

Leading Teams

SETTING THE STAGE
FOR GREAT
PERFORMANCES

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Preface

Let's start with a pop quiz. Here are three items from a citizenship test given to all fourth-grade students in Ohio.

1. Which branch of Ohio's state government makes laws?
 - a. Judicial
 - b. Executive
 - c. Legislative
2. Which of the following people is consuming something?
 - a. Carmen is walking her dog.
 - b. Jaleel is buying a new shirt.
 - c. Dale is sorting baseball cards.
3. When people work together to finish a job, such as building a house, the job will probably
 - a. get finished faster.
 - b. take longer to finish.
 - c. not get done.

I'm fairly certain of the answer to the first item (the legislative branch) and the second (buying a shirt), which means that my knowledge of government and economics is at least at the fourth-grade level. But how about that third item? The Harvard student from Ohio who brought me the test said that alternative *a* (get finished faster) is scored as correct. But as she and I reflected on our own experiences in various kinds of work teams, we wondered about that. Too many of the teams we had been in barely worked at all.

There is a puzzle here. On the one hand, alternative *a* really should be the right answer. Work teams have more resources, and a greater diversity of resources, than do individual performers. Teams have great flexibility in how to deploy and use their resources. Teams provide a setting in which members can learn from one another and thereby build an ever-larger pool of knowledge and expertise. And there is always the possibility that a team will generate magic—producing something extraordinary, a collective creation of previously unimagined quality or beauty. These are significant benefits, and they help explain why teams are such a popular device for accomplishing organizational work these days.

On the other hand, team magic, as wondrous as it can be, is rarely seen. More commonly, teamwork really does take longer to finish (alternative *b*) or doesn't even get done at all (alternative *c*). When I announce on the first day of class that there will be group projects in my undergraduate course, there invariably are a few groans from students who have suffered through such projects in other courses. Moreover, research that compares the performance of teams with what is produced by an equivalent number of individuals who work by themselves almost always finds that the individuals outperform the teams.

This book seeks to resolve this puzzle, and do it in a way that can guide the actions of team leaders and members who seek to help their own teams perform well—and maybe even generate a little magic now and then.

THE MAIN MESSAGE

Work teams perform poorly when leaders have focused on the wrong things in designing or supporting them. This book identifies what the right things are—five specific conditions that foster work team effectiveness—

and points to the right times to establish them. Although few in number, these conditions are great in impact. When leaders focus on creating and sustaining them, teams really can perform superbly.

The leader's main task, therefore, is to get a team established on a good trajectory and then to make small adjustments along the way to help members succeed, not to try to continuously manage team behavior in real time. No leader can *make* a team perform well. But all leaders can create conditions that increase the *likelihood* that it will.

There are better and worse times to intervene with teams. Certain acts of leadership are best done when a team is just starting out, others around the midpoint of a work cycle, and still others when a team has finished up a significant piece of work. Leadership initiatives that are done at the wrong times rarely make a constructive difference, and sometimes they backfire.

Anyone who succeeds in getting performance-enhancing conditions in place or helps strengthen them is exercising team leadership. That can be a person who is designated as "team leader," to be sure. But it also can be a team member, an external manager, or even an outside consultant or client. It is not important who creates the conditions, how they go about doing it, or what their personality characteristics are. What is important is that the conditions that foster team effectiveness be put in place and stay there.

The five conditions—having a real team, a compelling direction, an enabling team structure, a supportive organizational context, and expert team coaching—are easy to remember. The challenge comes in developing an understanding of those conditions that is deep and nuanced enough to be useful in guiding action, and in devising strategies for creating them even in demanding or team-unfriendly organizational circumstances. People who are natural team leaders seem to know intuitively how to do these things. In this book, I have attempted to capture what natural leaders know, integrate that with social science research findings about team behavior, and generate a set of lessons that leaders can use to set the organizational stage for great team performances.

ABOUT THE BOOK

If I have achieved my aspiration in writing this book, four different groups of readers will find it informative and useful: (1) practitioners who want to

help the teams they lead, or on which they serve, perform as well as possible; (2) scholars who conduct research on team behavior and performance who seek fresh ways of thinking about the factors that most powerfully shape team effectiveness; (3) consultants who may find it useful to inspect and analyze teams through a somewhat unconventional lens; and (4) general readers who are curious about why it is that some teams sail into orbit while others either struggle unpleasantly to an unsatisfactory outcome or crash and burn shortly after launch.

Although the assertions and conclusions in the book are grounded in up-to-date research and theory about work team behavior and performance, I've done my best to avoid the use of academic and management jargon (the term *empowerment*, for example, is used but once in the entire book, and that time reluctantly). Instead, I have tried to use language, concepts, and extended examples that make the material as engaging, concrete, and useful as possible.

The book is optimistic about what team leaders can accomplish. Providing first-rate team leadership unquestionably is a significant personal and organizational challenge. But good team leadership really does make a difference. I reject the views of some contemporary scholars that leadership is mainly a symbolic activity of no real consequence, that leaders are but pawns in larger dramas driven by external forces, and that the best that high-status leaders can hope to do is compose a team well and then keep their distance to avoid unduly influencing members' deliberations. Instead, I have attempted to lay out a way of thinking about team leadership that can increase leaders' leverage in helping a team perform superbly and, in the process, become stronger over time as a performing unit and contribute positively to the personal learning and well-being of individual members.

A Brief Road Map

The book opens with an extended description of how senior leaders at two different airlines structured and supported teams of flight attendants. One airline achieved a great deal of control over flight attendant behavior, but at considerable cost in motivation and creativity. The other airline achieved nearly the opposite outcomes. The experiences of those two airlines are helpful in reflecting on what it means to say a team is "effective," and they highlight the trade-offs that must always be managed

in structuring, supporting, and leading organizational work teams. I refer back to the flight attendant teams frequently throughout the book.

Each of the next five chapters explores one of the five conditions that foster team effectiveness: a real team, a compelling direction, an enabling structure, a supportive context, and expert coaching. Then, in the last two chapters, I discuss the opportunities that the present approach provides for some new ways of thinking about team leadership and organizational change processes.

Much of what I say is based on research conducted by myself and my collaborators on a highly diverse set of work teams—musical ensembles, economic analysts, manufacturing teams, airline cockpit crews, and more. It turns out that many of these teams are similar in one significant respect: Their work requires members to generate performances “live” and in real time, often without the chance to go back and try again if things don’t go well. Because team design and leadership are so consequential for such teams, they provide a stringent and informative test of the ideas set forth in this book. If the enabling conditions enhance the performance of teams that have little room for error, they surely also should help other teams that have more latitude for trial-and-error learning.

Things Are Not Always What They Seem

Here are four assertions about work teams that, unless I miss my guess, will not seem terribly controversial.

1. Teams whose members work together harmoniously perform better than those that have lots of conflict about how best to perform the work.
2. A primary “cause” of team dynamics is the behavioral style of the team leader, especially the degree to which he or she is authoritative versus democratic.
3. Larger teams perform better than smaller teams because they have more, and more diverse, member resources on which to draw in carrying out the work.
4. The performance of teams whose membership stays intact for a long time gradually deteriorates, because members get careless, insufficiently attentive to environmental changes, and too forgiving of one another’s mistakes and oversights.

Although perhaps not controversial, each of these assertions is wrong. The way things *seem* to operate in groups is, surprisingly often, not how they *actually* operate. By drawing on evidence from both social science research and organizational practice, I seek in this book to provide readers with a new set of lenses for analyzing team dynamics—lenses that bring into focus aspects of team functioning that are invisible to casual observers, and that correct commonly held views of teams that are more illusory than real.

A Note on Notes

One of the great features of documents posted on the Internet is their use of hyperlinks—highlighted terms or phrases that, with a single click, take you to another place where you can learn more about something that interests, intrigues, or confuses you. And then, with but one more click, you can return to the text you were reading. The printed page cannot include hyperlinks, but notes serve much the same function. This book has lots and lots of notes, grouped by chapter at the end of the book.

Some of the notes identify the basis for assertions made in the text. Others point you to other books or articles where details about a point being made can be found. Others provide in-depth analyses of certain issues, and therefore may be of interest only to a subset of readers. Still others merely give an unusual example, a tidbit, or an aside that may make you smile or frown. Because the notes are grouped at the end, you can read through the book without distraction. But I hope many readers will insert a bookmark at the start of the notes section and frequently flip back to them to learn more about things that engage their interest.