

## What makes an exceptional team?

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In this article we examine how to consistently create an exceptional team considering:

- What are the essentials – team purpose, selection and development?
- How does the team form and adhere?
- What is team success and when is it realized?

### Definitions

As Katzenbach and Smith (1993) tell us in their landmark study, "A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they are mutually accountable." An exceptional team is an ordinary group that will achieve extraordinary performance while transforming group members individually and collectively (Bellman and Ryan, 2009).

### The essence of teams

Teams are a mainstay of the contemporary corporate world. The flat, lean cross-functionality characteristic of global market environs requires collaborative efforts. Teams can be both project and process oriented. What is shared in all conceptions of a successful team is the idea of goal achievement (Lewis-McClear and Taylor, 1998). Examining the optimum way to select and bring together groups of individuals to realize a desired goal is key.

### Team Composition

In their discussion of exceptional groups, Bellman and Ryan (2009) point to an array of factors which speak to consistent team performance, the first being a compelling purpose. Every member of the team must share the same interpretation of purpose or goal (Team Technology, 2006). The team requires a clear mission statement that all members agree upon. Moreover, equal commitment to the realization of that mission by all members is a cornerstone value (Tuckman, 2001).

Then, there is the question of selection. A great team begins with "getting the right people on the bus" (Collins, 2001). It seems an obvious truism, but so many teams are formed with the idea of talent aggregation overshadowing people alignment. Both matter equally. As Meredith Belbin (2010) frames it without keeping team roles in mind (monitor evaluators, shapers, implementers et al) a team cannot cohere to even reach the unified performance level.

Power dynamics is one of the most important yet delicate aspects of team structure. Under the guidance of a team leader, leadership must be shared and accountability divided. There must

be sufficient differentiation in roles to accomplish all facets of the task but all team members share the role of being as “glue” as opposed to “solvents”. (Oliver Wyman Delta, 2010)

### **How are best team practices realized?**

When Bellman and Ryan speak to “just enough structure”, they are referring to an environment with clearly specified rules and norms for team functioning, but with sufficient latitude for team accomplishment – which depends on each member contributing their individual best and respective expertise. This may be spoken of in terms of emotional intelligence. High functioning team members have exceptional interpersonal skills, specifically a balanced sense of both empathy and social responsibility as well as an incorporation of their team role into the constellation of their respective professional identities (Goleman, 2006).

Team success depends on full engagement by all members to purpose as well as productive interdependence including a positive attitude toward difference that embraces and recognizes the need for not only distinct skill sets but unique perspectives.

Here is where communication skills are paramount (Harris and Sherblom, 2010). An analogy can be made to a ship in an ocean storm. The sound of the torrential wind and crashing waves may well make direct communication on board impossible. This exterior noise is not unlike the ‘noise’ of organizational climates with different deadline demands, political struggles, internal competition and more. The successful team must develop a system of communication that can overcome all external obstacles and impediments. This requires an array of skills, most notably active listening and verification.

### **The stages of team development**

Bruce Tuckman’s classic model (1965, 2001) argues that there are five stages of team development that will essentially etch the positive arc of any group success. Beginning with an understanding of the goal of optimum performance (stage four) and productive conclusion (stage five), it is pivotal to understand the stages that must precede positive outcome:

- Forming
- Storming
- Norming
- Performing
- Adjourning

*Forming* is the stage when the team first comes together. At this stage there will be high dependence on the formal leader (i.e. the individual/s responsible for bringing the team together). Purpose is articulated and each team member begins the internal balancing act of recognizing their contribution to the team in a distinctive way vs. their collaborative

responsibility, assessing how to meet their own expectations and egos, asking questions that will enlighten each and all.

The *storm* returns at stage two. The best of teams will clash in the early stages. Individual interpretation will result in a seeming conflict of aims and team members will jockey for position in the absence of clarity. Collective decision-making will be difficult. This is natural and normal. What distinguishes teams that succeed is how quickly they can come to grips with the goals and roles that brought the team together in the first place. Are compromise and consensus seeking institutionalized?

The coming together of ways of working as a team is the *norming* stage. Big decisions are made by the group. Roles and responsibilities are delineated and accepted. Processes and working styles are discussed and put into place. Commitment is evident. Relationships and interdependence take root. Conjoint leadership emerges and the team can focus on the task and *perform* with a shared vision.

Finally, when the task has been completed, the team will break up (*adjourn*) and everyone can move onto new things, hopefully feeling good about what's been achieved and the new relationships that have been established.

### **Gauging success**

When a team reaches its goal there are several ways of calibrating success. One is, of course, results. Was the purpose accomplished in a way that the costs were clearly outweighed by the benefits? How was the goal reached? Was it done in a timely fashion? How well were resources used? Was it a just satisfactory result or are management *and the team* delighted?

A further measurement of health is the state of the team. An exceptional group will only be strengthened by each project or engagement, there will be new learning, and relationships will have been strengthened. This, as Bellman and Ryan point out, is essential as process growth is just as important an overarching goal of a highly successful team.

### **Conclusion**

To realize team success as a norm of business operations requires an understanding of the composition of 'extraordinary groups': a compelling goal; sufficient structure for cohesion without impeding creativity; full engagement; shared leadership; a desire for learning; positive attitude towards diverse ideas and feedback; working toward and valuing great results together. It can also be appreciated by observing the arc of growth of team progression through the five stage model.

In the final analysis, an exceptional team will be one that achieves an outstanding end product and a coherent group that emerges much stronger, with a result highlighting that a well functioning team exceeds what the same people can achieve individually.

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