

CHAPTER 1

Change Yourself, Change Your Team

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THE GREAT PROMISE OF TEAMS

“A team can make better decisions, solve more complex problems, and do more to enhance creativity and build skills than individuals working alone. . . . They have become the vehicle for moving organizations into the future. . . . Teams are not just nice to have. They are hard-core units of the production.”

—Blanchard¹

Better decisions, increased productivity, and heightened engagement: Teams promise a lot. At their best, teams make many things easier. Good teams solve problems² better than individuals. They improve quality.³ Teams can increase your engagement and motivation. One study of British rowers even found a physiological advantage to teamwork,⁴ with team members releasing more endorphins than individuals rowing the same race. *We're wired for teamwork.*

Beyond any physical benefit, teams have an intellectual advantage because they make more information available to you, help you generate more novel ideas, and give you access to more people who can identify good ideas—and weed out bad ones.

But the proof of the benefits of teamwork isn't just in the numbers. If you've experienced at least one strong team in your career, you know the feeling in your gut. Being part of a great team is electric. You feel more connected, you feel the upward spiral of ideas getting better and better. You know that a bunch of people have your

back. It's easy to get stuff done. Once you've felt what it's like to be on a truly great team, you'll always want that feeling back.

That's the feeling you're trying to evoke when you plaster the office walls with cheery posters of mountain climbers, rowers, and planes flying in formation.

THE SAD REALITY OF TEAMS

For many people today, the reality of working on a team is nothing like what's shown in those posters. Teams can feel pretty crappy. Instead of collaboration, you're in competition with your colleagues. Instead of diversity of thought and breadth of ideas, there's tunnel vision. Instead of friendship and camaraderie, there's gossip and backstabbing.

And it's not as though the pain is all worth it because you're so much more productive. In many instances, teams are slower and less productive than individuals. Seriously? All that drama for nothing! Teams aren't even more accurate than individuals. And that promise of increased engagement and motivation goes out the window when lack of role clarity, mistrust, and unhealthy conflict sour your relationships. Research has even debunked the value of the cornerstone of teamwork—the brainstorming session.⁵ *Teams are failing us.*

TEAMS ARE HERE TO STAY

There's no going back to a world where we all did most of our work independently. Teams have multiplied as our work has grown more complicated. If you go way back to 77 AD, one man—Pliny the Elder—managed to write an encyclopedia of all that was known to mankind. Today, that's just impossible to fathom! No single person could possibly know all there is to know even in one very specific field. *We can't know enough without teams.*

The huge increase in the use of teams is also part of a seismic cultural change. Command and control organizations didn't need teams to get things done—they had *memoranda*. The boss sent out a

memo and everyone got on board. “Yes, sir, right away, sir!” When was the last time you saw a memo? Today, our organizational cultures are more sensitive to engagement and buy-in. We have to use influence instead of authority to get things done. Meetings have replaced memos. *We can't get things done without teams.*

I recently reached out to human resources leaders in 50 large and midsized organizations and asked them whether teams would be less, equally, or more important in the future than they are today. Eighty-nine percent of respondents said that teams would be more (or much more) important in the future. *Teams are here to stay.*

Teams are the way work gets done in our increasingly complex, fast-paced, global world. They are the basic unit of our organizations and a critical piece of the productivity puzzle. For many of us, our work teams are also the closest thing we have to community in our urban, disconnected, two-hour-commute lives. My teammates are my colleagues, my sounding boards, my friends, and even the aunts and uncles to my two daughters. For both our organizations and ourselves, there is a lot riding on our ability to make teams work.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED ABOUT FIXING TEAMS

The problems facing teams are serious, but instead of fixing the serious teamwork problems with serious solutions, most team-building sessions focus on fun or frivolous activities like cooking classes or white-water rafting. I guess the idea is that if you can have fun outside the office, maybe you can recapture the fun back in the office. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way.

More often than not, people return with horror stories about team issues being magnified by these types of sessions. The cooking class highlights how your team can't get its act together and ends with everyone eating a cold meal just to rub their noses in it. The karaoke night widens the gap that already exists between the outgoing party types and the more hesitant introverts. The Popsicle-stick boat sinks along with your hopes of building a better team. Expecting silly exercises to fix serious issues is ridiculous.

On the other side of the spectrum are the “tissue issue” team builders. These are the team-building facilitators who think that if you remove the tables, sit in a circle, and have an authentic dialogue with one another that everything will be fine. These folks come prepared with their box of tissues because they don’t feel like they’ve created a breakthrough until someone cries. These sessions can make things a whole lot worse in a hurry. It’s just not acceptable that these are your only options when you want to invest in your team.

For the last 17 years, I’ve been studying and working with teams. I started back when I was a graduate student in psychology studying the dynamics that affect innovation in high-tech product development teams. That research was my first evidence of the profound connection between team effectiveness and business success. For the past decade, I’ve been working as an advisor to executive teams. At first, I focused mostly on facilitating strategy, but it didn’t take long for me to learn that the quality of the strategy process hinged on the dynamics of the team. For the past 7 years I’ve been helping top teams improve their alignment to strategy, reduce their dysfunction, and fulfill the promise of teamwork in creating productive organizations.

By the time I get a call to help a team, things are usually pretty bad. Some teams openly admit the severity of the problem. But many try to downplay their distress. They say things like, “*We’re a good team, and we’re just trying to become a great team.*” It doesn’t take long to learn that the *patient* is in bad shape. Sure, they’re walking and talking, getting things done, but they’ve got badly blocked arteries, and the only solution is the team equivalent of open-heart surgery. That’s how I spend most of my days. I wheel teams into the operating room, crack them open, and try to repair the damage. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

Just like eating well and exercising every day can greatly reduce the risk of heart disease, simple, healthy practices on a team can prevent or at least reduce the impact of the most common team dysfunctions. If you get into the habit of doing these small things every day, you’ll prevent your team from becoming dysfunctional.

These steps are more effective than gimmicky team-building programs. Going on a rock-climbing retreat to solve your team's problems is like trying to get healthy with diet shakes and a Thigh-Master. Living up to the responsibilities outlined in this book will prevent your team from reaching a crisis point where you need to invest in a costly team intervention.

THERE'S ONE CATCH

I sat across the table from the vice president of human resources of a large manufacturer. I hadn't worked with his team before, but from the interviews I had done with the members, I could tell things weren't good. The team was micromanaging and spending too much time in the weeds. They were also trapped in a bad dynamic where most members didn't trust, or even like, one another. I wasn't the first expert they'd hired to help.

I met with him to go over what I'd heard in the one-on-one interviews and get ready for the session. As we sat in his office, we stared out the windows at the water in silence until he said what we were both thinking: "This has to work. We won't get another chance."

Unfortunately, he thought that statement was about me. I was the team effectiveness expert, and I needed to fix the team. I needed to stop their yelling. I needed to cure their mistrust. I needed to make them forgive past indiscretions and move forward with a clean slate.

I can't fix a team. No team expert, no matter how skilled, can. You see, my secret weapon isn't a magic wand—it's a mirror. No matter how badly I want to cure a team, all I can do is create the conditions for the team to cure itself. I told the VP of HR what I tell every client: I'll give you everything you need to understand how and why you need to change. But you have to make the change yourselves.

Each and every team I've seen recover from dysfunction has been led by one brave soul who looked in the mirror and didn't like what he or she saw. And instead of waiting for everyone else to change, that

person decided to go first. Each and every team that got healthy had one member who would trust without being trusted. One person who would respond to hostility with curiosity. One person who would stand up for the teammate who others were shutting down.

If you are willing to be that person on your team, congratulations. If you are ready to make a change, this book will be your inspiration for why to try, your handbook for how to do it, and your measuring stick for how you're doing.

Are you ready to change your team?

THE ROAD AHEAD

In the first half of this book, the section on Toxic Teams, you will diagnose what's going on in your team. I'll introduce the most common team diseases and share the early warning signs, the symptoms, and some things you can do—even without the support of your colleagues or team leader—to get your team back on the right path. By the end of the Toxic Teams section, you'll be tuned in to the dynamics that are at play on your team. You'll know if your team is at risk of becoming one of the following:

Crisis Junkie team: Stalled by unclear priorities, lack of role clarity, and political infighting, the Crisis Junkie team lurches through life in search of the next crisis that will unite it with a common goal, unlock resources, and stop the petty bickering.

Bobble Head team: Homogenized by shared values, perspectives, and experiences, the Bobble Head team goes with the flow but maintains harmony, at the cost of little innovation and dangerous detachment from the risks of its decisions.

Spectator team: Fragmented by members who check out of discussions, the Spectator team loses the benefit of

diverse perspectives and sinks into apathy that ensures the whole will never be greater than the sum of its parts.

Bleeding Back team: Plagued by underground conflict and back-channel decision making, the Bleeding Back team nods its head in public and puts up a fight in private, causing a perpetual loop of one step forward and two steps back.

Royal Rumble team: Scarred by vicious attacks, screaming fits, and personal agendas, the Royal Rumble team fails to harness passion and instead spends all its time going back and forth and none of its time moving forward.

In the second half of the book, you'll learn the daily regimen you can use to keep your team healthy or to start fixing your team if it's broken. No single tactic will cure a Toxic Team, but if you live up to each of the following five responsibilities, you can cure every one of the different dysfunctions. Each of the responsibilities is simple in theory and difficult in practice. When applied, each will have a profound impact on your team and on you. It doesn't matter where you sit at the table; every team member can and should live up to these five responsibilities:

Start with a Positive Assumption: Short-circuit your biases, unpack your baggage, and truly appreciate the value that your teammates are bringing.

Add Your Full Value: Show up, get off cruise control, and bring the benefit of your experiences, your relationships, and your personality instead of just doing what is in your job description.

Amplify Other Voices: Loan your credibility and your airtime to teammates whose minority perspectives are usually shut out of the discussion.

Know When to Say “No”: Retrain yourself when and how to say no to the things that would dilute your focus, stretch your resources, and slow you down.

Embrace Productive Conflict: Tap into the value of different points of view by disagreeing about the issues in a way that promotes understanding and reduces defensiveness.

CHANGE YOUR TEAM

Teams are the way we get work done. Organizations need teams to live up to their promise instead of getting mired in dysfunction. Getting teams healthy will pay off richly in terms of productivity, innovation, and risk management.

But productivity, innovation, and risk management all pale in comparison to the true reason we need our teams healthy. Unhealthy Toxic Teams make our working lives miserable. Stress in the workplace costs our economy billions of dollars, and it’s costing you what are supposed to be the best years of your life. You know what it’s like: two hours into the team meeting and that one guy is droning on and on without listening to anyone, and you want to strangle him. You’re spending hundreds of dollars on pain relievers and massages just to deal with the tension.

And it’s almost impossible to leave a Toxic Team at the office. You carry the stress and anxiety with you when you walk through the door at home. You are distracted at dinner, quick-tempered with your partner, and harsh with your kids. It has to stop.

I’m passionate about teams because I have experienced the misery of working on a Toxic Team. Early in my career, I was a member of a Toxic Team. I kept on downplaying the effect our team leader was having on me until one day I saw a speech given by Dr. John Izzo. I am eternally grateful to him, because he gave me the kick in the pants I needed to get out of that environment. He said, “Every day, everywhere you go, you spread a virus. You decide if that

virus is positive or negative.” I realized that the toxic environment on the team had poisoned me. Just walking into the office made me grouchy. I spent more time complaining than making things better. I was spreading a negative virus.

Twenty-six days later, I submitted my resignation. It took me about two months to really appreciate the terrible toll that team had taken on me. I realized I had been wasting all my energy trying to protect myself from the team leader’s wicked accusations, and I had no energy left for anything else.

I hadn’t been doing my best work. I hadn’t been the kind of colleague and mentor to my team that I should have been. Worse, I had carried the weight of the day home with me at night. My daughter would ask to walk to the park or ride her tricycle, and I would tell her I was too tired and switch on the television to placate her, something I had sworn to myself I would never do.

Since that moment eight years ago, I’ve been committed to doing my part to end the misery of bad teams. I’ve learned that Toxic Teams are inefficient, they waste resources, and they leave people feeling unproductive, disengaged, and exhausted. No one deserves to feel that way.

I left my Toxic Team, but you don’t have to. You can change your team from the inside. One person—no matter where you sit—one person can change the trajectory of a whole team. Starting to behave differently, to unpack your baggage, and to disagree positively will make it easier for your teammates to do the same. Good behavior from you will encourage good behavior from others, and you’ll be amazed how much better things will be. If you have the courage, you can change your team.

If you change yourself, you will change your team.

