Capitalize on Team Dynamics

Relationships Can Transform Team Performance

Every team is only as strong as its weakest relationships, Diana McClain Smith points out in *Divide or Conquer*. How well and how quickly a team makes decisions, inspires innovation, tackles performance problems or learns from mistakes depends on the strength of relationships within that team. Some relationships give teams the courage to face tough truths and make bold changes. A team's performance — even a firm's — turns on the quality of its most important relationships.

Research shows two things: first, that relationships have an informal structure that can be mapped and changed; and second, that relationships may be the single most underutilized lever for transforming the performance of teams and organizations.

This is especially true for relationships that operate along organizational fault lines — interfaces where coordination is as essential as it is difficult. At each interface, interests collide and conflicts erupt. Whether people can put these conflicts to work so they create value rather than destroy it depends on the nature and the quality of their relationships.

It is possible to build relationships that are flexible and strong enough to sustain stellar performance in teams — both over time and under pressure.

All relationships develop at formal and informal levels. At a formal level, people define and redefine their formal roles, including responsibilities, decision rights and rewards. At an informal level, people define and redefine their informal roles: the emotional responsibilities they'll assume and assign, the interpersonal rights they'll claim and relinquish, and the psychological rewards they'll want to give and get. All relationships develop over a series of stages as people adapt to each other and the circumstances around them.

When people focus on relationships, they assume responsibility not just for themselves, but also for the relationships they create together and for the impact those relationships have on their firm.

Must-Have Team Member Skills

In *Great Business Teams*, Howard M. Guttman details the skills great team members need. When another person's needs are pressing, you need active listening skills: the ability to clarify, understand and acknowledge another's point of view. When your needs are pressing, you need assertion skills: the ability to state your case from a position of strength rather than being passive or running over others. When both people's needs are pressing, you need conflict management skills: the ability to manage each party's perceptions to defuse emotions, create a common understanding of the real issues at hand and work toward a collaborative solution in which everyone "wins."

Listening Skills: Not focusing on those who come forward with a concern can bruise egos, but we add insult to injury by continually interrupting. In our desire to help someone — or cut short the conversation — we may come in too rapidly with our own opinion. Withdrawing is another deadly response. Body position, facial expression, and gestures such as head

In This Issue…

nodding and hand movements provide cues that you are tuned in — or out. "Say more" responses are phrases that encourage the speaker to tell you more about his or her ideas and feelings.

Assertion Skills: There are four skills that enable people to move toward the mid-point of assertion:

1. *Persistence.* This works best with salespeople, contribution seekers, telemarketers — people with whom you are not trying to cultivate lasting relationships.
2. *Sidestepping.* When you sidestep, you acknowledge that the other person may have a good point.
3. *Straight talk.* Put your statement into the following format: I want/need ____ because ____ .
4. *The three-part "I" response.* When you deliver the message, it is most effective if you use the following formula: When you ____ , I feel ____ because ____ .

Conflict-Management Skills: In every conflict situation, there are four options available:

1. *Play the victim:* say nothing, act powerless and complain.
2. *Leave:* physically remove yourself from involvement.
3. *Change yourself:* move from your position, and shift to the other party's view; "let it go."
4. *Confront:* address the issue openly, candidly and objectively; communicate with the other party.

Use an overall strategy — the Four C's approach — for confrontation:

1. *Connect:* Establish a rapport with the other party by addressing the issue between you openly and candidly, and asserting yourself.
2. *Clarify:* Seek to understand by active listening and exploring all points of view.
3. *Confirm:* Reach mutual agreement as to what each party wants and needs, and establish your willingness to collaborate.
4. *Contract:* Negotiate agreements for future interaction.

One of the hallmarks of a great business team, Guttman says, is the willingness of team members to assume accountability for the success of their colleagues. This can take many forms, from tough questioning to providing resources to coaching.

While leaders are ultimately responsible for making the call on the coachability of their players, every team member has an obligation to turn the table on him- or herself by asking, "Am I up to the task of continually reinventing myself to meet ever-more-demanding performance standards?"

The Dynamics of High-Performing Teams

Contributed by Howard M. Guttman

Team dynamics can accelerate a business team to high-performance or drive it off a cliff. No matter what goals you set, processes you put in place, or measures you attempt to meet, how well your team performs depends on how its members *interact with one another.*

After nearly 25 years of helping organizations create horizontal, high-performance teams, I have identified seven characteristics that are common to the interactions of high-performing team members:

1. **Clarity.** High-performing players demand clarity. They closely question one another when an issue is up for discussion. "Can you clarify that?" "What do you mean by that?" "Can you give us an example?" "What do you see as the consequence?" You hear these and other clarifying questions — and plenty of them.

2. **Authenticity.** High-performing team players sidestep game playing. You rarely hear team members asking "imposter questions" — those designed to poke holes for the sake of exposing a colleague's Achilles' heel — or making non-relevant statements just to hear their own voice. High-performance discussion is straight talk. If there is a concern or disagreement, it's put on the table, not hidden under it.

3. **Accuracy.** On a high-performance team, conversation is biased toward facts, data and observable behavior. You'll often hear: "It's my opinion that … " — signifying that the speaker wants listeners to know that he or she is about to enter a no-fact zone — or "On what do you base your judgment?" asking for factual back-up. If a problem is being discussed, the first order of business is to get the facts: What, specifically, is the problem? Where and when is it occurring? Who and how much is involved?

4. **Efficiency.** There's little beating around the bush and verbal foreplay among high performers. Rather than long preambles, you're apt to hear, "John, I have a concern about your behavior and we need to talk." Rather than making excuses, the talk is more about accepting responsibility and moving on to solutions.

5. **Timeliness.** There's a just-in-time feature to high-performing interaction. "Let's put the facts — all of them — on the table, now." One of the questions you'll hear is, "By when?" There's also plenty of "If ... then" language, often related to the siloless high-performance environment: "If Marketing executes its plan by June, then Sales will have plenty of time to generate business."

6. **Openness.** High-performance conversations "go there." If a team member — or the leader — is underperforming or if a function is problematic, colleagues on the team will "go there." Elephant heads — those touchy issues that most teams pretend don't exist — are an endangered species on high-performing teams.

7. **Depersonalization.** True, members of high-performing teams "go there," but when they confront one another they don't "go personal." Nor do you hear much defensiveness. Rather, you frequently hear high-performing team members reminding one another in the face of criticism that "It's a 'business case.'" In other words, let's treat the discussion objectively.

Make these seven characteristics the foundation of your team's dynamics and you'll avoid the cliff on the way to high performance.

Howard M. Guttman is principal of Guttman Development Strategies, Inc., a Mount Arlington, NJ-based consulting firm. He is the author of *Great Business Teams: Cracking the Code for Standout Performance* (www.greatbusinessteams.com) and *Coach Yourself to Win: 7 Steps to Breakthrough Performance on the Job and in Your Life* (www.coachyourselftowin.com).

> People who believe in themselves are likely to try harder and longer, increasing their chances for success.

The thorniest coaching issue is how to deal with team members who are nearly or fully uncoachable. Players resist change for many reasons. Some do not see what's in it for them; others disagree on the need for change; still others are distrustful and suspect a hidden agenda. The challenge is to part the curtain to see what is behind the resistance to change. Intention is paramount. Is a team member's intention to change stronger than the lure of remaining comfortable with past ways of operating? If a player is unwilling to change, it may be time to press the "eject" button.

Leaders Must Instill Confidence

When leaders believe in other people, confidence grows and winning becomes more attainable. When people have confidence in one another, they are willing to lead and be led by the team, according to Rosabeth Moss Kanter in *Confidence*.

Every leader must promote the three cornerstones of confidence. To ensure accountability, leaders must foster straight talk, communicate expectations clearly, and make information transparent and accessible. To make sure people feel connected, they must foster collaboration by structuring collaborative conversations, reinforcing respect and inclusion, and defining joint goals and definitions of success. And finally, to develop tools, channels, rewards and permission for people to take initiative, leaders must open channels for new ideas, treat people as experts in their own work, and encourage small wins and grass-roots innovations. Leaders connect people to tasks, to members of the team and to the outside world.

People who believe in themselves are likely to try harder and longer, increasing their chances for success. They believe that their efforts will pay off in the future. These expectations translate into an investment of resources that improve performance in a mini-virtuous cycle. Leaders look more closely, invest more time and give winners the benefit of the doubt.

Coping with Problems Within a Team

It would certainly be a lot easier if we could lead teams as though they were some kind of logical, predictable machine. Unfortunately, that's not the way things work, as Robert W. Barner points out in *Team Troubleshooter*. Teams are composed of people — unpredictable, contradictory, sometimes uncooperative people. Pressures to succeed in the team environment are many, and they come from outside the team (in the form of deadlines, productivity standards, etc.) as well as from within (in the form of burnout or the simple inability to forge a common approach to a task or project).

The question you must consider is not whether the members of your team sometimes find themselves enmeshed in conflict; at times, all teams experience internal conflicts. The true question is whether these conflicts are so pervasive and damaging that they could pose a serious obstacle to your team's long-term success.

As team leader, you must not allow yourself to think the burden of resolving conflicts rests solely on your shoulders. In doing this, you are placing yourself in a patronizing, parental position that encourages your team members to abdicate personal responsibility for resolving conflicts and denies them the chance to develop necessary skills to do otherwise. Your team must learn to detect and avoid potential conflicts and successfully manage those that cannot be prevented.

Some symptoms to look for are:

- **Rapid escalation of minor conflicts.** If relatively small, one-on-one disagreements swifty expand to engulf other team members, the team leader or senior management, your team has a serious problem that demands prompt attention.
- **Self-imposed isolation.** Some team members may choose isolation in order to remove themselves from conflict situations, causing communication disconnects, work bottlenecks and turf wars.
- **Breakdowns in communication and personal relationships.** When there is little or no quality communication between team members, work processes are interrupted and people tend to only look out for their own interests, as opposed to their team's.
- **Use of intimidation.** Instead of refusing to engage one another, some team members may try to force co-workers to give into their demands by using arguments, veiled threats or other forms of intimidation. These tactics will often result in what looks like agreement, but which ultimately can lead to manipulation or withdrawal of support.
- **Formation of cliques.** Some team members may form alliances with other strategically positioned co-workers in order to out-maneuver or overpower opponents, or to isolate them from the rest of the team.

The Challenges & Advantages of a Virtual Team

An excerpt from an Executive Insights *interview with Carole Borden, founder and CEO of CB Transportation, Inc.*

Background: CB Transportation has been run virtually since it was started in 2006. The company launched with three employees. It went from a start-up to a $10 million company in 2010 when they had just eight employees. As of the interview (May 2011) there were 13 employees. Having the right talent in the right position and team alignment have been critical to the company's success, Borden says.

Soundview: Tell us a bit about CB Transportation: who you are and what you do.

Borden: CB Transportation provides transportation and logistics services to Fortune 500 manufacturers and retailers throughout North America. We predominantly work in the full truckload space and distribution, working with warehouses and carriers and the railroads throughout the country.

Soundview: How do you approach the obvious challenges of a virtual team?

Borden: I think it's very important that there is tremendous alignment and an understanding of what the overarching goal for the company is and what each individual teammate's position is within that framework. It's easy to get lost if you don't have that connectivity. And one of things that we discovered early on, and one of the benefits for us for running virtually, is that it kept our overhead low and it allowed us to invest in IT and technology, which keeps the company together. So we do a couple things: we have huddle meetings a couple times a week, and individual one-on-one meetings with the team, so all of that keeps the gang cohesive.

Soundview: What specific skills have you found that a leader needs in order to motivate a virtual team and establish connectivity?

Borden: First of all, I think you need to make very, very good hires from the beginning. You have to really bring on people that have a good skill set, that you can trust, that have integrity, that align with your company's values. I think as a leader it is very, very important to be transparent in your decision-making and your style because people need to know what you are doing — so you've really got to put that out there and not try to hide anything … And be as collaborative as possible in the decision-making process with those team members that are effected ultimately by the decision.

Soundview: How do you envision teams evolving in upcoming years?

Borden: I think the basic make up of a team will remain the make up of a team. You've got players or groups of people that have to trust and rely on each other. And so whether it is a baseball team or a military unit or a virtual company, we all need to rely on each other. One of the things that has changed is the fact that the technology becomes so important and that ability to keep everyone connected and to build that framework of closeness even when many, many miles separate each other. I think that going forward, you're only going to see huge advancements in technology that will make that even more seamless, and I think you're going to see the teams spreading out more globally as time goes on.

Team members should complement one another — team leaders should make that happen.

Consider these methods offered by Barner for treating team conflict:

- Lay down ground rules for your team members to follow, such as no personal attacks, no heated outbursts, no backbiting and never assume hostile intent.
- Identify issues and areas within your team's objectives and projects where problems are most likely to occur, then invite your team to discuss ways of addressing them.
- When conflicts arise, make an effort to contain them before they spread beyond your control by: reminding team members about the guidelines they developed; meeting with team members involved in conflicts to make sure they're trying to address the issue; and cautioning team members against inflammatory e-mail and voice mail.
- Each time your team reaches agreement on a point, summarize it verbally — it's easy for team members in the heat of discussion to forget points on which they've already agreed.
- When facilitating a conflict, stop periodically to determine how the team members think the resolution is progressing and whether they feel their views are being heard.

The Ideal Team

In John C. Maxwell's recent book, *The 5 Levels of Leadership*, a section speaks to developing people into a team. Maxwell offers this perspective: Team members should complement one another — team leaders should make that happen. According to Maxwell, "Author Stephen Covey asserted, 'The job of a leader is to build a complementary team, where every strength is made effective and each weakness is made irrelevant.' That is the ideal that every leader should shoot for — people working together, each bringing their strengths to make the team better and compensating for each other's weaknesses. How does that happen? First you must know the strengths and weaknesses of each player." ❖