

**PART II**

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**ENABLING  
CONDITIONS**

## 2

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# A Real Team

It can be inspiring to watch a superb team in action. One wonders, as members of a jazz ensemble pass solos back and forth without missing a beat, how they *do* that. The same feeling can come while watching a great basketball team. A player feints in one direction, moves three strides in another, and, at the precise moment she has broken free, the ball reaches her outstretched hands. The subsequent shot is anticlimactic; the awesome part is how it happened that the player and the ball arrived at the same place at the same instant.

The other side of the coin is the empathic embarrassment one feels when watching a team that does not work. The ball is passed but no one is there to catch it and it bounces untouched out of bounds. There was *supposed* to be someone there of course, but the play fell apart and the passer, who actually did what he was supposed to do, looks like a fool. Or the amateur jazz group finishes one passage, the drummer keeps on beating out the rhythm, but no one picks up the solo line. Members of the audience look away as the players signal one another with their eyes to try to recapture the music that they somehow lost.

Anyone who has logged much time working in teams, or watching them work, has experienced both kinds of feelings. Our job is to figure out what makes the difference between teams that inspire and those that embarrass—and to do so in a way that invites constructive action. Accomplishing this requires that we transcend the common human tendency to assign credit (and, especially, blame) for collective performance to single individuals. When a team has performed superbly, for example, credit often goes to the leader—or, for some tasks, to the one individual whose performance was both exceptional and salient, the “star” player. And when a team has performed poorly, we often ask, almost without thinking, “Whose fault was it?” Again, the most common answer is the person who served as team leader or, perhaps, the individual who dropped the ball at a critical moment.<sup>1</sup>

This tendency to assign credit and blame to specific people is seen in the individualistic orientation of interventions intended to improve team performance. The goal of many such interventions is to help group leaders and members become more aware of those aspects of their personalities, attitudes, and behavioral styles that change agents think are key to team effectiveness. The hope is that improved team functioning will come about more or less automatically if each member understands his or her personal style and recognizes the need for good communication and coordination. I know of no evidence that supports this assumption.

The opposite may be closer to the truth: The best way to get individuals to behave well in a group is to do a good job of setting up and supporting the group itself. A healthy group promotes competent member behavior; a sick group invites all manner of bizarre individual behaviors—which, ironically, can then be used to explain the problems of the group as a whole.<sup>2</sup> To understand what makes a team effective, then, requires that we become comfortable thinking and acting at the *group* level of analysis. Because that is not something most of us routinely do in our daily lives, it can take some learning and practice.

## EXPLAINING GROUP BEHAVIOR

Here is a question sent to “The Ethicist” column of the *New York Times Magazine*.<sup>3</sup> How would you respond to it?

My son's lacrosse team was being bussed home from a game. When a rival school's women's lacrosse team pulled alongside, two boys in the back of the bus mooned them. The coach ordered the entire team to sign a letter of apology. I have encouraged my son not to sign: he was not responsible for the deed or even aware it was occurring.

Randy Cohen, who writes the column for the *Times*, responded as follows:

Your son ought not confess to something he did not do. One should lie neither to deny nor to avow wrongdoing. What he and his teammates could sign, however, is a letter of regret that honestly describes the epidermal transgression, noting that many may have contributed to the rowdy atmosphere but few actually depantsed. All members of a group can honorably take responsibility for something done in its name and embodying its function . . . [but] your son need not apologize for the antics of two teammates.

Randy Cohen balances delicately and appropriately between individual- and group-level explanations for the event. On the one hand, two specific individuals did the deed, and the letter-writer's son certainly should not apologize for an action he personally did not perform. But another way of viewing the incident is as an intergroup event, as an exchange between one team and another as their buses passed. The "rowdy atmosphere" in the mooners' bus may have been all that the two least inhibited team members needed to initiate action *on behalf of the group*. I suspect many readers of Cohen's column (and perhaps readers of this book as well) would not go even as far as he did in concluding that what happened may have been, at least in part, the act of one intact group vis-à-vis another.<sup>4</sup>

To further explore the implications of group-level thinking, let us move from the lacrosse team bus to the flight deck of commercial aircraft, where two- or three-person teams share responsibility for flying the aircraft safely and efficiently to its destination. The extremely low accident rate in commercial aviation testifies to just how well cockpit crews perform day in and day out. When an incident does occur, however, more often than not it is because the team broke down. Analyses of the causes of accidents and incidents have documented that, in the great majority of cases, the *crew* got itself into trouble even though the aircraft was mechanically

capable of flying out of the situation and all crew members were highly skilled, well trained, and in good health.<sup>5</sup> Despite these findings, explanations of why an accident occurred—explanations offered by trained investigators as well as by laypersons—generally assign responsibility to individual crew members. Even pilots themselves, who have grown exceedingly weary of hearing the words “pilot error,” rarely use the language of groups in talking about their work.

To illustrate, here is how a pilot described to me the final approach of a flight that did not go well.

There was this flock of geese having a tea party right over the end of 22 Left [a runway designation], so the tower switched them to 31 just when Charlie [the copilot] was getting lined up on the ILS [Instrument Landing System]. Well, the weather was a mess, they were vectoring old Charlie all over the place, and he got confused and got behind. Three times Phil [the captain] had to remind him about something, and eventually Phil got so frustrated that he took the airplane and landed the damn thing himself.

And here is a different way of telling the same story. See what differences you notice.

After they got ATIS [recorded airport information] they just assumed it would be a routine ILS approach to 22 Left and they started chewing the fat. They didn't hear the talk on the radio about the geese over the runway, so when the tower switched runways at the last minute it was scramble time. Charlie was flying, and he had his hands full because of weather and the new vectors he was getting. Phil started changing the radios to set up for the new approach, but he didn't tell Charlie what he was doing, and Charlie couldn't quite figure out what was going on. Nobody got things organized, everybody got confused, and eventually Phil got so frustrated that he took the airplane and landed the damn thing himself.

The two versions of the story offer two quite different ways of understanding what happened on that flight. In the first, the one most likely to be heard, it was Charlie who had a problem. He let a situation that was not all *that* demanding get the better of him and had to be bailed out by Phil, his captain. The attributions made are all to individuals.

The second account invites a group-level interpretation: The *crew* got itself into trouble by not paying attention to changes in the situation, by not planning and organizing the team's work, and by poor coordination between members. Focusing on the crew also highlights the captain's team leadership—not so much his behavioral style, but the kinds of expectations about behavior that he had established and enforced. Such matters are unlikely to be revealed by the first account, which implicitly casts Phil in the role of savior. The second version of the story also raises questions about the airline's overall strategy for structuring and supporting its crews. Might there have been something about the way crews were set up and staffed at that airline, or about the amount of authority they had for managing their own affairs, or about company-specified performance routines that could have contributed to what happened to Charlie and Phil?

To answer such questions requires that we move beyond explanations of team performance that rely mainly on the attributes or behaviors of individuals, and instead focus on how the teams themselves are designed and supported. It may sound silly to say, but if you are going to lead a team well, you must first make sure that you actually have a team to lead—and that you then deal with it as a *team* rather than as a set of individuals.

## ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF REAL TEAMS

Real work teams in organizations have four features: a team *task*, clear *boundaries*, clearly specified *authority* to manage their own work processes, and membership *stability* over some reasonable period of time.<sup>6</sup> The first and perhaps most important task of those who create or lead work teams is to make sure that these four essential features are in place.

### *Team Task*

Everybody would agree that a string quartet is a team. Its work simply cannot be accomplished without all four members present and playing. Everybody also would agree that a collection of people on a street corner waiting for a traffic light to change is not. Beyond such extremes, however, the terms *group* and *team* are akin to projective tests: People read

into them what they wish, and conversations about teams can be frustrating because people have different things in mind when they talk about them.<sup>7</sup>

The first group I encountered in my research career was in the central office of a telephone company. My colleague Ed Lawler and I were being shown around the company in preparation for some research we were planning. One group we visited was introduced to us as “Supervisor Szczarba’s team.” Arrayed before us were a dozen or so telephone operators, each at her own console (there were no men in the group), each talking to her own customers, each taking her break at a time negotiated with Ms. Szczarba. Members of the group did perform their work alongside one another. But the only thing they actually shared was Ms. Szczarba.

Such teams are called *co-acting groups*. It is easy to tell who is in a co-acting group because members usually work in proximity to one another and have the same supervisor. But each member has an individual job to do, and that job’s completion does not depend on what the others do. Co-acting groups are barely groups at all, and they are not what we are concerned with here. Our focus is on groups whose task requires them to work *together* to produce something—a product, service, or decision for which members are collectively accountable and whose acceptability is potentially assessable. The kind of outcome produced is not critical; it can be a physical product, a service, a decision, a performance, or a written report. Nor is it necessary that the outcome actually *be* assessed; all that is required is that the team produce an outcome that can be identified as its product and that it be theoretically possible to measure and evaluate that product. If Ms. Szczarba’s team had been assigned collective responsibility for handling all service requests for, say, a specific part of the company’s service area, and if members had been held collectively accountable for how quickly and well those requests were processed, then it would have been a real work team.

A great deal of organizational work is performed these days by sets of people who are called “teams” but who really are co-acting groups. Managers in organizations where this is done may harbor the hope that they can harvest the widely touted benefits of teamwork while continuing to directly manage the behavior of individual members. That hope is misplaced: If you want the benefits of teamwork, you have to give the *team* the work. So there is a choice here: Either design the work for a team, or