

Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances

By J. Richard Hackman. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002, 312 pp, US\$29.95.

Unless you have been marooned on a desert island for the past 25 years and have been unable to keep up with developments in the organizational sciences, you probably know the name J. Richard Hackman. His work and that of his students permeate many important areas of organizational behavior. In this new volume, Hackman integrates much of his work on groups and teams into a highly readable, highly enjoyable, and highly useful examination of those conditions that should lead to more effective teamwork in a variety of different organizations.

He aims his work at four different audiences: practitioners (those leading and those serving on teams), scholars conducting research into team effectiveness, consultants, and lay persons curious why some teams fail and some succeed. To this list I would add graduate students pursuing degrees in a variety of

disciplines. Almost magically, Hackman has produced a work that readers in all five groups should find both accessible and useful. This is quite an accomplishment!

The volume is arranged in three parts. Part I provides an introduction to his model of team effectiveness, including an insightful discussion of how one should define “team effectiveness.” Part II contains five chapters, each discussing one of Hackman’s five enabling conditions for team effectiveness. Although the role of team leaders is alluded to frequently in these chapters, in Part III, Hackman offers two chapters that explicitly deal with the role of leaders in attempting to facilitate effective teams. The book concludes with a substantial collection of “Notes” and a comprehensive bibliography.

In Part I of *Leading Teams*, Hackman proposes a multidimensional approach to assessing “team effectiveness.” He argues that effective teams are those best able to satisfy three criteria: “A team product acceptable to clients; growth in team capability; and a group experience meaningful and satisfying for members” (p. 30).

Each chapter in Part II contains a detailed examination of each of the five enabling conditions Hackman argues are necessary for teams to work effectively. First, the collection of individuals working together must perceive themselves to be “a real team.” That is, they must have “a team task, clear boundaries, clearly specified authority to manage their own work processes, and membership stability over some reasonable time” (p. 41). As is the case for each of these five chapters, Hackman cites timely and pertinent research to support arguments. In addition, his examples throughout the book run the gamut from orchestral groups, through airlines, through the healthcare industry, to the usual manufacturing and service organizations. His examples are fresh, and he weaves them into his narrative in ways that bolster his arguments while maintaining the interest of his reader.

To be successful, any collectivity must know where it is going. The second enabling condition discussed in Part II is a “compelling direction” for the team. Hackman asserts, “*Effective team self-management is impossible unless someone in authority sets the direction for the team’s work*” (p. 62, italics in the original). Direction that is challenging, clear, and consequential can energize, orient and engage team members. However, in specifying direction, Hackman cautions would-be team leaders about specifying *both* team ends *and* means. These actions often result in wasted human resources, because the creativity and innovation organizations desire from teams is best served when ends are specified but means are left in the hands of appropriately trained team members.

To be effective, real teams with a compelling direction must have an “enabling team structure.” In this chapter, Hackman discusses approaches to designing work for teams. Based on his Job Characteristics Model, he argues a team’s work should provide experienced meaningfulness, experience responsibility, and knowledge of results to maximize the motivation of team members. In addition to interesting and compelling work, Hackman also argues for the development of appropriate team norms. Finally, he considers the importance of team composition (size, mix, and interpersonal capabilities) to team effectiveness. He refers to these characteristics of the team structure as “the shell of the team...the shaping structure within which (the team) comes to life” (p. 129). Hackman believes that “those who create teams have two quite different but equally important responsibilities: to make sure that a team has the best structure that can be provided, and to help members move into that structure and competently launch themselves onto a course of their own” (p. 130).

As important as the internal structure of the team might be, of equal significance is the extent to which the team’s broader context is supportive of teams and the individuals who populate those teams. Because well-organized teams do not function in an organizational vacuum, support for teams must exist on three

organizational fronts. First, reward systems must not reward A (individual performance) while hoping for B (team effectiveness). Organizations that truly wish to adopt a team-based model of work need to examine the nature of their current reward systems. Hackman couches this discussion in expectancy theory terms, arguing that “consequences of team performance...must be something that team members themselves view as favorable” (p. 135), and must be “provided contingent upon the desired outcomes” (p. 139).

Second, information systems must provide teams with the necessary information, at the appropriate time, in the appropriate format. Finally, leaders need to insure that what Hackman refers to as the organizational “education system” provides the needed training and technical assistance to insure that team members have the technical and interpersonal skills to function effectively. The extent to which these systems are supportive of team efforts reflects the extent to which an organization’s culture truly supports a team-based approach to effective operations. Absent cultural support for teams, team efforts will be less than successful in the long run, and possibly even in the short run.

Finally, the last chapter of Part II examines the role of “expert team coaching” in enabling successful teams. Coaching with well-timed suggestions can affect the effort team members devote to their team activities, the performance strategies teams employ in their activities, and the levels of knowledge and skills team members can apply to team tasks. The application of coaching efforts in these three areas should vary as a function of the team’s developmental trajectory, with special opportunities for coaching activities available at the beginning, midpoint, and ends of task cycles.

The initial chapter in Part III provides what Hackman calls “imperatives for leaders.” The structure of this penultimate chapter rests on his assertion that “great leaders create the conditions that promote team effectiveness” (p. 209). In summarizing his approach to team effectiveness, he notes that his book offers “a nontraditional model of how leaders can help their teams and organizations do well, a model that focuses more on the functions that leaders fulfill than on anything about their personalities or styles” (p. 231). Were one to be short of time, reading this chapter as well as the first chapter could get one started on the road to leading effective teams.

In the final chapter of his work, Hackman asks his readers (particularly his academic colleagues) to begin “thinking differently about teams.” He summarizes his approach as having focused on *conditions* of team effectiveness rather than the causes of team effectiveness. He suggests that future research into team effectiveness should assume this more multidimensional perspective on team effectiveness. As he notes in summarizing his message, “A leader cannot make a team great, but a leader can create conditions that increase the chances that moments of greatness will occur” (p. 253).

There is little to criticize in Hackman’s effort. The book is well written, tightly focused, and even fun to read. I could argue that his attention to virtual teams was anemic (only a couple of pages in the whole book) given their growing popularity in many organizations. But his general argument suggests that the leader’s role in providing the enabling conditions is even more important in the virtual environment but also more difficult to develop and maintain.

His suggestions here are not particularly new or revolutionary, given that they are based on his decades of group/team-related research, but the packaging of his arguments makes a great deal of sense to this reader. His suggestion that the field moves beyond causation to context is well reasoned.

Although this book is being reviewed in a leadership journal, at times I found myself musing about whether this work was a leadership or about groups/teams? Is this a book about teams, of which leadership has a limited role in the discussion? Or is it a book about leadership in which teams have a big role in the discussion? Either way, readers should come away from this book with a renewed

appreciation of the role of leaders for team effectiveness in organizations as well as for the career efforts and insights of one J. Richard Hackman.

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