AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE OF GROUPS AND TEAMS

HOW A GROUP BECOMES A TEAM

Individually, we are one drop. Together, we are an ocean.

—Ryunosuke Satoro

Sticks in a bundle are unbreakable.

—Kenyan Proverb

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Mead

"One for all, and all for one"—the famous oath from Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*—symbolizes the quintessence of teamwork. It is through cooperation, rather than conflict, that we attain our greatest successes. If we are prepared to support each other, the greater part of our problems will already be solved. As d'Artagnan and the three musketeers understood, their fate as individuals was tied to their fate as a group.

As novels on camaraderie go, it would be hard to find one as famous, or that has so completely captured the popular

imagination, as *The Three Musketeers*. It is a confounding narrative: joyful, maddening, eccentric, full of convoluted twists and turns. It dramatizes significant events in the history of France—the action begins in 1625 and ends three years later—and entertains the reader with spectacular displays of bravery, loyalty, and wit on the part of the three musketeers and their young comrade-in-arms, d'Artagnan. The four heroes of the tale are involved in labyrinthine intrigues concerning the weak King Louis XIII of France, his powerful and cunning advisor Cardinal Richelieu, the beautiful Queen Anne of Austria, her English lover, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, and the siege of the rebellious Huguenot city of La Rochelle.

With great ambitions, d'Artagnan, the main protagonist of the story, sets out for Paris with three gifts from his father: the modest sum of 15 crowns, a horse, and a letter of introduction to the captain of the King's Musketeers, a military unit serving as the protectors of the Royal Household. D'Artagnan wants to become a musketeer himself, and must prove himself worthy of such a position; however, he doesn't have much going for him except his wits and his skill as a swordsman. But with the help of his fellow musketeers—the legendary and noble Athos, the devoted Porthos, and the cunning Aramis—d'Artagnan succeeds in gaining glory, and fulfills his destiny.

Teamwork saves the day in *The Three Musketeers*. Loyal to each other to the death, the musketeers have no compunction at pulling a fast one on their enemies. The strength they have in working as a team, their devotion to excellence, their willingness to sacrifice, their great trust in each other, their generosity of heart and spirit, and—the most powerful virtue of all—their unshakable dedication to a cause greater than themselves, inspire the reader's imagination. It is a tale that can be viewed as a moral lesson, highlighting the importance of cooperation, unity, and perseverance.

A team like the three (or, even better, four) musketeers is timeless. The characters in this book are so life-like and the dialogues so real that we can easily transplant this 19th-century novel

about 17th-century events to our day and age, laugh at the comedic elements in the tale, and cry at the tragic ones. In many ways, the adventures of d'Artagnan and the three musketeers are universal—teams are an inspiring feature of human life. To quote a Japanese proverb, "None of us is as smart as all of us."

This story touches on many of the themes we will explore in the various chapters of this book. The best team is one where members are ready to take personal risks, prepared to tackle conflict, and willing to have courageous conversations. These developments, however, are contingent upon an underlying team culture of trust, reciprocity in self-disclosure to improve interpersonal dialogue, and constructive conflict resolution.

The story of Dumas's heroes also helps to make a connection from the wide-ranging exploration of the group-as-a-whole, to a more specific description of well-functioning teams. Just as individuals have moods, emotions and other peculiarities, groups (or teams) have similar characteristics, which influence aspects such as cohesiveness, performance and the emotional state of other group members.

The musketeers' battle cry—"All for one, and one for all"—reveals some of the signifiers that make teams work. The musketeers believed that when one of them was in trouble, they were all in trouble. If one of them needed help, they all provided it. If one succeeded, they all succeeded. For them, reciprocity and interpersonal trust were indisputable. At both a conscious and at an unconscious level, their behavior was in sync. Due to their team spirit and friendship, the musketeers discovered they could accomplish anything as a team, if they just put their mind to it.

Alexandre Dumas's fictional 17th-century adventure remains an effective prescription for our third millennium workplace; the underlying, out-of-awareness psychodynamic individual and team processes of his musketeers were aligned with the task at hand. Helping to create this kind of team is one of the over-arching objectives of executive and leadership group coaching.

TEAMS: WHAT, WHY, AND HOW

Before discussing teams, let's first specify the difference between a group and a team. A group is any number of individuals who form a recognizable unit, cluster, or aggregation.

Teams are specific groups of people with (it is hoped) complementary skills and abilities who join together to collaborate. People in a team possess a high degree of interdependence geared toward the achievement of a common goal or completion of a task for which they hold one another mutually accountable. In contrast to most groups, teams often identify and reach an agreement on their common goals and approaches, rather than looking to a leader to define them. What's more, the outcome of a team's activities will affect team members as a whole, not just each member individually. In the organizational context, team members are empowered to share responsibility for specific performance outcomes, and work together for a limited period of time. The most effective size for teams is between five and 12 people. Larger teams require more structure and support, while smaller teams often have difficulty engaging in robust discussions when members are absent [1–7]. (As groups and teams essentially differ depending on the degree and intensity of interdependence, throughout this book these two terms will be used interchangeably).

As a caveat here, I should point out that although well-functioning teams are essential to the world of work, there are occasions when putting together a team to get a project off the ground may not really be the best option. Some jobs or projects can be completed much more effectively if assigned to one person. But when jobs are very interdependent and the task is highly complex, teams can replace individual executives to carry out what used to be traditional, single-executive functions.

Having asserted how important well-functioning teams will be in this new world of work, we need to ask ourselves how truly effective most teams really are. We know (frequently from per-

Are you a part of a team or do you merely belong to a group of people?

Study the following questions and answer them either YES or NO

                                                              YES   NO

1. Do the people you work with have a high degree of interdependence, geared toward the achievement of a common goal or completion of a task for which they hold themselves mutually accountable?

2. Do you belong to a group of people with complementary skills and abilities who come together to collaborate?

3. Does the outcome of your activities affect not merely you, but all the other people you work with?

   If you answered YES to all these questions, you are most likely part of a team.

sonal experience) that many teams do not live up to their billing. A substantial body of research shows that many claims about the benefits of teamwork appear to be more fantasy than reality [8, 9]. There are numerous damning signifiers of people's negative experiences of teamwork, for example: "A committee is a group of people who can do nothing individually but who, as a group, can meet and decide that nothing can be done"; "A team is a group of the unwilling, picked from the unfit, to do the unnecessary"; "A team is an animal with four back legs." Far too often, teams soak up too much time and too many resources, flounder, and become quicksands of tension and antagonism.

   Creating a winning team implies taking a collection of individuals with different personalities (perceptions, needs, attitudes,

motivations, backgrounds, expertise, and expectations), and transforming them into an integrated, effective, holistic work unit. This can be quite a challenge. Some personality types just do not click. For many different reasons, some people's character and behavior are like the proverbial red rag to a bull [10].

Teams and need systems

One way to approach the challenge of creating well-functioning teams is to focus not on what makes people different, but on what they have in common. For example, teams can satisfy our sense of belonging. In other words, while teams may initially be formed to fulfill a task, they may also meet other needs at an individual level. Many people like working in teams because they desire a sense of social interaction, affiliation with a community, and pride of accomplishment or greater purpose. In fact these intrinsic rewards may be even more important to individual members than financial or other tangible means of compensation. Therefore, addressing individual needs may well contribute to motivating team membership and performance.

"Most people have a powerful desire to be part of a group in which they feel recognized and understood."

Most people have a powerful desire to be part of a group in which they feel recognized and understood. Belonging—being part of a social context—is essential for the development of self-esteem and self-confidence. Social outcasts may end up feeling empty and depressed. Social connection (and fear of losing it) is crucial to the quality (in some cases, even the duration) of our lives. Applying this lens to teams, it is clear that individuals in teams are less anxious about the work they need to accomplish when they are part of a team that takes the time to build a sense of community and belonging for all members.

Is altruism important to you?

Study the following questions and answer them YES or NO

	YES	NO

- Are you the type of person who will do anything for others?
- Are you able to give and share or are you quite self-centered?
- Are you willing to help someone even if helping doesn't benefit you immediately?
- Are you the kind of person who freely offers help when someone else is in need?
- Do you enjoy helping people?
- Do you feel bad when you see people who are less fortunate than you?
- Are you always prepared to help strangers?

If you answered YES to most of these questions, your score on the altruism test is high. You often go out of your way to help others, and in some cases do so without even being asked.

Altruism—the desire to make a difference—also draws people to work in teams.

Many aspects of human social relations exist within a complex web of kin and reciprocal altruism [11]. Working in teams that have a meaningful purpose may help people feel that their own ability to make a difference is magnified by the power of the group. The musketeers were not only a band of brothers, in a sense, but together they were serving a great cause.

Fundamentals

The experience of the individual is the first layer at which it is possible to assess a team. Does the team have a shared sense of purpose? Do its members all pull in the same direction at the same time? Is there complementarity in skills and competencies? Is each member of the team pursuing the same thing? Have the team's goals and objectives been discussed and agreed openly? Does the team stick together through highs and lows, taking both the blame and the rewards as something to be shared by all? Do team members seem to be enjoying working together most of the time? Ensuring that these fundamental criteria are present will help to lay the groundwork for trust and a willingness to put the team's goals first.

The interpersonal relationships that arise from team dynamics need to be managed in a strategic rather than opportunistic manner. And that's easier said than done. Many things can go wrong. For example, which team member is going to take charge? Who sets the boundaries? Who is going to be the main action driver? And how will all these decisions be made?

One of the most dangerous ways to manage the dynamics of a team is to allow the most forceful individuals to drive decisions about resources, thus creating a profound sense of unfairness and helplessness among the other members of the team. And group dynamics can become even more dysfunctional when the organization is in the throes of a succession process. In such instances, a zero-sum-game mentality—"I win, you lose"—may dominate team dynamics, with each member of the team trying to position him- or herself for the top job.

For all the reasons given above, a critical moment in team building comes as each member is integrated into the team; it should made be clear what skills he or she has, and what contribution can be expected. Newcomers quickly, albeit instinctively, figure out how they fit within the team and the complementary roles they can play. At some level, their own individual hopes and

wishes will also come into play as they enter the team. The integration process, however, is far more difficult than it would seem.

THE DARK SIDE OF DYSFUNCTIONAL TEAMS

A powerful lion, a donkey, and a fox decided to go out hunting together. That way, they thought, they would get much more than if they each hunted alone—and they were right. At the end of the day they had amassed a huge heap of food. "Right," said the donkey, "let's divide it all up between us." And he shared it out in three equal piles. When the lion saw what the donkey had done, he roared, "What's this?" jumped on the donkey, killed him, and ate him. Then he turned to the fox, saying, "Now it's your turn to divide the food." The fox had more emotional intelligence than the donkey. He made two piles—a very big one, and a very small one. "Hmm," said the lion, pulling the big pile toward him. "Who taught you to share things out so well?" "That would be the donkey," replied the fox.

It's easy to see dysfunctional dynamics at work. They dominate teams whose stated goal is not the real one, or teams with fuzzy goals, or rapidly changing priorities. We can see them in teams rife with role conflict and ambiguity, unresolved overt and covert conflicts, poor timekeeping and absenteeism; teams that cannot reach closure, that have rigid, ritualistic meetings, uneven member participation, tunnel vision, indifference to the interests of the organization as a whole, and a lack of resources, skills, knowledge, and accountability. There is no genuine collegiality, collaboration, or coordination in these teams. These are the teams that give teamwork a bad reputation.

Highly dysfunctional teams are like a contagious disease; they have an insidious influence and create a toxic environment. Competitive feelings among team members can result in sabotage

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Is your organization beset by team killers?

Study the following questions and answer them either YES or NO

                                            YES   NO

- Does your team suffer from fuzzy goals/changing priorities?
- Do you think there is a false consensus among the members of your team?
- Does your team have unresolved overt conflicts?
- Does your team find it difficult to reach closure?
- Are calcified meetings characteristic of your team (i.e., people coming late or arriving not at all)?
- Does your team suffer from uneven participation?
- Do the members of your team not feel accountable to one another?

    If most of your answers are YES, your team is in a lot of trouble.

    It may not even be a team.

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of each other's work, unjustified criticism, and withholding information and resources, contributing to the breakdown of the team's proper functioning and the creation of neurotic organizations [12, 13]. All these activities can be very subtle.

The situation is aggravated by the fact that some people who act this way may feel justified in doing so, from a sense of being personally wronged. This is fair process or equity theory taken to the absurd. Yet insidious and irrational as these acts may be, they will be very damaging to the organization and its members.

In many dysfunctional teams, blaming and scapegoating will become major dynamics, doing very little for the organization's productivity and the creative process. In these teams, members avoid dealing with conflict, preferring to resort to veiled discussions and guarded comments. Discussions are likely to consist of generalities and platitudes. Unsurprisingly, many such teams morph into highly constipated, slow decision-making bodies, underperforming and floundering despite all the resources made available to them. Predictably, their decision outcomes will be sub-optimal [14–18].

Despite the strong forces of cohesiveness and groupthink within teams, members (like the hedgehogs) have constantly to cope with forces of attraction and separation. Although there will be strong forces aiming at harmony and cooperation, forces of polarization and regression will always be present, as will a regressive tendency toward "splitting," the unconscious failure to integrate aspects of self or others into a unified whole. As human beings, we have a tendency to regress and separate or "split" people into different categories, labeling the aspects of them that we find acceptable "good" and the things we find painful or unacceptable "bad." As a result, and because this is an interactive process, we may alternate between over-idealizing and devaluing individuals, teams, and organizations [19–22]. Groupthink may raise its ugly head [23].

While personality conflicts are very troublesome, structural organizational design errors can bring additional misery. Essentially, if good people are put into bad systems, we should not be surprised by their poor results. If teams are created merely as a gesture that some form of action has been taken, without giving the members of the team a clear mandate for what needs to be done, form will take precedence over substance, and empty rhetoric over doing real work. For example, teams may have been created without a clear goal and measures of success, with fuzzy boundaries, and with very poorly defined tasks. Teams may be composed

What are the signs of groupthink?

Study the following questions and answer them YES or NO

                                                                YES   NO

Have you ever been a member of team where

- there was an illusion of invulnerability,
  creating a false consensus?
- there was an unquestioned belief in the
  morality of the group?
- there was, in each instance, a collective
  rationalization of the team's decisions?
- opponents were stereotyped?
- you engaged in self-censorship—where no
  criticism was tolerated?
- illusions of unanimity prevailed, creating a
  false consensus?
- there was strong pressure on dissenters to
  conform?
- there were self-appointed "mind guards"
  protecting the group from negative
  information?

   If you answered YES to most of these questions, you may have been part of a groupthink process, making hasty, irrational decisions. In this situation, individual doubts are set aside, for fear of upsetting the team's balance. In an attempt to reduce conflict and reach consensus, you may not have analyzed an important issue critically.

of people with the wrong talents—individuals who would do better staying where they are. And so on and so on.

Senior executives can also play a highly dysfunctional role by putting people into teams for purely political reasons—creating teams in name only. The members of these teams end up engaging in social rituals, merely playing roles in each other's presence. This behavior prevents team members knowing each other on a deeper level. Recognizing the futility of their activities, they may resent the time they spend with the team. They may feel—rightly so—that they have better things to do. So they go through the motions, feeling increasingly alienated from the organization's overall mission. In fact, the permutations of team dysfunctionality are endless.

"If good people are put into bad systems, we should not be surprised by their poor results."

What role do you play in a team?
Review the following questions.
    Which role fits you best?
    In teams, is your role more task oriented?
    Do you take on a more social role?
    Is your role more divergent?

• Are you the deviant?
• Are you the rebel?
• Are you the martyr/scapegoat?
• Do you play the clown?
• Are you the aggressive one?

    Do you play a more marginal role?

• Are you the silent type?
• Are you the private one?
• Are you the cautious one?

THE VIRTUES OF TEAMS

Having dwelt on the dark side of team working, I want to reiterate at this point that in spite of all the shortcomings teams may have, the advantages of working as a team greatly outweigh the disadvantages.

Two of the most valued outcomes of teamwork are efficiency and effectiveness. If the team shares involvement, ownership, and a sense of urgency, successful implementation is highly probable. If team members feel committed to carry out whatever needs to be done to make the project a success, they can accomplish more than a similar number of individuals working alone. By dividing responsibilities, different activities can proceed in parallel and the ultimate goal will be achieved much faster.

Complementarity

However talented a person may be, no one has all the skills needed to do everything—although we may be able to hold a tune, we cannot whistle a whole symphony by ourselves. Working as a team reduces the burden placed on any single individual; large tasks can be broken up into smaller assignments and assigned to the people best suited to the job. For example, some people excel at generating ideas. Some love detail, while some prefer to focus on the big picture. Some can be counted on for implementation and follow-up of a project. While an individual tends to look at a problem or issue from only one perspective, teams present a variety of working hypotheses. Team building should be seen as an opportunity creatively and constructively to maximize each individual's strengths and compensate for weaknesses, enabling the team to produce top quality results. It is important that team designers recognize complementarity of talent to be able to create effective executive role constellations [24–26].

Dysfunctional team work, as I said earlier, can be contagious. By the same token, the attitude and mood state of a successful team can energize an entire organ-

"We cannot whistle a whole symphony by ourselves."

ization, creating a greater sense of satisfaction, establishing a learning, collaborative culture, and contributing to a high degree of creativity and innovation. In organizations with an effective team culture, information flows freely—up, down, and laterally; people who are prepared to share their knowledge are more effective and more productive.

What kind of contribution do you make to the team?
Study the following statements and label them either TRUE or FALSE, as you think they apply to you.
  Select more than one if appropriate.

                                                              TRUE   FALSE

1. I have great strategic sense.
2. I take on the role of deal maker,
   always prepared to make propositions
   about new business deals.
3. I am highly experienced at turning
   around difficult situations.
4. I suggest entrepreneurial ways of
   developing the business.
5. I come up with a number of new
   product or process innovations.
6. I promote and monitor structures,
   systems, and tasks.
7. I am very interested in devising
   creative ways to develop people.
8. I take on the role of communicator.

> **What is your leadership style? (The numbers in the box above each refer to a specific leadership style.)**
>
> 1. Strategist
>   • the leader as chess player
> 2. Change-Catalyst
>   • the leader as implementation/turnaround specialist
> 3. Transactor
>   • the leader as deal maker/negotiator
> 4. Builder
>   • the leader as entrepreneur
> 5. Innovator
>   • the leader as creative idea generator
> 6. Processor
>   • the leader as efficiency expert
> 7. Coach
>   • the leader as people developer
> 8. Communicator
>   • the leader as the great stage manager

The emotional dimension

All of us, at one time or another, have been members of a team; all of us have had the opportunity to observe that teams can evoke strong and often conflicting reactions. Many of us have learned from personal experience that being part of a team can be highly attractive and repellent, extremely satisfying and deeply disappointing, depending on how well the team is functioning. Many of us know first hand that a great deal of the energy generated and dispensed within a team revolves around frustration, tension, and ambivalence. We might reflect on how we habitually deal with such problems: Do we try to find a solution? Do we step back and wait for someone else in the team to take the lead? Do we withdraw into a state of suspended animation?

Given the importance of the emotional dimension of team-work, people prepared to be team players have to focus not only on the tasks that need to be done but also on the processes. They need to be prepared to deal with the elephants in the room and the snakes under the carpet.[1] I recall a very task-driven logistics team that, having dealt with their concerns during their weekly meeting, would always have a short follow-up discussion, exploring their experience of the meeting, and what could be done to improve future meetings. These post-meeting sessions would lead to passionate dialogues, as they discussed what every member of the team could have done better to make their exchanges more effective.

A word about vulnerability

In organizational life, our willingness to be vulnerable before team members will always be an issue. Opening up and talking about personal issues—how we look at and interpret things—carries the risk of looking foolish. Publicly revealing our own vulnerability or others' weaknesses within a team contains a potential threat to our self-worth and sense of dignity. Self-disclosure may be associated with painful, deep-seated memories of childhood situations where we may have been exposed to public ridicule and humiliation. Furthermore, there will always be a limit to self-disclosure. Teams in organizations are not like therapy groups, which have their own boundaries. Too much self-disclosure may leave team members with highly ambivalent feelings, creating an increasing sense of vulnerability.

"Talking about personal issues always carries the risk of looking foolish."

[1] There is a Sufi tale about a man who noticed a disturbing bump under a rug. He tried everything to flatten the rug, smoothing, rubbing, and squashing the bump, but it kept reappearing. Finally, frustrated and furious, the man lifted up the rug, and to his great surprise, out slid a very angry snake. This tale is a highly illustrative metaphor of the need to deal with the real issues. Staying at a surface level will only give limited results.

Do you have the mindset to build a real team?
Study the following questions and answer them either YES or NO

                                                                YES   NO

- Are you prepared to reveal your thoughts, feelings, aspirations, goals, failures, successes, fears, and dreams as well as your likes, dislikes, and favoritisms to other people?
- Are you willing to share with others information that helps them understand you better?
- Are you willing to put yourself at risk through intimate disclosure?
- Are you the kind of person who believes in the integrity, ability, character, and truth of other people?
- Do you have confidence in the capability of other people to make good on their promises?
- Are you always prepared to position yourself as vulnerable to others?
- Are you convinced that others will not abuse your confidence due to your trusting behavior?

If most of your answers are YES, it will be relatively easy for you to build intimate relationships with the members of your team.

Allowing a tolerable amount of vulnerability is necessary, however. As members of a team get to know their colleagues better, they will come to understand the things that will and will not work for different people. For example, if the members of the executive team know that one of their colleagues has problems with closeness, they will understand why that person prefers to work independently, rather than assuming he or she is simply not interested in working with others.

I remember a group where at one point, one of the members of the executive committee said to another, "John, we've worked with you for 20 years. But I know more about you in these last three days than I knew in all that time. I know more about your likes and dislikes. I have a better sense of what drives you—and what drives you crazy. I wish I had known these things years ago."

I felt a bit sad when I heard this comment. Obviously, these two men had communicated with each other, but never really talked. But even though it was very late in the game, having a better understanding of what made each other tick would benefit them in the future. This sort of incident clarifies why a clear set of behavior and communications expectations is such an important aspect of creating high performance teams. These expectations help to build empathy and understanding, and ensure that individual preferences are not given more importance than team objectives.

As we can see, the degree to which a team works well together is dependent on a multi-factorial process. From a factual point of view, it depends on the team's members, environment, and tasks. Superficially, team cohesion depends on the extent to which the individuals in the group want to accomplish its primary task. Less obvious contributing factors include the members' attraction to the group, the developmental phase the team is in, normative and informational influences, and external sources—all adding to a team's complexity. Given the influence of all these variables, team

dynamics can take on a life of their own, influencing participants in significant ways. So leadership group coaches not only need to focus on the team's primary task, they also need to make the nature of specific team-as-a-whole dynamics more overt so that tasks will not be derailed by unconscious acting out.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED SO FAR?

To sum up, I have argued that well-functioning teams are a critical element of global organizations, particularly those dependent on virtual, highly diverse teams who must assemble, produce, and disband rapidly. Such entities, if not handled properly, will be rife with paranoid and depressive anxiety. The likelihood of this happening needs to be minimized. We need a better understanding of individual relationship processes, group dynamics, and the vicissitudes of teams to see the warning signs of inner rot. At the same time, it leaves us with a number of important questions. How can people in organizations build corporate cultures that foster teamwork? And how can leadership group coaching help? And above all, what is group coaching all about?

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