

Building Smart Teams: A Roadmap to High Performance

1

An Introduction

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Smart Teams: The What For and Why

When teams comprise people with various intellectual foundations and approaches to work . . . ideas often combine and combust in exciting and useful ways.

Theresa Amabile (1999, p. 13)

Today, most organizations face the difficult challenge of regaining or maintaining a competitive advantage. With intense global competition and deregulation, no organization is exempt from the myriad forces creating the need for organizational renewal (see, for example, Beer & Nohria, 2000; Ghoshal & Bartlett, 2000). In fact, it has become somewhat cliché to talk about the extraordinary complexity we face in our work environments.

When we ask managers to identify the factors and trends driving the need for change in their organizations, they typically identify technological innovations, higher customer expectations, new global entrants, increased or decreased government regulations, and changing consumer demands and demographics as being at the top of their lists. While the implications of these forces play out differently in each organization, all organizations must become adept at reading and responding swiftly and proactively to the competitive forces. According to Goleman, Kaufmann, and Ray (1992), the ability to acquire, interpret, and act upon information with innovations in processes and products is a core competitive capability.

To do this, organizations require ingenuity—clever, imaginative, out-of-the-box responses that allow them to flex with their many competitive demands. This means that they must create favorable conditions for people to spontaneously come together to share knowledge and learn as they explore organizational challenges and identify novel ideas. Undoubtedly, teamwork is the most efficient way for organizations to encourage and harness this creative potential.

By teamwork, we mean real teamwork, whereby the right people with the right skills, knowledge, and perspectives join to collectively explore challenges, generate creative solutions, and work diligently to build the necessary support and commitment for implementation. Not surprisingly, teams have been identified as an integral ingredient in developing and sustaining a high-performance work culture. In his critical examination of people management practices, Jeffrey Pfeffer described what leads to organizational health. At the root of these people management practices is teamwork, “with decentralized decision-making and empowerment as the basic principle of organizational design” (Pfeffer, 1999, p. 64).

Apart from the many performance benefits, working in teams can also facilitate employee satisfaction; in fact, our research shows that team performance and satisfaction are highly related (Beatty, 1997). As employees continue to seek meaningful and developmental work opportunities, teams can provide a powerful avenue for learning, flexibility, job enhancement, and empowerment (Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993). Real-time learning occurs as members expand their expertise, knowledge, and experience.

Despite its many advantages, working in teams is increasingly hard work in today’s rapidly evolving business world. For the team’s work to be relevant, their challenge is by nature complex. Why would an organization invest precious time and resources in an irrelevant challenge? The days of teamwork for the sake of teamwork are long over. Today’s teams are charged with complex, high-stakes issues that require clever innovation, resourcefulness, and disciplined action.

On many occasions, we have asked teams to assess the complexity of their challenges. More often than not, they describe initiatives that require members to expand their thinking, to learn from each other and others outside of the immediate team, to build on existing know-how, to apply

knowledge in new ways, and to go through many iterations of collecting and analyzing data before a solution emerges.

Apart from the obvious task complexity, teams also report that their challenges involve complex relationships; more and more their challenges require that they work with and involve many stakeholders, often with competing interests, biases, and ways of working. We refer to challenges with high task and relationship complexity as *jamais vu* challenges, in which team members have never been there or done that before together. *Déjà vu* challenges, on the other hand, are those with low complexity that the team has already mastered in the past.

Déjà vu challenges are relatively simple to deal with because teams have developed expertise over time to handle them, and members follow a prescribed process with set roles and responsibilities. But today, teams are more often confronted with challenges they have never encountered before and where there is no specific path to success. These *jamais vu* challenges are all around us: Constitutional reform, culture change, implementing a merger or acquisition, or new strategy formation are all examples of systemwide change initiatives that require team members to manage complex relationships while forging a new path.

So as the complexity of our business challenges increases, so

Today's Teams: The Move From *Déjà Vu* to *Jamais Vu*

Executive development expert Peter DeLisle's typology of task and relationship complexity, which we have adapted, is a useful tool for considering a team's work. A challenge with low task and relationship complexity is one in which familiar team members follow a prescribed process with defined procedures. We call these *déjà vu* challenges—in other words, challenges that the team has experienced before. Examples may include the admitting and treatment process followed by emergency room attendants, or protocols adopted by firefighters for attending to a blaze.

In contrast, a challenge with high task and relationship complexity is one where the players may not be familiar with working together and do not have explicit protocols or direct experience and know-how to apply to the task at hand. We call these *jamais vu* challenges, which involve issues that the team has never encountered before, while team members must learn to work together at the same time. No one person has the right answer or all of the relevant expertise, and the team must explore and experiment to discover a solution.

An example of a highly complex challenge was the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic, which was first reported in Asia in February 2003 and quickly spread to more than two dozen countries within months. Dubbed the mystery illness, SARS eventually claimed 44 lives in Canada and 238 in Asia. In Canada, the absence of a national body for disease control meant that specialists and health care officials had to join forces quickly to first identify the mystery virus and then, through trial-and-error experimentation, develop protocols for diagnosis,

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treatment, prevention and disseminate critical information to those in the field. Their laudable efforts, although imperfect, led to the eventual containment of the highly infectious virus.

With *jamais vu* tasks, teams operating in the same old ways and using the same mindsets, processes, and tools designed for less complex challenges will find themselves in deep water. Messy and ambiguous challenges, ones that are hard to design and have no prescribed right answer, require members to explore, experiment, and evolve their thinking together. These challenges require team protocols designed to encourage both task ingenuity and relationship ingenuity. Simply put, these teams must be designed to tap into the know-how and perspectives of relevant stakeholders to create relevant, workable solutions that members and their partners are energized to implement.

does the need for real teamwork. Well-designed teams can provide the task and relationship ingenuity to survive and thrive in *jamais vu* territory. Yet real teamwork is often lacking. In the public sphere, for example, stories abound of government councils, tasked with greater responsibility, reduced budgets, and a more demanding public, spending their time bickering rather than finding ways to create better results. In organizations, real senior teams are largely a myth (Katzenbach, 1997), even though cohesive leadership from the top team is more important than ever to the process of creating a mission, a guiding vision, and a strategy. Throughout the organization, teams must plan, implement, and build support for the many change projects that are

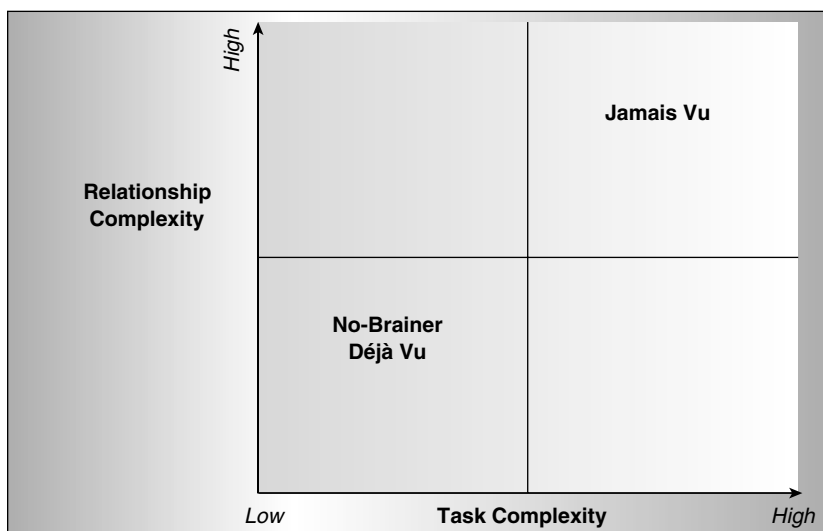


Figure 1.1 Our Team Challenges

happening all at once. Often, we see half-hearted attempts that fail as members give up prematurely in the face of apparent resistance.

Effective teamwork at all levels of the organization is now a necessity, the foundation for the flexible, empowered, and high-performance culture that organizations are desperately seeking to create. So the question is, how do managers and leaders go about organizing for real teamwork?

To provide a roadmap to guide team leaders on this journey, we have developed the Team Effectiveness Model based on comprehensive research. Our model identifies the critical processes and skills that leaders need to get their teams up and running quickly and to create smart teams that excel at accomplishing their objectives.

Your Roadmap: Introducing the Team Effectiveness Model

We've all been part of successful and unsuccessful teams, and as such, we all have firsthand experience of the benefits and frustrations of team membership. While some group experiences are very fulfilling, with members becoming highly skilled at working together, others are frustrating, with members developing interpersonal conflicts that are counterproductive to team progress.

These experiences have taught us that participating on a team is not necessarily easy, and for many of us it does not come naturally. Team success depends on a number of factors, including attracting the right people to work on a common goal, enabling them to begin working together well and quickly, setting and adhering to performance schedules, and, inevitably, handling the interpersonal stresses that occur when people work together closely.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for a team member is the struggle and resulting tension that arises from being an individual—with one's own talents, biases, values, beliefs, interests, and ways of working—versus being a member of a team. Being part of a team requires members to involve others in making important decisions, to share critical information openly, and, at times, to sacrifice one's personal agenda for the good of the team. The challenge, of course, is to harness the group creativity that comes from an open exchange of ideas and opinions to produce an integrated solution that builds on the best of the individual thinking. Maintaining the balance between fostering diverse thinking and controlling these differences is often easier said than done (Burke, 1988).

So despite the many potential benefits of effective teamwork, including increased performance, improved decision quality, high commitment to group decisions, and increased job satisfaction (Hackman, 1990), team

membership requires a new orientation to working, and most members need to *learn* how to be part of a team. Marvin Weisbord (1987) suggests that management teams actually have to unlearn “bad habits” because most organizational cultures have rewarded individual results and competitive behaviors, not cooperation and teamwork.

We believe that most individuals can learn to be good team members and reap the personal and professional rewards of team membership. Our research suggests that by undertaking several key activities, organizations can give their teams a strong foundation for success.

SIGNPOSTS TO GROUP INGENUITY: CRITICAL PROCESS AND SKILLS

Our model (Beatty, 2003) has narrowed the key success factors of high-performing teams to three critical sets of processes and skills. These key processes and skills predict both team performance (how well the team performs its assigned tasks) and team satisfaction (the extent to which members enjoy and derive personal gains from their team experiences). They include the following:

- ❖ Team management practices
- ❖ Problem-solving skills
- ❖ Conflict-handling skills

We like to think of the building of these skills as base camp for teams; that is, the work involved in developing effective team management practices, problem-solving skills, and conflict-handling skills is akin to base camp for mountain climbers. Just as successful mountain climbers must spend sufficient time preparing for their ascent by planning their route, testing equipment, delineating roles and responsibilities, adapting to the climate, and stocking supplies, teams must devote sufficient time and energy to developing effective team management practices, problem-solving abilities, and conflict-handling processes. As teams spend time building these essential skills, they learn to work effectively together.

ALL FOR ONE: TOP TEAM MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Team management practices refer to the overall level of team commitment, social functioning, and task approaches of the team. With effective team management practices in place, a group possesses the following characteristics:

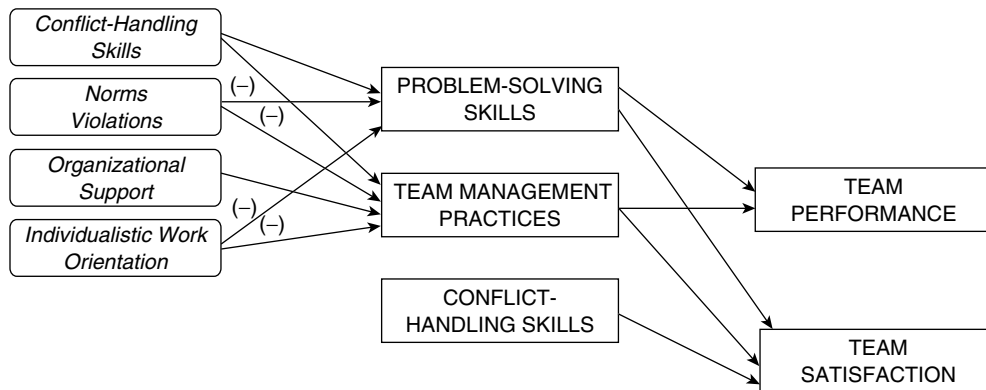


Figure 1.2 Team Effectiveness Model

Task Processes

1. A common purpose with set goals, priorities, and task strategies
2. Defined tasks with clear authority and responsibilities assigned to members

Social Processes

3. Protocols and norms for working together—that is, processes for problem solving, conflict handling, evaluation, inclusion, and so forth
4. Clear roles and responsibilities to ensure that members' talents are fully utilized

Commitment

5. Committed members who are willing to pull their share and exert extra effort to ensure that the team tasks are completed on schedule

Good team management practices are very important to establish in the early stages of team development. As such, we highly recommend that team-building efforts begin with the team defining their purpose and goals, followed by roles and responsibilities, and then norms and protocols. As the team develops and works together, commitment and motivation should naturally follow. Later on, the team management practices may become second nature to the high-performance team and may even go unnoticed and unappreciated. However, establishing these practices up front can ensure that the team gets off to a good start.

From Predicament to Ingenuity: Problem Solving for Pros

Teams with strong problem-solving skills possess the communication and interpersonal skills necessary to work effectively. Team members are *patient communicators*; they work hard to understand each other and make themselves understood. Difficulties in understanding are attributed to the communications process in general, not to other members' failings. Group members follow an agreed-upon process for exploring problems and challenges, collecting information, developing options, and evaluating and selecting a workable solution. It is the combination of these skill sets that fosters synergistic decision making, whereby the team together develops solutions that are better than the sum of individual ideas.

From Chaos to Creativity: Conflict Handling for Results

Conflict-handling skills refer to the group's ability to resolve conflicts as they occur. Teams that demonstrate good team management practices and possess problem-solving skills experience less conflict. However, conflict does occur and high-performance teams have a strategy in place to deal with it. They *do not* avoid thorny issues. They work to identify and understand the underlying issues and to deal with them effectively. In dealing with the difficult situation, members do not let issues fester and grow into interpersonal stresses between members. Rather, they address the issues and move on, putting in place a process or protocol for resolving similar conflicts in the future.

Measuring Your Team's Progress

How do you measure team success? When we ask teams this question, most identify task performance variables, such as accomplishing their goal or exceeding customer requirements, as well as personal satisfaction variables, such as feelings of accomplishment, mastery of new skills, and a sense of belonging. We suggest that both are critically important to team effectiveness.

Intuitively, this makes a lot of sense. If the team works cohesively but does not deliver the performance required by its customers or supervisors, it is not high functioning. Conversely, teams that achieve their goals but do not develop the goodwill and commitment of their members only frustrate their ability to work together on future tasks. It is when both task and social functioning are high that teams can excel by creating a climate where

group members commit to participating fully and become personally invested in the team.

Therefore, our model provides a measure of both team performance and team satisfaction. Team performance measures the degree to which the group agrees that its productive output—whether a product, service, or decision—meets the needs for quality, quantity, and service expected by its customers. Team satisfaction measures the extent to which group members enjoy being a member of the team and experience the social rewards of membership, such as learning, development, and a sense of belonging. Satisfied team members are committed to achieving their tasks and remaining on the team.

We found that measuring performance and satisfaction was much more complex than simply counting outputs. First, we asked the team sponsors—professors for the learning teams or managers for the industry teams—to subjectively assess how well their teams were doing with respect to both progress toward goals and satisfaction among members. Rather surprisingly, we found that both professors and managers had very little intuitive sense of how well their teams were doing. In fact, many were very surprised to find that their teams were experiencing difficulties.

Next, we attempted to measure task-related outputs such as marks for the learning teams and product or service outputs for the industry teams. Here we also found low consistency between the manager's or professor's assessment of the team's performance and the team's assessment of how well they were doing. We also found a high variance of assessments among the different professors and managers to whom the teams reported. In other words, we found that various managers or professors did not agree about how well the team was performing. So we decided that the team's own assessment was probably the best one. Teams may well inflate their ratings of performance. But if all teams do so to roughly the same extent, it still allows us to array them on a measurement scale from lower to higher performance. In other words, we can compare them and analyze them statistically.

In the end, we chose to rely on each team's assessment of their performance and satisfaction levels. Only the team truly knows how well it is performing and how skilled members are at working together, given the many challenges and obstacles encountered en route to goal completion. In support of this approach, we found a high degree of consistency among the team members' scores for performance and satisfaction, adding credence to our view that the team members know best how they are doing.

How to Maintain High-Octane Group Functioning

At the heart of improving group effectiveness is the ability of group members to reflect on what they are doing well and how they need to

improve—that is, what they need to start doing, what they should stop doing, and what they should continue doing. However, most groups find it difficult to examine their behavior on their own and wonder where to begin. Our model provides teams with a diagnostic guide for assessing how well they are doing and for determining where they need to focus their energy on skill development.

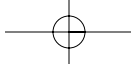
So, for example, teams often ask us questions like, “We got off to a great start, but it seems as though we are losing focus. How do we get it back?” or “Some members are coming late or not completing their team work on time. How do we rebuild their commitment to the team?” or “Some members can’t work together; what should we do?”

Just as a physician uses patients’ vital signs to determine their health and detect possible ailments, teams can use the Team Effectiveness Model to assess where and how the team needs to improve. When stalled, teams can do an overall diagnosis using our Team Effectiveness Model Gap Analyzer (see page 12, or page 115 in the Exercises section) to obtain an overview of areas of most and least effectiveness. Next, a team can zoom in directly on the three key success factors of high-functioning teams using our specific diagnostic instruments:

Team Management Practices: Do members understand and agree on their task? Have team members created and internalized their team norms of conduct? Do members have the necessary skills, expertise, perspectives, and resources to do their work? Is the team aligned with the interests of its stakeholders? Do team members feel supported by the organization? Do members feel safe to express their views and contribute fully? Are members committed to exerting the necessary effort for task accomplishment? (For a more detailed analysis, refer to the Team Management Practices Assessment on page 117 for an instrument to provide the answers to these questions.)

Problem Solving: Are members patient communicators? Do they take the time to truly understand each other’s points of view and contributions? Do members evaluate potential ideas and solutions before they discard them or adopt them? Do they build on each other’s ideas to create synergistic solutions? Are simple decisions overanalyzed? Are members following an agreed-upon problem-solving process for collecting information, exploring options, evaluating solutions, and making decisions, or are they jumping to conclusions? (Refer to the Team Problem-Solving Assessment on page 145 for a way to explore these issues with your team.)

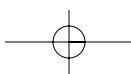
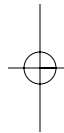
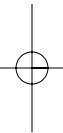
Conflict Handling: Are members avoiding conflict? Do members examine all views or simply avoid conflict to speed decision making along? Are important decisions being made prematurely? Do thorny issues remain under the table? Are disruptive behaviors blocking the team



from achieving their goals? (Refer to the Handling Problems in Team Discussion Assessment on page 182 to help answer these questions.)

Each of the three chapters that follow is devoted to one of these key factors for effective teams: team management practices, problem solving, and conflict handling. In addition, we've included structured and stimulating exercises to guide you along the path toward creating your own high-efficiency teams.

The Team Effectiveness Gap Analyzer provides an excellent place for a team to begin, allowing an overall assessment both of what is in good shape and of where there are gaps that need to be bridged. Teams can learn whether they are ready, getting ready, moving slowly, or stalled in each of the three key areas for working together effectively.



Team Effectiveness Model Gap Analyzer

<i>Level</i>	<i>Team Management Practices</i>	<i>Problem Solving</i>	<i>Conflict Handling</i>
4 Ready ("Watch our dust!")	<p>Team purpose and goals are clearly defined and compelling and our whole team is focused on achieving them.</p> <p>Members are working collectively, tapping the full potential of all and creating superior results.</p> <p>We have a well-defined approach for tackling our challenges and it is working for us.</p> <p>Relationships with key stakeholders are well defined, productive, and focused on the overall goals.</p> <p>Our team norms are well established and everybody abides by them. All individuals are included and respected as full, contributing members.</p> <p>All members are fully committed to the team and its purpose.</p>	<p>Our team creates ingenious "1 + 1 > 2" solutions.</p> <p>We use communication patience skills to foster dialogue, share important knowledge, and explore assumptions.</p> <p>We use synergy tools to help members expand their thinking, generate and build on ideas, and evaluate those ideas to arrive at superior solutions.</p> <p>We use the right process tools to guide our work.</p> <p>We discuss and agree upon sound approaches to problem solving, and we collect the relevant information before jumping into discussions about solutions.</p>	<p>We have established a team climate that welcomes and accepts diverse points of view, and our members feel safe to express themselves fully.</p> <p>We understand that conflict is a normal and natural part of team life. When conflicts do occur, we pause and discuss how we can move forward.</p> <p>We then develop a protocol to help us prevent similar conflicts in the future.</p> <p>We do not allow conflict to become personalized.</p>
3 Getting Ready ("We're on the right track")	<p>Team purpose and goals are becoming clear. The team is on the right track for completing our purpose, vision, priorities, and goals.</p> <p>Members are committed to working collectively, and we are learning how to tap into the full potential of all.</p> <p>We are defining/tweaking our approach for tackling our challenges, and more often than not, the approach is working for us. Results are coming nicely.</p> <p>Relationships with key stakeholders are well defined and for the most part are working.</p> <p>We are establishing team norms. Most of the time we are unafraid to confront difficulties and to discuss ways of working together more productively.</p> <p>Commitment to the team is fairly high.</p>	<p>Our team is learning how to create breakthrough "1 + 1 > 2" solutions.</p> <p>When we use communication patience and synergy tools, we arrive at superior solutions.</p> <p>Our process tools are helping guide our work and expand our creative thinking.</p> <p>We are beginning to be disciplined about how we approach problem solving and have put more structure around our discussions.</p>	<p>We're working hard to promote a team climate that welcomes diverse views so that members feel safe to express themselves.</p> <p>When conflicts do occur, we pause and discuss how we can move forward.</p>

<i>Level</i>	<i>Team Management Practices</i>	<i>Problem Solving</i>	<i>Conflict Handling</i>
2 Moving Slowly ("We're not on track yet")	<p>Loosely defined goals provide some focus and direction.</p> <p>We're beginning to recognize that a clear purpose and vision are important.</p> <p>We recognize that we are not tapping the full potential of all, and as a result, we're not producing the results expected of us.</p> <p>We do not have the right approach or strategy for tackling our challenges, and this is slowing us down.</p> <p>Experience has taught us that we need to foster relationships with key stakeholders. We're beginning to identify, clarify, and develop relationships with key groups.</p> <p>Team norms are loosely defined. Sometimes we do not live up to the great ideas that we had initially discussed for working together.</p> <p>Commitment of some members to the team is uneven.</p>	<p>Our team creates "1 + 1 = 2" solutions.</p> <p>Our team meetings are focused on sharing information from each member's area of responsibility. We do not use processes and techniques to identify common challenges, share relevant information, build on each other's ideas, or generate solutions that benefit all members and stakeholders. At best, we operate as a group instead of a real team.</p> <p>We are not disciplined in our problem-solving approach, and our discussions seem at times to be going in circles.</p> <p>We do not base our discussions nearly enough on sound information, but rather on members' opinions and intuitions.</p>	<p>Our team climate does not always welcome diverse views, and members are often uncomfortable with expressing their thoughts and feelings.</p> <p>We have no protocols in place to help us manage conflict effectively. As a result, conflicts often steer us off track and block us from moving forward.</p>
1 Stalled ("We are spinning our wheels")	<p>We have no concept of our purpose or vision.</p> <p>We do not have a useful approach or strategy for tackling our challenges, and this is slowing us down. Roles and responsibilities are unclear, resulting in confusion and frustration.</p> <p>Relationships with key stakeholder groups are unclear or not viewed as important.</p> <p>Team norms do not exist. People disagree over how we should be working together, and conflict is glossed over or ignored.</p> <p>Some members are not committed to the team at all.</p>	<p>Our team creates "1 + 1 < 2" solutions.</p> <p>Our team meetings are chaotic, with members interrupting, grandstanding, withholding information, and so on.</p> <p>Our inability to generate workable solutions stops progressive action and blocks people from moving forward on important issues.</p>	<p>Our team climate does not welcome diverse views and members do not feel safe to express themselves.</p> <p>We have no protocols in place to help us manage conflict effectively. As a result, conflicts often steer us off track and block us from moving forward.</p> <p>Members have personalized the conflicts, and cliques have formed to create "we-they" separations.</p>

