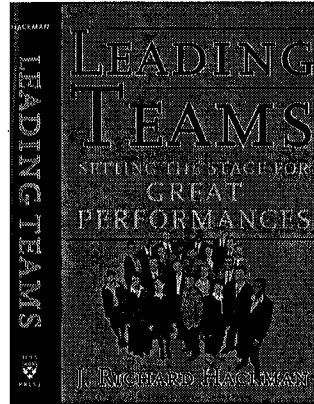


Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances



By J. Richard Hackman.
Boston: Harvard
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cover, \$29.95.

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Avid readers of popular business books published during the last decade have often been told that teams outperform individuals and that self-managing teams perform best of all. But do they really? In *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances*, J. Richard Hackman cautiously points out that "work teams can, and sometimes do, perform much better than traditionally designed units. But they also can, and sometimes do, perform much worse." His message is clear—there is no magical recipe for team success. Rather, the role of a leader is to create the conditions that will promote—even if they cannot guarantee—team effectiveness. These conditions include:

- creating a real team rather than a team in name only
- setting a compelling direction for the team's work
- designing an enabling team structure
- ensuring that the team operates within a supportive organizational context
- providing expert coaching.

In creating real work teams, leaders must be certain that the task is appropriate for a team, as opposed to a group of individuals working independently. Second, the team should have clear boundaries. Third, leaders must clearly specify the team's level of authority. In this regard, Hackman describes four levels of authority: (1) teams who merely execute the task (manager-led teams), (2) teams who execute the task as well as monitor and manage work process and progress (self-managing teams), (3) teams who execute, self-manage,

and also design the team and its organizational context (self-designing teams), and (4) teams who do all the above as well as establish the overall direction of the team (self-governing teams). Finally, a real team has stable membership over a reasonable period of time.

In describing what is meant by a compelling direction, Hackman asserts that self-management by a team does not require consensus decision-making about the team's direction. Rather, team leaders should be "insistent and unapologetic about exercising their authority to specify end states." When leaders authoritatively establish the team's direction, it energizes team members, orients their attention and action, and engages their talents.

Hackman focuses on three areas when describing an enabling team structure: task design, norms, and composition. Regarding team task design, Hackman asserts that when the five characteristics outlined in the Hackman and Oldham Job Characteristics Model are present (that is, factors relating to skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback), they can promote a state of collective internal motivation. Team norms are critical because they serve to coordinate and regulate member behavior. In determining team composition, leaders need to ensure that each team member has strong task skills and at least adequate interpersonal skills. Additionally, the size of the group should be small (generally, no more than six members) and the composition should strike a balance between homogeneity and heterogeneity.

Regarding the organizational context, Hackman notes that a well-supported work team has a reward system that provides positive consequences for good team performance (as opposed to individual performance), an information system that provides accurate and reliable data and projections, an educational system that provides critical training and technical assistance, and the material resources necessary to carry out the team's work.

In discussing expert coaching, Hackman emphasizes the importance of timing and content, as opposed to style of coaching. "Although I am agnostic about the particular behaviors or styles coaches should exhibit, that is decidedly not the case regarding the focus of coaches' activities. That focus . . . should be on a team's task-performance processes, not on members' social interactions or interpersonal relationships." He adds that a team needs to experience the task before it can benefit from strategy interventions. Thus, the midpoint of a

team's life cycle—not the beginning—is a good time for a coaching intervention.

One of the most compelling features of *Leading Teams* is that the author combines an extensive body of research with highly engaging, often humorous stories, cases, and personal experiences. My favorite story is "I do the yellows." When describing what he means by a compelling direction, Hackman asserts that leaders should specify the ends but not the means by which the team is to pursue those ends. He goes on to say that the worst-case scenario involves specifying the means without specifying the ends (that is, the purpose of the work). To illustrate, Hackman describes the experiences of George Seegers, who was at the time an assistant vice president at Citibank. When George first came to the bank, he wanted to find out what his people did. So he asked an elderly lady, and she replied, "I do the yellows . . . I take this yellow piece of paper and I stamp it and I put it over here." When Seegers asked further questions to determine the purpose of her work, the woman replied, "Excuse me, sir, but are you stupid? This is a yellow. I take the yellow piece of paper and I stamp it and I put it over here. It's the yellows. That's what it is."

Another important and valuable feature of *Leading Teams* is that the author debunks many commonly held beliefs or myths about teams and team effectiveness. For example, one commonly held belief is that team coaching interventions should focus on improving interpersonal relationships. Hackman claims that this belief is neither logical nor correct. Interpersonal conflicts are more often a consequence of, rather than a cause of, poor team performance. Thus, team leaders would be better advised to focus on improving the team's structural or contextual conditions. Another common misconception is that teams should periodically have changes in membership to prevent team members from becoming inattentive, careless, and too forgiving of one another's mistakes and oversights. Hackman points out that his research evidence suggests just the opposite: teams with stable membership over a long period of time perform better than those that have to adjust to the arrival of new members and the departure of old ones.

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Leading Teams is a highly useful and enjoyable book. Hackman has succeeded in laying out a new way of thinking about team leadership and team effectiveness. Unlike most scholars writing about teams, he makes no attempt to identify the true causes of team effectiveness. Instead, he adopts the

perspective of practitioners who "welcome rather than shun both the confounding of variables . . . and redundant causation." His cautiously optimistic advice on how to set the stage for great team performances should be valuable to executives, team leaders, consultants, and academics.