Mastering Two Disciplines—Not One

It is more than instinct alone . . .

MINDBOOK

We have all been part of a small group that somehow came together to accomplish unexpected feats as a team. The personal chemistry was right, the circumstances were compelling, and the group jelled. We have all also been part of small-group efforts that fell apart because of a misplaced concern about becoming a team, when, instead, the situation called for one clear leader to take charge. So how can you get team performance when it counts, without losing the power of single leadership and individual accountability when they count? This is a matter of applying the right discipline at the right time against the right challenge.

There are two key disciplines of small-group performance: the team discipline and the single-leader discipline. The *team discipline* promises a great deal of versatility and collective power when deployed against a challenge that warrants and demands a team. Many important performance challenges, however, do not benefit from teaming. For example, a half dozen salespeople, assigned to separate territories, typically

will maximize sales results through the sum of their individual efforts. Challenges like this are best achieved through the *single-leader discipline,* which is defined as the sum of separate, individual contributions directed and managed by a single leader. (Please note: In *The Wisdom of Teams,* we called this the "working group" discipline. Over the past decade, we and those we consult with have found "single leader" to be a more useful descriptor.)

Members of small groups must be conscious and deliberate about when, where, and how to use the team discipline versus the single-leader discipline. Not surprisingly, both disciplines are effective if used in the right situations, and a balanced leadership approach will integrate the two, rather than constantly favoring one over the other. Unfortunately, too many leaders neither integrate nor balance these two disciplines. Instead, they instinctively, if not blindly, follow the single-leader approach, as though it were the *only* way to manage. Also, they may put more or less emphasis on teamwork, in the sense of togetherness, depending on the leader's personal style.

Leaders with this unfortunate habit and mind-set, together with the groups they lead, increasingly fail because performance results in today's fast-moving and challenging environment demand mastery of both disciplines. Intentionally or not, such leaders foster what we call *compromise units,* small groups who fail to grasp and apply either of the two disciplines, and become dysfunctional.

People in compromise units do not recognize that team performance requires the team discipline. Instead, members of such groups and their leaders never get beyond inadequate appeals to teamwork. They cry out to "be more of a team" and complain about "not getting along" or being insufficiently

"empowered." Leaders of such groups often go hot and cold in their approaches, first commanding members to "Be a team!" then backing off with the hope that a real team will somehow coalesce. They seldom do. Yet, when leaders retreat, and the group fails to apply the discipline of team basics, a confused and leaderless gang inevitably results. Compromise units are the worst of both worlds, allowing performance to deteriorate because the leader and members of the group have neglected to apply the two key disciplines of small-group performance.

Learning how and when to apply the two disciplines for small-group performance begins with recognizing that each discipline supports *the five basic elements of effective group work*. It is important to remember that an effective group is a significant step below a performance unit. Nonetheless, neither of the two small-group performance units, real team or single-leader group, can realize its performance potential unless the five elements are in place. First, the group has or develops *an understandable charter* that provides the group with a reason and purpose for working together; however, the charter is not necessarily focused on performance. Second, the members of the group *communicate and coordinate effectively* to allow constructive interactions involving all of the members. Third, the members of the group establish *clear roles and areas of responsibility,* which allow them to work individually or collectively. Fourth, the members create *a time-efficient process,* minimizing wandering discussions and wasted time. And, finally, the group develops *a sense of accountability* helping each member understand individual contributions to the success of the group; hence, progress can be monitored and evaluated accordingly. Figure 1.1 illustrates how these elements of effective group work provide the base on which performance units develop. The essential difference

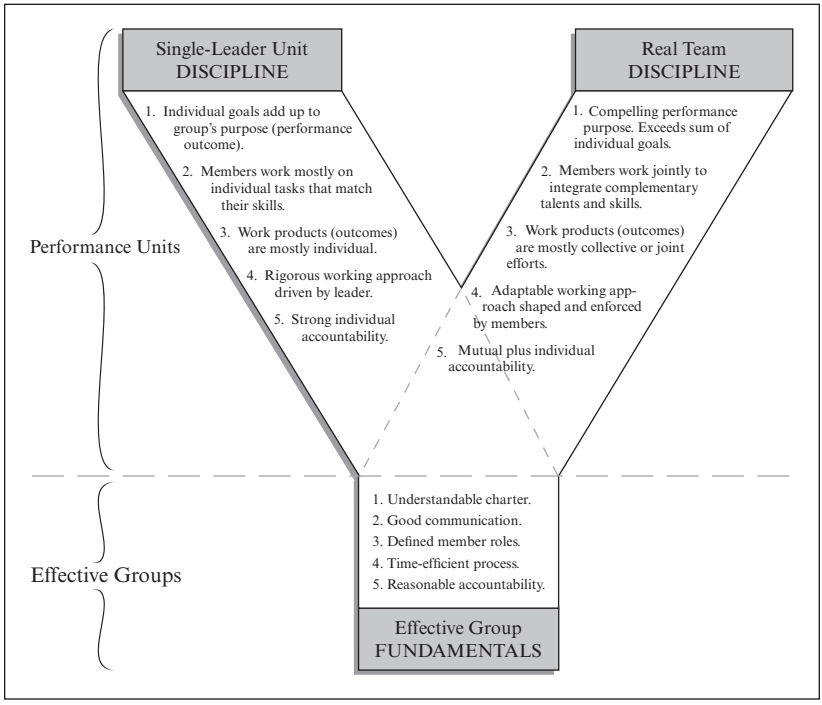

FIGURE 1.1 Climbing the Y
Source: Copyright by Katzenbach Partners LLC.

between an effective group and the two performance units is in the clarity of the group's focus on performance and the rigor with which the members of the group apply the appropriate discipline required by the performance challenge.

The team discipline and the single-leader discipline are two distinctly different managerial approaches. Both are required for an effective group to become a performance unit. Leaders and the other members of small groups must master all three branches of the Y: (1) the elements of effective group work; (2) the discipline of single-leader groups, and (3) the basics of real-team performance. Optimizing the value of small-group work requires understanding each of the branches and knowing how to use performance as a guide for deciding when to branch left (single leader) versus right (team).

The Single-Leader Discipline

The single-leader discipline revolves around one leader. The leader, often in consultation with the group, determines the performance-based reason and purpose for group work, makes the decisions, establishes the required individual contributions and group pattern of communications, and determines the requirements of success and how and when to evaluate progress. In the single-leader discipline, the formal leader:

1. Makes and communicates decisions for the group. The members of the group respect the decisions because the leader has the required formal authority, as well as recognized experience, proven judgment, and relevant knowledge of the performance situation. Indeed, members of the group *expect* the leader to make the decisions. While consultation can be a part of the decision process, the leader makes the final decision.
2. Sets the performance goals and determines individual responsibilities. While the goal-setting process often involves open communication and two-way negotiation, the leader has the final say about what constitutes an appropriate goal for each member, as well as for the group as a whole. Members often provide important input in this process, but the leader establishes the goals.
3. Sets the pace and determines the working approach. The leader monitors the progress and pace of each person's effort and motivates individuals, as well as the group as a whole. The leader determines the overall working approach, which reflects a series of individual contributions based on stable, well-defined, individual roles for each member of the group. The leader acceler-

ates or slows the pace by setting deadlines for the group and its members.

4. Evaluates the results. The leader assesses individual results, as well as overall group progress, and makes adjustments as needed. The leader is responsible for achieving group results that are acceptable to higher-level managers. Throughout the process, the leader recognizes and rewards the contributions and results of individuals.

5. Establishes benchmarks and standards. The leader fosters sharing of ideas among the members and encourages best practices both within and outside the group, ensuring effective group communication between members and outsiders. In most cases, the leader makes the final determination of the best standards for the group.

6. Maintains control of the group effort by clarifying individual accountability and emphasizes consequence management. As a result, the members of the group are clear about their roles, specific goals, expected end-products, manner of interaction with others, and deadlines. The leader determines the measures that apply to individuals and to the group as a whole. In the final analysis, the leader is in control. Furthermore, the members of the group, as well as senior management outside the group, expect the leader to be in control.

The single-leader discipline is a familiar and essential part of all well-managed organizations. Throughout history, most organizational departments and business units have been led primarily in this mode. Team gurus and enthusiasts aside, we believe most leaders and employees are more comfortable

working within the single-leader discipline because each team member knows what is expected and how performance will be assessed. Perhaps what is more revealing is that being accountable for your own, individual goals and actions is preferable, clearer, and easier than the shared responsibility that characterizes the team discipline. With every good intention, we may advocate teamwork, but our actions all too often favor the single-leader discipline mind-sets and behaviors.

The Team Discipline

As useful, valuable, and time-honored as the single-leader discipline is to small-group performance, it is not the only way, or always the best way, to manage small groups. The team discipline, which demands shared leadership and mutual accountability is the alternative. When groups effectively apply the team discipline, the group, not the formal leader, determines the performance rationale and purpose for group work, and the group establishes the required individual and collective contributions and pattern of communications. The group also sets the requirements for success and how and when to evaluate progress.

The team discipline requires peer- and self-enforcement and is described in *The Wisdom of Teams* as "a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable." These six elements are reviewed thoroughly in Chapter 5 (small number and complementary skills), Chapter 6 (common purpose, goals, and working approach), and Chapter 7 (mutual accountability). Instead of elaborating element by element at this point, the following paragraphs highlight how the team discipline differs from the single-leader discipline.

1. In the team discipline, decisions are made by the appropriate people. Sometimes the decision-maker is, in fact, the designated team leader and sometimes it is the whole group. But, far more often, decisions are made by the person or people whose skills and experience best qualify them to decide. This is why team basics require a set of complementary skills. Groups who apply the team discipline do not require consensus decisions. (For more on the dangers of consensus decision-making, see Chapter 6.) In fact, the group rarely even votes. Instead, decisions get made by those the group believes best positioned to do so, usually as a result of talent, skill, experience, and assigned work task. The leader only intervenes when group members are incapable or unwilling to reach a decision. In contrast to the clear, unvarying, decision-making authority that characterizes the single-leader discipline, leadership and choice making shifts and is shared among the members in groups using the team discipline.
2. Goals of groups using the team discipline are set and affirmed individually and collectively by the group. While the designated leader may argue persuasively for certain goals, the goals are not set until the members of the group have explored the implications, wrestled with the trade-offs, and developed a shared understanding and mutual sense of commitment. This process differs from the characteristic, one-on-one negotiation between each member and the leader in the single-leader discipline. Moreover, in the team discipline the group clearly differentiates between individual goals and collective goals. (In fact, the achievement of collective goals is the joint responsibility of two or more mem-

bers.) When groups are using the team discipline, the number and value of collective goals invariably outweigh the number and value of individual goals.

3. In the team discipline, the pace and working approach are set by the group, making the approach a matter of shared commitment. The team chooses the best way to distribute and integrate work, manage logistics and administration, and establish and enforce norms for each other. More important, the roles and contributions of the members shift to fit different performance-task needs, instead of remaining predictable, stable, and relatively inflexible as in the single-leader approach.

4. In the team discipline, the group rigorously and consistently evaluates its own results. Because the purpose and goals of the team require similar levels of commitment from all of the members, the group assesses its progress *as a team*. The team is its own toughest critic, and members are less forgiving of performance shortfalls than their sponsors or even the leader. Members of a team hold each other accountable to a greater degree than they are held accountable by either the leader or the sponsoring authority. Furthermore, when teams evaluate progress, the dialogue is open, nonhierarchical, and more focused on performance progress and the entire effort of the group than on individual performance.

5. In the team discipline, the members of the group set high standards. These demanding standards arise from the compelling performance purpose to which all members are committed. Because of their shared commitment, the members of the group seek out tough stan-

dards and high comparisons for themselves. The group is seldomly satisfied with the standards or benchmarks used elsewhere in the organization. It is not uncommon for a team to establish a set of goals that exceeds the goals set in its charter from the sponsoring authority. Groups using the team discipline thrive on clearing a bar that others would not attempt.

6. Members of groups using the team discipline hold themselves individually and mutually accountable. With groups applying the team discipline, it is very difficult (if not impossible) for any one member to fail—only the team can succeed or fail. Team members are not easy on one another in this respect. Yet, they are extremely flexible and adaptable in helping each other to contribute to the fullest extent possible and to develop new skill levels in the process. In marked contrast, the single-leader discipline almost exclusively emphasizes individual accountability and development. Indeed, mutual accountability for shared purpose and goals may be *the* hallmark of the team discipline.

Read the preceding two sections on the single-leader discipline and the team discipline again in conjunction with the Y chart in the first section of this chapter. Note how each discipline builds upon and extends the five basics of effective group work: (1) a clearly understood purpose and rationale for group work—though not necessarily performance focused; (2) open communication and coordination among all of the members—though always within a predictable meeting agenda; (3) clear roles and areas of responsibility as to how work will get done—though seldom differentiated by individ-

ual versus collective work product needs; (4) a time-efficient process that minimizes "group groping"—though seldom variable by group task; and (5) a sense of who is accountable for what and what success looks like and how to evaluate progress—though seldom rigorously enforced. In short, these fundamentals enable groups to work effectively, but not to perform exceptionally.

Yet, as you reread these two sections, we urge you to learn the distinctions between these two separate performance disciplines for small groups as well as the fundamentals of effective group work. The two disciplines should feel different. For example, if you consider a small group in which you currently participate, you ought to find it easy to use the above descriptions to identify which of these two management disciplines is being used and if your efforts are best characterized as an effective group or worse, a compromise unit.

Table 1.1 provides a model to highlight the key differences between effective groups who merely interact well, and performance units who apply discipline to achieve success.

A balanced approach to small-group effectiveness starts with the conscious choice of which discipline will work best for a particular performance challenge. *Note:* these two disciplines lead to performance unit results—they are not simply the names for two types of work groups. We are not suggesting or encouraging leaders and groups to choose between being a team or being a single-leader group. In fact, we strongly warn against that mindset. Leaders and groups must look at each separate performance challenge they face, decide if they really need a performance unit, and then choose the best discipline for their situation. The two key disciplines are ways to achieve demanding performance results, not arbitrary names for types of groups.

TABLE 1.1 Effective group fundamentals versus the single-leader or team disciplines

Effective Work Group: That Interacts Well	Single-Leader Discipline: Performance Unit	Real-Team Discipline: Performance Unit
Clearly understood charter or purpose (not necessarily related to enterprise performance).	Strong performance charter and purpose comprised mostly of individual contributions.	Compelling performance challenge comprised of many collective work products.
Hierarchical leader promotes open communication and coordination.	Focused, single leader applies relevant experience and know-how to create performance focus.	Leadership role shifted/shared among members to reflect and exploit performance potential.
Individual goals seldom add up to a clear performance purpose for the group. The goals are not outcome-based.	Individual outcome-based goals and work products that add up to the performance purpose.	Outcome-based goals include both individual and collective work products (the latter predominates).
Clear roles and areas of responsibility remain constant throughout the group effort.	Stable roles and contributions reflect talents and skills of members.	Shifting roles and contributions to match varying performance tasks, as well as exploiting and developing member skills/talents.
Accountability is understood, but consequence management principles seldom prevail.	Individual accountability enforced primarily by leader; consequence management usually prevails.	Both individual and mutual accountability, largely peer- and self-enforced. However, only the team can "fail."

Linking Work Products to Performance

Whenever a small group can deliver performance through the combined sum of individual contributions, then the single-leader discipline is the most effective choice. This choice is fast, efficient, and comfortable, since most organizational units have followed the single-leader model for decades. However, if there must be collective contributions in addition to individual efforts, then the group should apply the team discipline. We choose to call such contributions work products. As illustrated in Figure 1.2, many group performance challenges can be achieved through the sum of individual work products. Other challenges demand the extra, team-based performance that arises from collective work products.

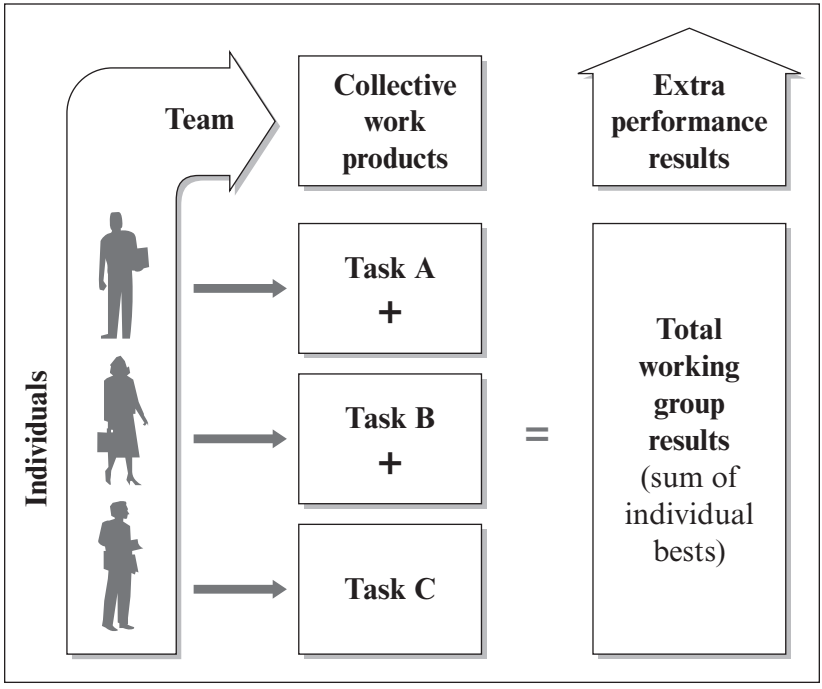

FIGURE 1.2 Collective work potential

Such products add an important dimension of performance that simply cannot be achieved primarily by individuals working on their own; hence, the value of the collective work product can be significant. The collective work product is the reason why teams outperform single-leader units.

Collective work products come from the hands-on work of two or more people, each with different skills, talents, and perspectives, who collaborate to produce value not achievable by any one of them alone. For example, a market researcher who collaborates with a product designer and a sales representative to design, set up, conduct, and debrief a focus group creates value from their joint or collective work effort. The skills, effort, and talent of all three combine to produce the focus group and what is to be learned from it. The different perspectives of the three people working together result in a better set of focus-group questions and interactions, as well as a richer interpretation of the response. If one of the three people conducts the focus group, or even if each of them conducts a separate focus group, the value of their merging perspectives would be largely lost.

A collective work product requires the skills, talents, and melded perspectives of several members of the group working together. One person working independently cannot produce the same quality product. Also, the leader cannot create the product by simply combining the individual work efforts of several people. Members have to roll up their sleeves and work together (either around the table, over the phone, or across the Internet). When performance demands collective-work products through real-time collaboration and integration of multiple skills and perspectives, the sum of individual work products and contributions falls short, and the single-leader approach will under-perform.

Individual work products come from individual effort, tal-

ent, and skill. Sounds obvious, and it is. The value created derives primarily from the hands-on work of one person. For example, a market researcher who designs, sets up, conducts, and debriefs a focus group by herself creates an individual work product. The researcher might ask an assistant to make phone calls, get help from an audio-visual technician in recording the focus group, or ask an editor to review the draft of the conclusions for clarity. But the researcher is doing the essential value-added work.

The distinction here is one of common sense. Yet, it is a distinction far too often ignored. In this case, four people are doing the work: the market researcher, the assistant, the technician, and the editor. However, most of the value in the work product from the focus group comes primarily from one person: the market researcher. It is the market researcher's individual work product. In the case of the jointly designed and conducted focus group in the preceding example, the collective interactions of the market researcher, the product designer, and the sales representative create the value.

People sometimes confuse work products with decisions. Work products, whether individual or collective, are more about work than decisions. Work products involve more than reviewing, deciding, and delegating—the actions so often associated with the job of manager. For example, steering committees that review, discuss, decide, and delegate are not producing collective work products. They are, as a committee, performing the classic management role of making decisions. But decisions—even though they often create value in and of themselves—are not the work products that define small group disciplines. The work leading to such decisions, as well as the work that such decisions require, may warrant performance unit levels of effort. Thus the decision event itself may dictate performance unit work. As a consequence, steering

committees can seldom be classified as teams, although they may sponsor or stimulate group actions that warrant performance unit action.

In choosing between the single-leader and the team disciplines, groups must determine if their goals require significant and essential collective work products, or if the performance challenge is best achieved through the sum of individual work products and contributions. If the group cannot identify important, *required* collective work products, the team-approach should not be applied.

In the previous sentence, the word "*required*" is important. In our experience, most small groups can imagine many possibilities for collective work products. For example, the market researcher could easily approach the focus group in either of the ways described above. The key question, therefore, is not whether your group can imagine one or more meaningful and important collective work products, but whether the specific performance challenge at hand *requires* and benefits from collective work products.

Consider, then, these two examples of different performance challenges:

Challenge 1: "We need to know if our core consumer segments will respond favorably or unfavorably to emphasizing 'healthy' and 'natural' in our upcoming ad campaign."

Challenge 2: "We must understand if we can grow our customer base significantly by redesigning our product line that currently sells so well to the 'fifty-plus crowd' in ways that will appeal to people in their teens and twenties."

A market researcher could imagine approaching Challenge 1 through delivering the kind of collective work product

described earlier. But, in our experience, performance does not necessarily require that approach. Neither product designers nor sales representatives are needed to assist the market researcher in designing, conducting, or learning from a series of focus groups whether 'healthy' and 'natural' will benefit or hurt sales. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine anyone succeeding against Challenge 2 without collective work products. There are too many uncertainties and open questions, all of which would benefit significantly from the real-time combination of the differing skills, experiences, and perspectives of the market researcher, product designer, and sales representative.

WORKBOOK

EXERCISE 1.1
Learn From Your Own Experience

Gather one or more groups of people. Ask them to take a few minutes to write down at least one prior experience when they believed they were part of a really effective team versus one when they felt the group was ineffective. When everyone has completed this task, give them another five minutes to identify the characteristics that distinguished the two situations. Once people have completed this assignment, ask the whole group to divide itself into subgroups of four to eight people, with some groups focusing only on the characteristics of effective teams and others on the characteristics of ineffective teams. Give these groups twenty minutes to discuss their insights before asking each subgroup to share feedback with the whole group.

When you have gathered the feedback, ask the group to compare the findings and insights they have generated with the material in Chapter 1: (1) the five basic elements of all effective groups, (2) the team discipline, (3) the single-leader discipline, and (4) "compromise units."

EXERCISE 1.2
Test Your Understanding

Use the true/false test in Table 1.2 to evaluate your understanding of the two key disciplines and related concepts.

TABLE 1.2 Test your understanding

		True	False
1.	A team approach is better than a leader-led approach only if significant collective work products are needed.		
2.	A team approach is likely to be more effective than a leader-led effort when the number of members exceeds twenty-five.		
3.	In groups larger than twenty, the most practical way to achieve team levels of performance is to utilize subgroups.		
4.	Leader-led groups achieve results faster than teams.		
5.	Once a team has mastered the basics, their results are just as fast as a leader-led group.		
6.	At the start of a project, it is important for every small group to decide to be a team and then figure out how best to adhere to that discipline.		
7.	A small group can sometimes function as a team and sometimes as a single leader unit, provided the group applies the right discipline in the right places at the right times.		
8.	The best way for a group to achieve team levels of performance is for the formal leader to back off and empower the group to manage itself.		
9.	Teaming is nothing more than getting along and helping each other.		
10.	People in groups will only respect decisions if they are made by the boss.		
11.	Sometimes my group will perform best if the leader will just make decisions, assign each of us our individual jobs, and just get on with it.		
12.	Most people are more comfortable with clearly defined responsibilities and roles, as well as individual accountability.		
13.	Teaming is required whenever it is possible to imagine any collective work product.		
14.	Teams typically set higher standards and goals than what the chain of command expects.		
15.	Clear and compelling performance goals are what create great teams, instead of the desire to team up.		

Answers: 1. T; 2. F; 3. T; 4. T; 5. T; 6. F; 7. T; 8. F; 9. F; 10. F; 11. T; 12. T; 13. F; 14. T; 15. T

WORKBOOK

EXERCISE 1.3
Assess and React

Gather your group together. Ask each person to answer the questions in Table 1.3 on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 being *strongly agree,* and 5 indicating *strongly disagree.* When you have completed your answers, compare notes. Discuss whether your group balances the single-leader discipline with the team discipline, or perhaps habitually uses only one of these disciplines. Also, discuss whether your group is a compromise unit. Finally, ask yourselves whether there are any specific performance challenges your group faces that would benefit from a different approach from the one usually taken.

TABLE 1.3 Assess and react

		1	2	3	4	5
1.	Our working approach is determined by the way in which the leader assigns tasks and runs the meetings.					
2.	We hold one another accountable for higher collective results than our leaders and sponsors expect of us.					
3.	We all participate in evaluating each other's efforts instead of leaving that up to our leader.					
4.	Most members of our group are not comfortable in leading the group.					
5.	Members of our group are very clear about their roles, and we maintain those roles in all meetings and interactions.					
6.	We need clearer decisions and less time spent on touchy-feely stuff.					
7.	Most of the real work required is best done by each member working on his/her assignment in his/her area of competence.					
8.	We spend a lot of time between meetings collaborating on work that couldn't get done individually.					
9.	Our leader delegates effectively to others and only supervises and monitors individual progress.					
10.	When we set our goals, we seldom distinguish between individual goals and joint or collective goals.					

TABLE 1.3 *continued*

		1	2	3	4	5
11.	We learn a lot from one another because we often shift roles and share work tasks.					
12.	We seldom take time to discuss and decide on our purpose and aspirations as a group; these are clearly specified by our leader.					
13.	When new members of our group are added, we spend quality time as a group incorporating their views into our purpose, goals, and working approach.					
14.	All of our meetings are conducted very efficiently by the leader, and the topics and agendas are clear in advance.					
15.	It is more important that we get along with one another than achieve extraordinary results.					
16.	All members of the group feel comfortable suggesting changes in the group's goals and working approach.					
17.	Our group is too big to function effectively as a team; hence, most of the real work is done by individual and subgroups, only some of which work as performance teams.					
18.	We are each held accountable by the leader for individual goals and contributions that add to our group's purpose.					
19.	Time is clearly more important to our purpose than collective work products; hence, most of the work is individually driven.					
20.	Members are primarily respected by the others for their skills rather than personality.					

EXERCISE 1.4
Match Your Performance Challenges To The Two disciplines

Gather your group and spend whatever time is needed to list the most pressing performance challenges that you currently face. Refine this list until you have five to ten particular challenges. Pick one challenge from the list. Review Figure 1.1 and Table 1.1. Now, ask half of your group to make the best possible arguments in favor of applying the single-leader disci-

pline to the selected performance challenge. Ask the other half of the group to argue in favor of the team discipline. When you have completed this debate, move on to a second specific challenge from your list, then a third, and so on.

EXERCISE 1.5
Does Performance Require Collective Work Products?

Again, start by identifying one or more specific performance challenges facing your group. Pick one of those challenges to discuss. Ask the group to brainstorm regarding the kind of work that must get done to succeed. Convert this description of work into a series of specific work products. Identify and discuss among yourselves whether the work products are individual or collective. Then, using Figure 1.2, discuss whether your group's performance *requires* or benefits from collective work products. Remember that the question here is not whether you can identify collective work products, or whether any particular collective work product is a good idea or potentially valuable. Instead, the question is whether the performance objectives and goals demand such work products.