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# What Leaders Can Learn About Teamwork and Developing High Performance Teams From Organization Development Practitioners

By D.D. Warrick

## Introduction

The ability of organizations to be skilled at teamwork and building high performance teams is a major key to competitive advantage and may very well determine the future success or failure of many organizations. The payoffs of teamwork are well documented (see for example, Katzenback & Smith, 1993; LaFasto & Larson, 2001; McShane & Von Glinow, 2010; Hellriegel & Slocum, 2011; Levi, 2011). Teamwork can significantly improve performance, effectiveness, efficiency, morale, job satisfaction, unity of purpose, communications, innovative thinking, quality, speed in getting things done, and loyalty to an organization. By contrast, organizations that are not skilled at teamwork are sure to underutilize their potential and are just as sure to suffer the many internal and external consequences that a lack of teamwork brings. It makes sense that organizations of all types and sizes from the private, public, non-profit, athletic, military, and other sectors should make teamwork a high priority and that leaders should be trained to be skilled in developing high performance teams.

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supports the value of teamwork, and teamwork is almost always a central theme of text books and practitioner books on leadership and how to build successful organizations, most organizations do little if anything to build teamwork. In fact, leaders are rarely trained how to build teamwork and high performance teams, and organization cultures, designs, priorities, pressures, and rewards often discourage teamwork. Yes, there are excellent examples of teamwork in some organizations, athletic teams, the military, and a few other organizations. However, excelling at teamwork is not the norm. If you want a reality check on how effective organizations are at teamwork, gather a sampling of people from your own organization or different organizations together and ask the following questions:

- a. Do you believe that teamwork is important to the success of an organization?
- b. Does your organization excel at teamwork at the top, within teams, and between teams?
- c. Do you believe that your organization values and rewards teamwork and being a team player?
- d. What does your organization do to train leaders how to build high performance teams?

## The Valuable Contribution Organization Development Practitioners Can Make in Training Leaders How to Build Teamwork and High Performance Teams

Organization development practitioners are uniquely qualified to address the teamwork dilemma by championing the importance of teamwork and by multiplying their effects by training leaders in the fundamentals of what OD practitioners do to build teamwork and high performance teams. For purposes of this article, I am defining OD practitioners as those who are trained in OD and practice OD as a profession, or use OD in how they approach their jobs. For readers who may not be familiar with OD, there are many definitions of OD (Cummings & Worley, 2001; Warrick, 2005; Rothwell, Stavros, Sullivan, & Sullivan, 2010). The definition that I am using for this article is that OD is a planned and collaborative process for understanding, developing, and changing organizations to improve their health, effectiveness, and self-renewing capabilities.

One of the early distinctives of OD was its emphasis on teamwork, collaboration, and team building, and on the core value of transference, meaning that OD practitioners are committed to transferring what they know. Thus, OD practitioners should be well trained in how to foster teamwork and high performance teams and should be willing to share what they have learned.

The purpose of this article is to point out the need for organizations to excel at teamwork if they are going to succeed in these times of dynamic change and unrelenting competition, and to encourage OD practitioners to champion the need for teamwork, to help organizations build teamwork, and to multiply their efforts by training leaders in the fundamentals of what they know and do to develop teamwork and high performance teams. The potential payoffs of these efforts to organizations could be substantial and could even determine their future success or failure. In this article, a prototype of how this can be done is provided to encourage OD practitioners to create their own approaches.

## Communicating the Important Difference Between Experiential and Action Team Building

To gain the interest of leaders in learning how to build high performance teams, it is important to clarify the difference between *experiential* and *action team building*. If you ask leaders what comes to mind when they hear the term team building, they will typically say that it means doing a series of experiential exercises such as trust walks and trust falls that some would just as soon avoid. The field of organization development bears some of the responsibility for misconceptions about what team building is as early team building efforts tended to be heavily experientially-oriented, which sometimes gave OD the reputation of being a “touchy feely” field.

Experiential team building typically does indeed consist of a number of experiential exercises. It has a valuable purpose in that it can be used to build camaraderie and help people understand important concepts. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that by doing experiential exercises a team will suddenly become a high performance team. Doing a trust walk may illustrate the importance of trust, but building trust takes time and real life actions that earn trust.

Building a high performance team is hard work, does not happen overnight, and comes primarily from action team building. Action-oriented team building involves participants in the specific actions needed to build a high performance team. For example, a team may need to agree on the purpose of the team, on what it will take for the team to be successful, on the vision and mission of the team, on the responsibilities of the team and each team member, on the standards the team will operate by, and on the goals of the team. Once these fundamentals are established, it takes time, practice, and continuous improvement to build a high performance team.

In preparing leaders to understand team building, it is also important to point out that teams have different situations and purposes, and that what it will take for a particular team to be a high performance

team, and if a team even needs to be a high performance team, will differ with each team. The point is that there are many valuable lessons leaders can learn about teamwork and building high performance teams from OD practitioners, and that OD practitioners can do a better job of transferring what they know to leaders.

## A Prototype for Transferring What OD Practitioners Know to Developing Leaders Skilled in Building Teams and Teamwork

There are a number of resources available on how to build high performance teams (for example, see Larson & LaFasto, 1989; Wheelan, 2005; *Leading Teams* published by the Harvard Business School Press, 2006; Anderson, 2012). The most popular model was developed by Tuckman and Jensen (1977) that includes five stages of team development:

1. Forming: getting to know the team members and the team;
2. Storming: team members struggle to establish roles, norms, and goals;
3. Norming: roles, norms, and goals are established;
4. Performing: team members have learned to efficiently coordinate activities, resolve conflicts, and work together with a high level of trust;
5. Adjourning: the team is about to disband and team members shift their focus from a task to a relationship focus.

While this is an excellent model, the focus is primarily on forming new teams and showing the life cycle of teams.

Based on a review of various models for developing high performance teams and my own experience in working with hundreds of teams, I have identified five fundamentals for championing efforts to improve teamwork and to train leaders how to build high performance teams. Keep in mind that the goal is not to present one approach, but rather to encourage OD practitioners to develop their own approach based on what they know and have seen work. Also, keep in mind that this prototype addresses basic, fundamental concepts, and that once the fundamentals



Table 1

## CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAMS

### STRUCTURED FOR RESULTS

- Effective leadership
- Team members that are competent, compatible, and committed to the success of the team
- Strong commitment by the leader and the team members to excellence
- Clearly understood mission and goals that team members are committed to achieving
- Clearly understood member roles and responsibilities
- Effective planning procedures
- Effective follow-up procedures and controls
- Flexibility to respond quickly to needed change

### MANAGE AND IMPROVE GROUP PROCESSES

- Clearly understood group norms that encourage healthy behavior and high performance
- All team members are valued and treated with respect
- Open and candid communications
- Encourage straightforward, transparent, and supportive behaviors
- Discourage game playing, manipulation, and behind the scenes maneuvering
- Effective decision making and problem solving processes
- Conflicts are openly discussed and resolved constructively
- Team and individual team member strengths are fully utilized
- The team members perform as a united team but also encourage independent thinking

### DEVELOP A HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAM CULTURE

- Team has a positive, can-do attitude that inspires excellence
- Team is results and action oriented but also has fun
- Team members have a high level of trust of the team leader and each team member
- A warm, friendly, supportive, and uplifting working relationship exists among the team members

### HAVE RESULTS-ORIENTED MEETINGS

- Meetings have a clear purpose and agenda and are productive and results-oriented
- Meetings are characterized by open, lively, and focused discussions and unity once decisions are made
- At least four types of meetings are held, some simultaneously: (1) information sharing; (2) decision-making/problem-solving; (3) team improvement; and (4) social/developmental
- Follow-up assignments are clear and expected to be accomplished

### ACHIEVE A HIGH LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE

- The team is highly productive and makes high quality decisions
- Member morale and satisfaction with the team is high
- The team is successful at accomplishing realistic goals

new teams or working with existing teams, or are working with on-going or temporary project teams, or trying to build face-to-face or virtual teams, there are at least six essentials to building high performance teams (see *Figure 2* and for ideas on the essentials see Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; LaFasto & Larson, 2001; Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn, 2005; Dyer, Dyer Jr., & Dyer, 2007):

- Effective Team Leadership.** No amount of team building will replace the need to have a team leader who is committed to building a high performance team that performs above the norm and has the knowledge and skills to successfully lead a team.
- Capable and Committed Team Members.** It is important to have or to be developing the right players for the team in order to build a high performance team. You cannot have an “A team” with “C players.” An “A player” is a team member who has valuable skills that contribute to the success of the team and who is a committed team player. “B players” can also be valuable to a team. They are developing skills needed by the team and are committed team players. A “C player” is a team member who either does not have the right skills needed by the team, appears unwilling or unable to develop the skills, and/or is not a committed team player. One ineffective or disruptive team member can handicap the whole team.
- Team Norms That Create a High Performance Culture.** Norms are standards of behavior that begin to shape the team culture and the practices and behaviors of team members. They can be positive or negative, helpful or harmful, and can have a significant influence on the performance and health of a team. Norms can happen by design or default, so it is important to establish norms by design by agreeing on the norms and what it takes to create them. It is also important

for the team to agree on what to do if team members consistently operate outside the norms so that there is an understood process for addressing issues.

- d. **Structuring the Team for Results.** Another essential fundamental to building a high performance team is to structure the team for results. Some of the important structural issues that should be clear and designed to make the team successful are: (1) having the right people on the team; (2) clarifying the mission of the team; (3) clarifying the responsibilities of the team, the team leader, and the team members; (4) agreeing on a few high impact, clear, and motivating goals; and (5) determining how and when the team will meet and for what purposes.
- e. **An Organized Way To Improve Team Processes.** While it is customary and essential for teams, such as athletic teams, to continuously work at getting better at what they do, this is seldom the case for teams in organizations. Curiously, it is not unusual for teams to never spend time focusing on how to improve the team and how it functions. It is important to establish an appropriate number of times each year for the purpose of evaluating what is working and what could be improved to increase the effectiveness of the team, and to involve the team in making improvements. In efforts to involve team members in improving the effectiveness of the team, leaders need to be discerning about when they should use an internal or external professional to facilitate these meetings.
- f. **An Organized Way to Manage and Improve Team Results.** In addition to evaluating and considering ways to improve team processes, teams should also periodically evaluate and seek ways to improve team results. This can be accomplished by tracking and periodically evaluating performance measures and

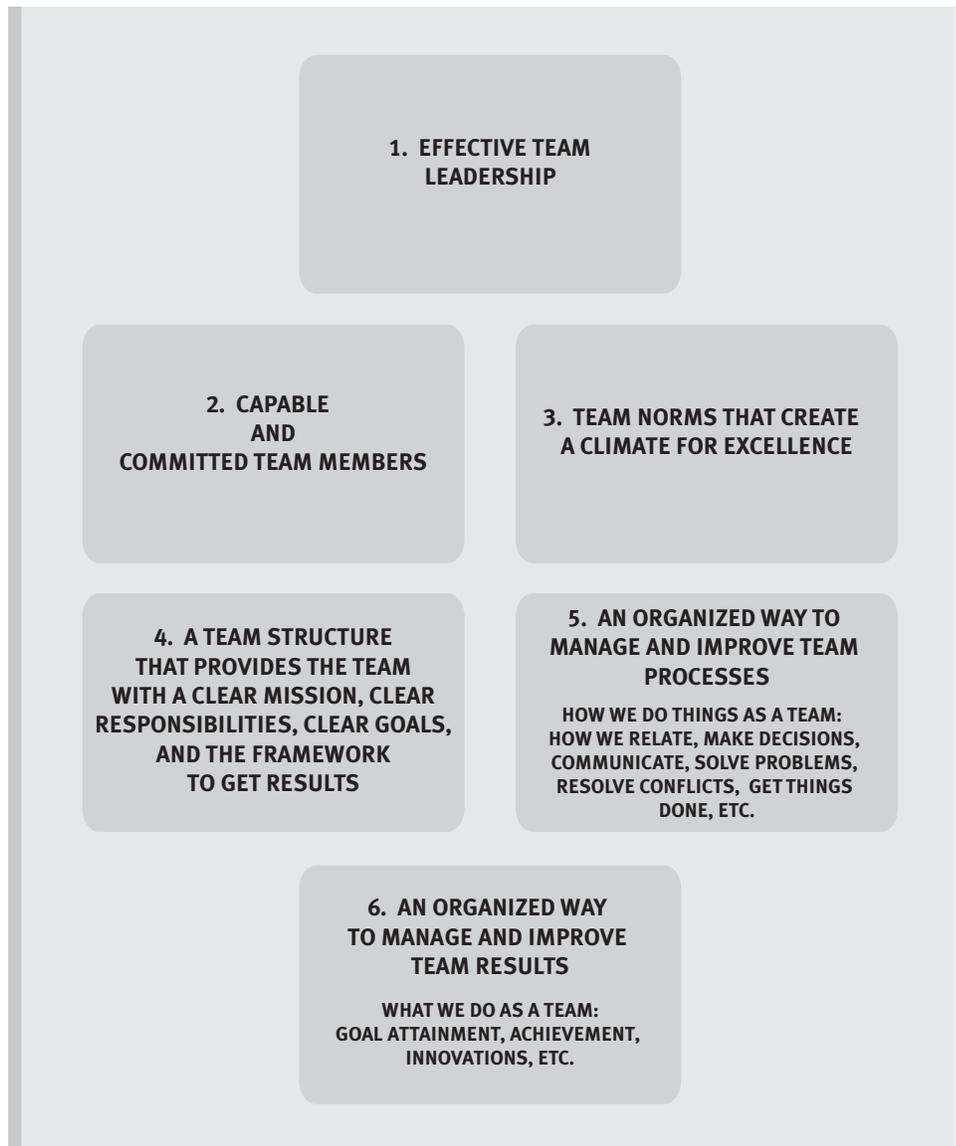


Figure 2. Essentials of Building High Performance Teams

- goals the team committed to achieving, and to making needed improvements and changes.
- 5. **Provide tools for building high performance teams.** Once leaders have the right perspective about teamwork and understand the characteristics of a high performance team and the essentials for building a high performance team, they need a few team building tools to help them in the team building process. For example, it is helpful to provide leaders with: (1) a team building questionnaire to evaluate the effectiveness and realities of the team (see Figure 3 for an example of a Team Building Questionnaire based on the Characteristics Of A High Performance Team shown in Figure 2); (2) sample team norms they can use to develop norms with their team; (3) a simple form to guide them in structuring their team for results with a clear mission, clear responsibilities and expectations of team members, norms that guide the way the team functions, a few goals the team needs to accomplish to be successful, and formal and informal meeting plans (see Figure 4 for an example); and (4) a form to help clarify team member roles that could include, for example, a ranking of major responsibilities, a list of top three to five priorities, changes that would more fully utilize the potential of the individual, what others could do to help each person succeed, and what each

## TEAM BUILDING QUESTIONNAIRE

**INSTRUCTIONS:** On each item below, **CIRCLE THE NUMBER THAT BEST REPRESENTS HOW YOU WOULD RATE YOUR TEAM.** Consider **1-3 A LOW RATING**, **4 AN AVERAGE RATING**, AND **5-7 A HIGH RATING**. Circle only one number for each statement. It is very important that you express your observations honestly and objectively so an accurate profile can be developed.  
**Total your points to discover the type of team that you have.**

LOW	AVE.	HIGH	
1	2	3	<b>STRUCTURE</b>
1	2	3	1. The Team leader provides Vision, Direction, and Inspiration.
1	2	3	2. The Team has a clear Mission.
1	2	3	3. The Responsibilities of the Team and each Team member are clear.
1	2	3	4. The Team has clear Goals.
1	2	3	5. The Team is effectively organized to achieve the best possible results.
1	2	3	6. The Team does the necessary planning to be effective.
1	2	3	7. The Team is effective at following through on goals, projects, and commitments.
1	2	3	8. The Team has the necessary resources, support, and control to succeed.
1	2	3	9. The Team operates with minimal red tape and bureaucracy.
1	2	3	10. The potential of the Team and each Team member is fully utilized.
1	2	3	11. The Team is flexible and responds quickly to needed changes.
			<b>PROCESSES</b>
1	2	3	12. The Team leader encourages participation and involvement.
1	2	3	13. All Team members have a strong commitment to the success of the Team.
1	2	3	14. All Team members are committed Team Players.
1	2	3	15. Team members feel free to be candid and communicate openly.
1	2	3	16. Ideas are critiqued in a positive way by attacking problems and not people.
1	2	3	17. All Team members use a style that encourages effective problem solving.
1	2	3	18. Problems and conflicts are openly discussed and resolved.
1	2	3	19. Team members may disagree but are united once decisions are made.
1	2	3	20. Team members are valued and rewarded for their efforts.
1	2	3	21. The Team has an excellent relationship with other teams in the organization.
1	2	3	22. Time is taken periodically to evaluate and improve the Team.
			<b>CULTURE</b>
1	2	3	23. The Team has a sense of vitality, enthusiasm, and team spirit.
1	2	3	24. Team members work well together and support and encourage each other.
1	2	3	25. An atmosphere of trust exists among the Team members.
1	2	3	26. The Team has an environment that encourages innovative ideas and constant improvement.
1	2	3	27. The Team has an environment that is warm, friendly, and fun.
1	2	3	28. The Team encourages and supports state-of-the-art training and personal development.
1	2	3	29. The Team fully utilizes the talents of each team member.
			<b>MEETINGS</b>
1	2	3	30. The Team meetings are well-designed to be useful and productive.
1	2	3	31. A variety of meetings are held to involve Team members in sharing ideas.
			<b>RESULTS</b>
1	2	3	32. The Team is very successful at achieving the desired results.
1	2	3	33. Team morale is high.
1	2	3	34. The Team excels at being customer-driven and service-oriented.
1	2	3	35. The Team produces high quality work.

High Performance = 193 – 224      Good = 160 – 192      Average = 129 – 159      Below Average = 96 – 127      Weak = 32 – 95

TEAM STRENGTHS	TEAM OPPORTUNITIES

Figure 3. Team Building Questionnaire

person could do to be a more effective team player or help others succeed. Team questionnaires are available on Survey Monkey, Qualtech, and a variety of other servers.

**Designing the Present and Future Training Process to be an Intervention Rather Than an Event**

Typical training is an event where people attend sessions, leave, and, it is assumed, will apply something that they learned. Properly designed, training in building teamwork and teams can include assignments that enable participants to

apply what is being learned and to ideally improve teamwork at the top, within teams, between teams, and with key stakeholders. When OD practitioners are involved in training, they should have the expertise to design training as an action learning intervention rather than an event, and to provide coaching and facilitation help as leaders learn to apply what they have learned. They should also have the expertise to design future training supported by coaching and facilitation help so that they can continue to share their knowledge and capabilities in helping develop teamwork and leaders who are skilled at building high performance teams.

**Conclusion**

In today’s highly competitive and rapidly changing environment, teamwork is not the only key to an organization’s success, but it is a major key as organizations that excel at teamwork will typically out-perform and do everything faster, better, and smarter than their competitors. The irony is that while virtually everyone believes in the value of teamwork, and it is well documented that teamwork plays a significant role in the success or failure of an organization, it is a rare organization that does much more than talk about teamwork. This presents a unique opportunity for

<b>TEAM NAME:</b>		<b>TEAM LEADER:</b>	
<b>TEAM MEMBERS:</b>			
<b>TEAM MISSION (PURPOSE)</b>			
<b>TEAM LEADER ROLE (RESPONSIBILITIES)</b>			
<b>TEAM MEMBER ROLE (RESPONSIBILITIES)</b>			
<b>TEAM RESPONSIBILITIES</b>			
<b>TEAM NORMS</b>			
<b>TEAM MEETINGS AND WAYS OF COMMUNICATING</b>			
<b>TYPE OF MEETING</b>	<b>WAYS OF COMMUNICATING</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>	
<b>TEAMGOALS</b>			
<b>GOALS</b>	<b>TARGET DATE</b>	<b>GOAL LEADER</b>	
<b>TEAM PROCESS FOR HANDLING TEAM ISSUES</b>			

Figure 4. Structuring the Team for Results

OD practitioners to become champions of teamwork and to multiply their efforts by training leaders in the fundamentals of what they know as OD practitioners about teamwork and building high performance teams. The efforts of OD practitioners could have a considerable impact on the performance and success of an organization, how the organization gets things done, the culture of the organization, and the quality of services the organization provides.

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