

LEADING TEAMS

BY J. RICHARD HACKMAN

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Engaging: 4 Innovative: 4
Usefulness: 4 Visual Aids: 4

This is a seminal work on teams that is as thoughtful and thought-provoking as any I have read in the past 25 years, which is what many of us have come to expect from the faculty of Harvard Business School. While it may not please readers who are in search of quick fixes and practical routes to easy success, the conceptual framework into which the author places the building of teams is extraordinary in its simplicity and completeness of design—kind of like an exquisitely prepared meal by a chef who knows her stuff.

As all great coaches and managers already know, the main task of the team leader is to create the right environment for people to flourish. This is more art than science and often comes as a result of great flailing and dismal failures. For

Hackman, the conditions necessary for success are in place when the team is a “real” team and not one in name only.

Such a team has a compelling direction for the project, an enabling structure that facilitates teamwork rather than obstructs it, works within a supportive organizational context, and has expert coaching in generous supply. To which my initial reaction may be ... “as if.”

Managers have problems with such lofty and admirable thinking because work doesn’t happen this way in a real company. Think for a moment about how many times in your career these four circumstances have existed for any appreciable length of time in one setting. If you have had even one such experience, you are very fortunate. And most of the time the problem doesn’t start with you. It starts at the top of the organizational chart.

Alas, our own frustration should not deter us from learning a great deal from this fine work and applying the author’s thinking where we can. Like every good book, it contains diamonds of wisdom among the other rocks. A particularly provocative portion is Chapter 4, “Enabling Structure.” In it there’s a passage called “countering ordinary human tendencies” that runs a couple of pages and should be read by every team member and aspiring team leader at work today.

—Skip Corsini