



WHY TEAMS DON'T PERFORM

KNOWING AND UNDERSTANDING THE PEOPLE PERFORMANCE BARRIERS

Teams that aren't performing well . . . or those being formed that won't ever perform well . . . are the victims of a mismatch of people with the project, the process, and the product. In quantifying these factors we often overlook the most complex and critical success element . . . the *people* who will do the work. While there are numerous reasons why teams fail, we have identified those that are most often the root cause. This paper discusses ten key reasons teams don't perform as well as they could.

To perform effectively, a team needs to operate as a unified group, and within a smaller environment with a possibly different culture than that which exist outside the team.

If the team is forced to operate at the level of its common denominator, there will be no synergy and the team will fail.

1. The People Don't Understand The Team's Mission

The team needs a clearly understood and agreed upon objective, i.e., why it is being formed and what it is expected to accomplish. What is the team's active time frame? Is it event or calendar driven? Is this an ad-hoc, single project team, a cross-functional/department work team, a continuing, open-ended assignment, or . . . spell it out.

How will the team and its members interface with the rest of the organization? What will be its reporting process? What are its constraints (functional, political, etc.). Is this a research/study team, an idea or concept team, an implementation team, an advisory team? And, what will be its work product?

2. The Team Lacks Empowerment

Once the team's mission is set, thoroughly define its authority. Can it take action on its own without further authorization or approval? Is its role advise and consent, or define and do?

The team must have management's affirmative and active support. Its authority must be explicitly communicated to the rest of the organization so that others may clearly understand the team's goal and role. This issue is critically important with self-directed teams; what real muscle does the team have and what resources are at its disposal?

3. Team Members Are Not Matched To The Mission

Once the team's mission and empowerment status have been determined, the process of building the team can begin.

Start by identifying the requisite functional, technical, experiential, and other background skills that will be needed by the prospective members. Then, closely examine the team's intended

work product to determine the best mix of thinkers, doers, analyzers, innovators, planners, implementors, builders, crafters, documenters, and researchers.

These natural approaches to accomplishment are critically important for the team's success, and often make the difference between "mission accomplished," or holding a postmortem critique to determine what went wrong. And, very importantly, know each member's ability to get along, cooperate and coordinate with others.

Teams have both a responsibility and an obligation for performance.

4. There Is A Poor Fit Of Each Member To Her/His Role

Poor judgement in the formation of a team precludes the team's full creative capacity from ever being realized, i.e., the team has a short oar before it ever begins the race.

Evaluate each member in terms of two performance perspectives; the individual's actual performance and expertise prior to the team assignment, and *their team performance potential*. The team requires certain skill-sets, behavioral and personality traits, and individual approaches to team work.

To perform effectively, a team needs to operate as a unified group, and within a smaller environment with a possibly different culture than that which exists outside the team. Each member has a role which must not be materially different than that demonstrated outside of the team. The team environment may alter an individual's conduct by degree, but it is unreasonable to expect a completely different kind of performance in a team role than has otherwise been demonstrated.

5. People Don't Understand Each Other's Natural Approaches

Inscribed on the temple of Apollo at Delphi is the sage advice to, "Know thyself." The corollary to this advice is "... and then know thy fellow teammate." Every team member is unique in some way that allows each to contribute a special knack or gift to the team. Each member knows what he/she will or won't do, or resists doing.

Knowing the other person's approach to team work is a powerful tool in building the needed synergy. Assumptions about another person's conduct are quite often erroneous, leading to misunderstandings, miscommunications, and mistakes ... and to a missed mission. Know each other, then the expectations of and for the team will be realistically based.

6. No Development Of The Individuals' Innate Talents

Since each member brings their own skill and behavior set to the team, the team leader must allow that strength to flourish. Otherwise, each person will not produce to her/his full capability, and neither will the team reach its combined potential. Team membership should provide the opportunity for continued individual development and contribution, not stunt it or set it aside for the time being.

7. Team Roles Don't Match Individuals' Personal Fulfillment Goals

Every individual has her/his own set of professional aspirations. Each person hopes to realize at least some of his/her goals or to make significant progress toward them in every assignment. Most of us not only need to be recognized for our noteworthy achievements, but most importantly for those achievements that are on our own path to success; affirmation that we are indeed on the right path.

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An individual's team role is really a subset of her/his overall mission within the company, and therefore must be compatible with the reason why that person joined the company. The team role must effectively answer a subtle phrasing of the question, "What's in it for me?" which really addresses more than just the need for continued employment or the chance to demonstrate one's "team spirit." We all need to feel good about our accomplishments, and that's a very personal thing.

Do you know the personal goals of each team member?

8. Performance Isn't Linked To Organizational Goals

In addition to aligning an individual's team role with his/her personal goals is the need to firmly link a team member's performance to the goals of the organization. The answer to "Why are we doing this?" must emphasize the organization's need for *team* mission accomplishment which can be realized only through *individual* performance.

As individuals, the need to be a part of . . . not apart from . . . the "big picture" can be achieved through an understanding of how one's team performance contributes to the company's goals. The team's mission must be to help the organization achieve its mission. If the team fails, the organization will suffer. If the team succeeds, individual recognition and reward will come from both the team and the organization.

9. There's No Linkage Of Personal Performance And Team Responsibility

Teams have both a responsibility and an obligation for performance. One does not abrogate her/his individual responsibility for performance by becoming part of a team. A team must not be a hiding place for someone thinking to shirk the "burden" of individual performance. If anything, team members are "under the microscope" to an even greater degree.

Outstanding performance on a team quite often leads to more rapid and significant advancement toward one's goals than might otherwise be the case. Similarly, the weak team member must bear an appropriate portion of the responsibility for a team's failure.

10. Inability To Transform Team Member Conflict Into Synergy

“Synergy” does not imply “one big happy family.” What it means for a team is the blending of often diverse and unique individual skills and sometimes conflicting behaviors into a mutually supportive effort focused on an objective to which all members commit themselves. “The total being greater than the sum of its parts,” will be realized only if management and the team itself . . . meaning the individual members . . . can direct and channel their individual strengths into a cohesive gel that allows each to work to her/his fullest and best capability.

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Team members must also rely on each other to offset any individual weaknesses, shortcomings, or resistance. Team members must barter their skills, behaviors, and approaches in a manner which does indeed “accentuate the positive” and which turns controversy, diversity, and differences of opinion into the “stuff” from which innovation and new ideas and processes are spawned.

If the team is forced to operate at the level of its common denominator, there will be no synergy and the team will fail. Management and the team leader(s) must absolutely know how to structure the team (its infrastructure) in a manner that makes this synergy possible. It all starts with knowing and understanding the team members as individuals who each bring their own skills, motivations, behaviors, energies and foibles to the task.

More Information

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