

CHAPTER FIVE

The Fundamentals Of Building High Performance Teams

D.D. Warrick

Major Focus Of The Case

The ability to build high performance teams and teamwork throughout an organization and the willingness to make the changes necessary to achieve a high level of team performance and teamwork may literally decide the fate of many organizations. Organizations that have teamwork at the top, within teams, and between teams have a significant competitive advantage. Unfortunately, though the need is great and the potential payoffs substantial, few organizations train leaders how to build high performance teams or do anything to build teamwork throughout the organization.

This case presents some fundamentals for building high performance teams and applies the fundamentals to helping change a dysfunctional top leadership team to a high performing team. The case is not intended to assume that there is a formula for building high performance teams so much as to present principles that can be adapted to the unique needs of teams. Actual names and places and specifics about the organization involved are not used so the focus can be on the fundamentals. The organization will simply be called Organization A and the team at the top that was involved will be called the Leadership Team.

Introduction

Virtually everyone believes in teamwork and leaders at all levels often preach teamwork. Effective teamwork has the potential to improve performance within and between teams, morale, cooperation, coordination, innovation, communications, the quality of decision making, the speed of getting things done, greater unity of purpose and commitment to carrying out plans, and even retention (McShane and Von Glinow, 2010). Many books and articles have been written about the many benefits of teamwork and the costs when teamwork is lacking (for example see Hellriegel and

Slocum, 2011, Katzenback and Smith, 1993, LaFasto and Larson, 2001, Levi, 2011). However, while it is obvious that teamwork plays a key role in the success of organizations, athletic teams, and symphonies, few organizations outside of athletic and military teams make teamwork a high priority that is systematically developed.

To put the level of teamwork that actually occurs in an organization into perspective, choose the organization you are presently working in or one you have worked in previously or are familiar with and answer the following questions:

1. Do you believe that teamwork is essential to the long term success of the organization?
2. Does the organization excel at teamwork at the top, within teams, and between teams?
3. Do you believe that the organization values and rewards teamwork?
4. What does your organization do to train leaders how to build high performance teams and teamwork?

Six Fundamentals For Building High Performance Teams

There are a number of models for building high performance teams. The most popular model was developed by B.W. Tuckman and M.A.C. Jensen (1977). The model includes five stages of team development: (1) Forming... getting to know the team members and the team; (2) Storming...team members struggle to establish roles, norms, and goals; (3) Norming...roles, norms, and goals are established; (4) Performing...team members have learned to efficiently coordinate activities, resolve conflicts, and work together with a high level of trust; (5) Adjourning...the team is about to disband and team members shift their focus from a task to a relationship focus. While this is an excellent model, the focus is primarily on forming new teams and showing the life cycle of teams. The model presented below includes six fundamentals that can be used for building existing teams into high performance teams, helping high performance teams continue to improve, and for forming new teams.

- 1. A Team Leader Committed To Building A High Performance Team.** No amount of team building will replace the need to have a team leader who is committed to building a high performance team that performs above the norm. When leaders lead, great things are possible and when they don't it creates a leadership vacuum filled with a lack of purpose, focus, and unity and unwanted and often dysfunctional dynamics that handicap the team. Effective team

leaders are skilled at providing **vision** (a clear and compelling sense of purpose and picture of what the team needs to do to succeed; **direction** (clear goals, values, and priorities); and **inspiration** (leading by example, motivating people to meet the challenge and give their best, encouraging and developing people).

- 2. Capable And Committed Team Members.** It is important to have or to be developing the right players for the team to build a high performance team. **You can't have an A team with C players.** An A player is a team member who has valuable skills that contribute to the success of the team and who is a committed team player. B players can also be valuable to a team. They are developing skills needed by the team and they are committed team players. A C player is a team member who either doesn't have the right skills needed by the team and appears unwilling or unable to develop the skills and/or is not a committed team player. One ineffective or disruptive team member can handicap the whole team.
- 3. Knowing Present Realities.** It is important for a team leader to have a keen sense of reality about the strengths and opportunities for improvement of the team and team members. Leaders who are out of touch with the realities of the dynamics of their teams will make decisions that may be influenced by erroneous assumptions or incomplete information. However, it is also important for the team to do periodic reality checks. If you know reality you can almost always do something about it but without reality checks, teams can develop issues that accumulate and go unresolved. Reality checks can be accomplished in formal ways by surveying and/or interviewing team members or by getting the team together to evaluate what is working best and what could be improved or changed.
- 4. Team Norms That Create A High Performance Culture.** Norms are standards of behavior that begin to shape the team culture, practices, and behaviors of team members. They can be positive or negative, helpful or harmful, and can have a significant influence on the performance and health of a team. Norms can happen by design or default so it is of course important to establish them by design by agreeing on the norms and what it takes to create them. It is also important for the team to agree on what to do if team members consistently operate outside the norms so there is a process for addressing issues.

5. Structuring The Team For Results. Another essential fundamental to building a high performance team is to structure the team for results. Some of the important structural issues that should be clear and designed to make the team successful are: (1) the mission of the team; (2) the responsibilities of the team, the team leader, and the team members; (3) a few high impact, clear, and motivating goals; and (4) how and when the team will meet, share information, and make decisions; and (5) simple but meaningful measures and controls.

6. An Organized Way To Improve Team Processes And Results. Curiously, it is not unusual for teams to never spend time focusing on how to improve the team and the team results. High performance teams don't become high performance teams by chance. It takes regular planned efforts to evaluate and improve how the team functions and the team results.

THE CASE: Efforts To Build A Dysfunctional Top Leadership Team Into A High Performance Team

Organization A was an organization of about 100 employees that had been in existence just under 40 years. It was an organization that attracted well educated employees that were willing to work at below industry wages because they believed in the purpose of the organization. The organization had been moderately successful but ran into difficult times because of the down turn in the economy. The President had resigned and the board brought in a new charismatic President with impressive credentials in hopes of turning the organization around.

The new President had a strong reputation for being a visionary, skilled, leader who was willing to make needed changes. He came to the organization with high hopes. However, after spending two months learning as much as possible about the board, his leadership team, the organization, and prospects for the future, he found that the organization was in far worse shape financially and organizationally than he anticipated. The board was a mixed assortment of well qualified and not so well qualified members. They showed little unity as a team and did not have a strategy for the future other than bringing in a new President. The Leadership Team consisting of the President and the top five leaders in the organization could at best be considered a dysfunctional team. They were dedicated professionals on a personal level but seldom operated as a team, had no vision or strategy for the future, and did not function well as a team though some did work

well with other individuals on the team. Unresolved interpersonal conflicts, a lack of trust among some of the team members, and different levels of acceptance of a new president made the culture of the team somewhat toxic. The rest of the organization was in disarray with confusion and uncertainty over the future of the organization. Employees felt over worked and under paid and had no hope or direction for the future.

Process for Preparing the Leadership Team to Lead The Way

After being President for about five months, the new President sought agreement with the Leadership Team to bring in an outside consultant to work with the team and an outside firm to help the organization grow and succeed. The proposal was met with mixed acceptance but was finally agreed to. The consultant and firm coordinated their activities to make sure they were synchronized with a common purpose.

The process that was agreed upon for developing the Leadership Team is shown in *Figure 1*. It should be kept in mind that team building processes need to be designed to fit the unique needs, resources, and desires of a team and the internal or external expertise available to guide the process. The fundamentals for developing high performance teams provide a framework for designing the process but each situation may have differing variables that drive the design.

It should also be noticed that the process chosen is an action oriented rather than an experiential oriented design. Team building methodology has often focused on experiential activities such as trust walks, trust falls, and outings that create an awareness of the importance of teamwork and are assumed to therefore improve teamwork and team performance. While these activities can be helpful in building camaraderie and insights about teams and teamwork, there is little evidence to support the assumption that they actually make teams more effective (Robbins and Finley, 2000). There is, however, evidence to show that action oriented team building can significantly improve teams (Anderson, 2012, Larson and LaFasto, 1989, Wheelan, 2005, *Leading Teams* published by the Harvard Business School Press, 2006).

Figure 1: Developing The Leadership Team Process: August, September,

Purpose When leaders lead and are united around a common purpose, great things are possible! Unfortunately, even the leaders who are committed to building exceptional organizations rarely commit the time and resources it takes to build a leadership team capable of leading the way to accomplishing this worthy goal. The purpose of this program is to develop a leadership team that is prepared to function as a united, focused, high performance team committed to building a special, successful, organization. It is a positive approach to change and uses the book *Positive Leadership* as a philosophical guide in preparing the leaders to be high impact, positive leaders.

Step 1:

Assessing Reality (August)

Step one includes a day that begins with an hour meeting with the Leadership Team to dialog about the program and what it is designed to accomplish followed by 45 minute interviews with each of the team members. The Leadership Team members will also be asked to complete an anonymous survey. The interviews and survey will focus on two parts. Part I includes an evaluation of the Leadership Team that will clearly identify the major Strengths and Opportunities for Improvement of the Leadership Team and what the Leadership Team will need to do to succeed. Part II provides an evaluation of the organization that will identify the major Strengths and Opportunities for Improvement of The organization and what it will need to do to succeed. If you know reality you can almost always do something about it.

Step 2:

Training And Preparing The Leadership Team For Change: Half Day (August)

Step two is designed to build strong commitment to the program, train the Leadership Team in the fundamentals of being a high performance top leadership team, and review and utilize the results of the assessment. This session will provide opportunities to discuss and agree on what it will take for the team to be a high performance top leadership team. A few specific actions will be identified that will need to be accomplished before the next meeting.

Step 3:

Designing The Leadership Team For Success (September)

Step three will include a review of follow-up assignments from the previous meeting and a step-by-step process to design the Leadership Team for success. Participants will be involved in establishing the vision, mission, and responsibilities of the team, team standards the team is committed to operating by, and agreeing on how the team will function and what the team needs to do to be considered highly successful. There will be follow-up responsibilities to refine what was accomplished and present it in the next meeting.

October, November

Program Design The program design includes progressive activities that are designed to move from assessing reality, to training and preparing the Leadership Team for success, to preparing the Leadership Team to lead and build a special the organization. It includes an assessment of the Leadership Team and organization and five half day sessions approximately every other week over a period of 4 months (a total of six activities) and makes it possible to option for a Follow-up Phase. The process is designed to achieve specific actions and measurable changes in the team.

Step 4: Leadership Team Goal Setting And Team Member Role Clarification (September)

Step four will include a review of follow-up assignments from the previous meeting and engaging in a process to identify a few high impact goals the Leadership Team needs to pursue as a top leadership team. The Leadership Team will also be involved in clarifying the role of each team member and how they can be successful in their job. In addition, the Leadership Team will be involved in planning ways to continue growing and developing as a team. Follow-up responsibilities will be assigned to refine the team goals and individual role descriptions.

Step 5: Training In Building A Special, Healthy, High Performance Organization (October)

Step 5 will include a review of follow-up assignments from the previous meeting followed by an exciting meeting that provides training in what the best organizations are like and involves the team in developing a model of what it will take to build the organization into a special, successful organization and what it will take to build the desired culture at the organization.

Step 6: Leading The Way, Evaluating Progress, And Preparing For The Future (November)

Step 6 will include another survey given to team members so an evaluation of progress can be made and a meeting designed to review follow-up assignments from the previous meeting followed by involving the Leadership Team in an evaluation of the survey results and identifying future actions that need to be taken to strengthen the Leadership Team and to build the organization into a successful the organization. Recommendations for engaging the organization at all levels in the change process will also be presented.

Comments About What Actually Took Place

The team building process for the Leadership Team was designed to include a **Team Assessment And Organization Assessment and Five Half Day Sessions** that met **Every Other Week** with the whole process taking **Four Months**. It should also be noted that the information provided for purposes of this case is a small fraction of the assessment information that was presented and of what took place. The assessment included interviews of the six team members and ratings by the six team members of both the team and the organization so the latter data could be used by the team to help change the organization. Both before and after assessments were made so progress could be evaluated. While only the highlights of the team assessments are shown in *Figure 2*, the actual assessment reports included:

- The Overall Average Score
- Highest And Lowest Ratings
- The Overall Average Score For Each Category Measured
- A Summary Of Major Strengths And Opportunities For Improvement Based On The Survey Results, Open Ended Questions And Interviews With The Team Members
- The Results For Each Item
- Representative Open Ended Comments For Each Open Ended Question Asked

Chapters from the book **Positive Leadership** (Cameron, 2008) were discussed by the team in the first four sessions. This book was selected because it focuses on the concept of positive leadership and how to build a positive culture, positive relationships, and use positive communications. The concepts are supported by a substantial amount of research. The book does not discourage dealing with reality and conflict but encourages doing so in a positive rather than negative way. Using the book helped the team to quickly change leadership, relationship, and communications patterns. The book along with training in leadership, team building, and interpersonal relations was helpful in learning how to dialog about sensitive issues and make difficult decisions that needed to be addressed.

Assessment information can be invaluable in quickly establishing and building a common view of reality, identifying and resolving issues, establishing goals, and providing a strong incentive for change. This was certainly the case with the Leadership Team as the data presented in the first session united the team around a strong incentive to be a united leadership team and make needed changes.

A follow-up group was assigned after each session to synthesize the information generated during the session and report back in the next session on their recommendations...what it will take for the Leadership Team to be a High Performance Team, team standards, team improvements, the team vision, mission, responsibilities, and goals, the role of the team leader and each team member, criteria for building a successful organization and successful organization culture etc. The recommendations of the follow-up groups were discussed and refined by the total team. A pattern was also established where at the beginning of each session each team member was asked to respond to the question, **what have you done to help unite and build a high performance Leadership Team and what have you seen others do?**

There are many keys to successful team building. However, the major key is the commitment and behavior of the team leader. Fortunately, the team leader was very clear and straightforward about what he wanted to accomplish. He also encouraged open dialog, was very supportive of the team members, and was willing to address difficult and sometimes controversial issues. This clearly accelerated the team building process.

Figure 2: Leadership Team Assessment

Leadership Team Structure		OA Aug'	OA Nov'
1. The Leadership Team Leader provides the Vision, Direction, and Inspiration needed to keep the team focused and united.		3.7	5.2
2. The Leadership Team has a clear mission.		3.3	6.0
3. The responsibilities of the Leadership Team and each Leadership Team Member are clear.		3.5	5.8
4. The Leadership Team has clear goals.		3.2	5.8
5. The Leadership Team is effectively organized to achieve the best possible results.		4.2	5.0
6. The Leadership Team does the necessary planning to be effective.		3.0	4.8
7. The Leadership Team is effective at following through on goals, projects, and commitments.		3.3	4.8
8. The Leadership Team has the necessary resources, support, and control to be successful.		3.7	4.8
9. The Leadership Team operates with minimal red tape and bureaucracy.		4.5	5.0
10. The potential of the Leadership Team and each Leadership Team Member is fully utilized.		3.0	5.2
11. The Leadership Team quickly adapts and responds to opportunities and needed changes.		3.2	5.3
Overall Average By All Members Of Leadership Team – August		OA AUG	
Overall Average By All Members Of Leadership Team – November		OA NOV	
1.0 – 1.9	2.0 – 2.9	3.0 – 3.9	4.0
Poor	Low	Below Average	Average
			4.1 – 5.0
			Above Average
			5.1 – 6.0
			High
			6.1 – 7.0
			Outstanding

Figure 2: Leadership Team Assessment continued

Leadership Team Processes	OA Aug'	OA Nov'
12. The Leadership Team Leader encourages participation and involvement.	4.8	6.0
13. All Leadership Team Members have a strong commitment to the success of the Leadership Team.	5.0	6.0
14. All Leadership Team Members are skilled and committed team players.	5.0	6.0
15. Leadership Team Members feel free to be candid and communicate openly with the Leadership Team Leader.	4.8	5.5
16. Leadership Team Members feel free to be candid and communicate openly with one another.	4.8	5.7
17. All Leadership Team Members use a style that encourages effective problem solving.	3.8	6.0
18. Problems and conflicts are openly discussed and resolved.	4.3	6.0
19. Leadership Team Members may disagree but are united once decisions are made.	4.3	6.0
20. The Leadership Team has an excellent relationship with Departments it works with.	3.8	5.0
21. Time is taken periodically to evaluate and improve the Leadership Team.	3.7	6.2
Leadership Team Culture		
	OA Aug'	OA Nov'
22. The Leadership Team has a sense of vitality, enthusiasm, and team spirit.	3.3	5.2
23. The Leadership Team has a strong commitment to being a united, high performance team.	4.7	6.2
24. Leadership Team Members work well together and support and encourage each other.	4.5	5.8
25. An atmosphere of trust exists among the Leadership Team Members.	3.3	5.5
26. The Leadership Team has an environment that is warm, friendly, and fun.	3.8	5.5
27. The Leadership Team has an environment that encourages innovative ideas and constant improvement.	4.2	5.2
28. Leadership Team Members feel valued and appreciated for their contributions.	2.8	5.2
Leadership Team Meetings		
	OA Aug'	OA Nov'
29. Leadership Team meetings are well-designed to be useful and productive.	2.8	5.0
30. The Leadership Team meets the right amount of times to be effective.	2.7	5.0
31. A variety of meetings are held to accomplish different things (share information, set goals, plan, etc).	4.2	5.2
Leadership Team Results		
	OA Aug'	OA Nov'
32. The Leadership Team is successful at achieving the desired results.	3.7	5.0
33. Leadership Team morale is high.	3.5	5.2
34. The Leadership Team excels at being customer-driven and service-oriented.	4.3	5.5
35. The Leadership Team produces high quality work.	4.5	5.3
*Overall Average By All Members Of Leadership Team – August OA AUG		
Overall Average By All Members Of Leadership Team – November OA NOV		

Figure 2: Leadership Team Assessment continued

	August	November
Overall Average Of All Items	3.9	5.5
Number Of Respondents	6	6

The Results

As shown in *Figure 2*, over the four month period the Overall Average for the Leadership Team improved from a 3.9 to a 5.5 with 7.0 being the highest rating possible. All items on the questionnaire showed improvement. The item, The Leadership Team has a strong commitment to being a united, high performance team increased from a 4.7 to a 6.2. Success at achieving the desired results improved from a 3.7 to a 5.0 and team morale improved from a 3.5 to a 5.2. Representative words and phrases used to describe the Leadership Team in the first assessment included “unfocused,” “dysfunctional,” “political,” “unorganized,” “ineffective,” “not a team,” “lack of trust,” “reactive,” “uncertain about role,” and “the Leadership Team does not engage in collective executive decision-making”. Representative words and phrases used in the second assessment included “developing a clear vision and leadership skills,” “striving for excellence,” “creating trust and open communications,” “high performance,” “dedicated and committed,” “coming together,” “continuous improvement,” “more cohesive and focused,” “involved,” “competent leaders,” “candid,” and “honest.”

Conclusion

High performance teams don't happen by chance. It takes change leaders committed to building high performance teams and implementing a number of fundamentals and continuous work to build a high performance team. The process is different for different teams and there are many ways to build a high performance team. However, the fundamentals are learnable and can be applied to on-going teams, temporary project teams, and virtual teams. The team in this case has gone from a dysfunctional team to a high performing team but there is still considerable room for improvement and there is no guarantee that the team will stay a high performing team. Team building is an on-going and highly important process that every leader should be skilled at.

Discussion

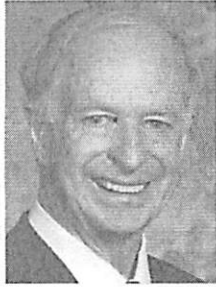
1. In getting a sense of reality regarding the need for high performance teams and teamwork verses the reality of what organizations actually do to develop high performance teams and teamwork, answer the four questions on page one of the case.
2. Based on what you read in the case and the assessment results shown in *Figure 2*, discuss the major strengths and opportunities for improvement of the Leadership Team before the team building process.
3. Discuss each of the fundamentals of building high performance teams and why they are important.
4. Evaluate the Leadership Team Development Process that was used (see *Figure 1*) and then discuss anything you would do different.
5. Discuss your perspective on experiential oriented verses action oriented team building.
6. Based on the information included under the sub-heading titled Results near the end of the case and the results of the follow-up assessment shown in *Figure 2*, discuss the improvements in the Leadership Team and the next steps you believe they need to take to sustain their gains and continue improving.

Key Lessons In Leading Change

1. Leaders need to understand the importance of developing high performance teams and teamwork within and between teams and to provide planned opportunities to continuously improve and make needed changes in teams and teamwork.
2. Building high performance teams will only occur when leaders are committed to building a high performing team and lead and support the process it takes to continuously develop the team.
3. Experiential oriented team building can be helpful in developing camaraderie and presenting concepts but it is action oriented team building that actually changes teams.
4. Leaders need to recognize when they need internal or external professional help in developing a team.
5. Gains made in developing a high performance team can be quickly lost if there isn't planned follow-up.

References

- Anderson, Donald (2012). *Organization Development: The process of leading organizational change* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage, 219-220.
- Cameron, Kim S. (2008). *Positive leadership*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Hellriegel, Don and Slocum, John W. Jr. (2011). *Organizational Behavior* (13th ed.). Mason Ohio: South-Western, 362-377.
- Katzenbach, Jon R. and Smith, Douglas K. (1993). *The wisdom of teams*. Boston Mass: Harvard Business School Press.
- Larson, Carl E. and LaFasto, Frank (1989). *Team work*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications.
- LaFasto, Frank and Larson, Carl E. (2001). *When Teams Work Best*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications.
- Leading Teams (2006). Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 12-13.
- Levi, Daniel (2011). *Group dynamics for teams* (3rd ed). Los Angeles: Sage, 27-30.
- McShane, Steven L. and Von Glinow, Mary Ann (2010). *Organizational behavior* (5th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill/Irwin, 236-237.
- Robbins, Harvey And Finley, Michael (2000). *Why teams don't work: What goes wrong and how to make it right*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 195-199.
- Tuckman, B. and Jensen, M. (1977). Stages of small group development revisited. *Group and Organization Studies*, 2, 419-527.
- Wheelan, S.A. (2005). *Creating effective teams: A guide for members and their leaders* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 39-51.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Don Warrick is an award winning educator, consultant, and author who specializes in coaching and developing leaders and in organization development, change, and transformation. He is a Professor of Management and Organization Change at the University of Colorado Springs where he holds the life time title of President's Teaching Scholar and has received the Outstanding Teacher Award at the university, many Outstanding Teacher Awards in the College of Business, and has received the University's highest award, the Chancellor's Award. He has received many awards for his contributions to his areas of expertise including being named the Outstanding Organization Development Practitioner of the Year, the Outstanding Human Resources Professional of the Year, and the Outstanding Educator of the Year. He was recently named the Best Professor in Organisational Development.

Dr. D.D. (Don) Warrick

1370 Rangely Dr., Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921
Phone: 719-488-2240 · E-Mail: ddwarrick@aol.com