

Building High Performing Teams

What's up with teams?

In an era of 24/7, organisations have to respond quickly to changing circumstances. Teams are ever more prevalent these days because companies are faced with the challenges of global business, matrix organisations, virtual working and multi-culturalism.

However, research has shown how bad people often are at teamwork.¹ Most of the time, when questioned, team members don't agree on what the purpose of the team is or the things it should be trying hard to deliver. Add to this the problem of ensuring the right people are on the team and that it is set up well, and most teams stand a slim chance of achieving anything approaching high performance. Whilst teams can collectively produce tremendous results, 'greater than the sum of the parts,' research shows that teams frequently underperform.² 'Social loafing,' as the psychologists have observed, results in some team members contributing less effort than when they work alone!

Creating an effective team requires more than great leadership. Simply gathering together some really talented people, pointing them at the challenge and hoping the 'wisdom of crowds' will prevail doesn't work either. Creating and sustaining an effective team requires an investment of time and energy in making it happen - teams don't just happen naturally, certainly not the high-performing sort. It also requires commitment and a willingness to see performance potentially dip as the group makes the transition into a 'real' team.

In many instances, so-called teams may actually take longer to produce results or may even deliver something less than satisfactory. Collaboration and collective action, particularly with truly creative or time-critical challenges, is a skill that takes time, and invariably, help to develop.

Too much homogeneity in a team can lead to a lack of creativity and to group-think. How then do teams embrace, rather than shut down, diversity of opinions (a prerequisite of high performance)? Achieving high levels of performance seldom means operating in harmony. Teams that perform well together have to learn to disagree in a skilful and productive way if the team interactions are to be healthy.

The culturally diverse teams are either the most effective teams or the most ineffective in terms of creativity and productivity.³

What happens the first time a group meets has a significant effect on how the group operates for the rest of its life. Not least because it establishes the relationship between the group and the leader, but because norms of behaviour (so) important to team working are laid down. It is important to create the conditions for effectiveness and continuously tune them.

What will we do?

Timing is everything. BlessingWhite designs team interventions to support every stage of Team development. In the first instance, every team needs a compelling purpose. This purpose provides the focus for the team. It is not merely the sum of the individual members' contributions but the answer to the question: 'What is the team for that no other team in the organisation could accomplish?'⁴ In addition, the team must agree on the key outcomes it is responsible for delivering. To help in this, BlessingWhite employs the **F.O.R.C.E.** model to help clarify the:

- F** = team Focus or purpose
- O** = Outcomes, what key goals or objectives must be accomplished to achieve the purpose
- R** = Resources, how to get the job done
- C** = Commitment, 'teamship' rules and ways of working that help get the job done
- E** = Execution, an action plan that identifies who will get the job done by when

From the outset, this can be a demanding task that often represents the first challenge to the leader. Why? It requires them to exercise real leadership and authority. It is also often the first decision the team have to agree upon.



1. Hackman, "Why Teams Don't Work," HBR, May 2009

2. Hackman, "Leading Teams," HBS, 2002

3. Carol Kovach, "International Dimensions of Organisational Behaviour," 1997 and DiStefano & Maznevski, "Creating Value with Diverse Teams in Global Management," *Organisational Dynamics*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2000

4. Hackman, loc.cit.

How do we do this?

Like the teams themselves, team interventions should have a clarity of purpose. They are about fostering better teamwork with a focus on the task, not simply about enhancing social interaction.

We have found that working with individual team members doesn't have much impact on team performance either. The focus should be on the team and team processes.

One of the key outcomes from early sessions is a greater sense of psychological safety and trust amongst team members. (Where psychological safety means the degree to which the team environment is conducive to taking interpersonal risks.) In psychologically safe environments, people believe that if they make a mistake others will not penalise or think less of them for it. They also believe that others will not resent or penalise them for asking for help, information or feedback. This belief fosters the confidence to take the risks and thereby learn. In so doing, solid foundations are laid that will provide a degree of cohesion to enable the team to successfully navigate the storms that will inevitably come if it is to reach high levels of performance.

Self-awareness and shared awareness is the cornerstone to great teamwork. It is our experience that a team is performing to its maximum potential when each team member is performing to his/her maximum potential.

The BlessingWhite approach to team development draws on various research studies, all of which describe the development of a team in terms of between three and five stages. However, uniquely BlessingWhite approaches team effectiveness through the lens of authentic 'dialogue.' The quality of communication within the team is synonymous with the ability to give and receive feedback, the ability to solve problems together and the ability to overcome verbal brawling and unproductive discussions skilfully.



When do we do this?

BlessingWhite Team development benefits:

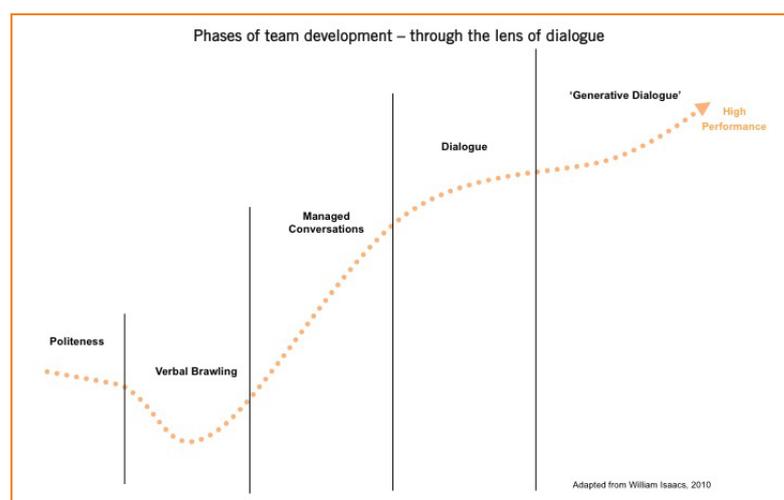
- Newly forming teams of all types when preparing to kick-off
- Teams that are stalled, becoming dysfunctional or are struggling to improve
- Teams seeking to integrate new team members or where the composition has changed markedly
- High-performing teams aiming to sustain performance
- Teams that simply wish to learn new 'portable' teamworking skills that will benefit team members as they work in other teams

The BlessingWhite Team approach is also equally applicable to Executive teams.

What if we do this?

Outcomes:

1. Clarity on the fundamentals of effective team-working
2. A compelling purpose
3. Agreement on the key outcomes the team is responsible for delivering
4. A realistic assessment of current team effectiveness
5. Clarity on the issues and interferences that hinder team effectiveness
6. An action plan for improvement
7. Agreement on 'teamship' rules
8. A roadmap for future development
9. Real progress on a current business challenge or opportunity
10. Sustainable improvement in team performance



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Building and Sustaining Effective Teams