps the most significant cause of problems for teams is that members literally don't know what they or other members do or should do. Members haven't established clear lines of responsibility; they don't communicate and haven't clarified publicly exactly what the team needs to achieve and how everyone must behave. Ambiguity becomes the enemy of accountability, which compromises commitment. This lack of understanding creates barriers

among team members that significantly impede efficient and effective teamwork, but with the right kind of help, team members can learn methods for removing these obstacles.

One of the best tools you can use to help a team overcome some of the discord so members can get back on track is to have a candid discussion about areas of accountability for task accomplishment and decision-making. The goal of accountability charting is to help the members operate more effectively by clarifying each team member's role, responsibilities, and expectations. Charting helps everyone understand who should participate in which decisions and identifies the right people for work assignments, projects, meetings, and task forces. It also helps people learn how not to step on each other's toes and how not to assume someone else will take care of a particular task

Conclusion

Understanding how to build a team of exceptional people involves appreciating how individual members' characteristics and personalities unite to form the unique culture of a virtuoso team. Satisfaction, performance, productivity, effectiveness, and turnover depend, to a large degree, on the socio-emotional make-up of the team. No two teams are alike—even if the two teams would both be considered teams of virtuosos. However, when we understand some of the universal factors that contribute to successful interactions among exceptional people, we can adapt and adjust communication to the situation and make choices that will benefit the team and the organization.