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Creating Effective Teams

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.
(Margaret Mead)

Key Learning Points

- The basic conditions for effective teamwork
- The conditions for outstanding teamwork
- Team reflexivity and its importance in team functioning
- The two dimensions of team functioning – task and social reflexivity
- The five elements of team effectiveness
- The relationship of team reflexivity to team effectiveness
- The application of the reflexivity questionnaire to real teams

Our societies and communities face the fundamental challenge of how to enable people to combine their efforts and imaginations to work in ways that enhance quality of life through the achievement of our shared goals. The major challenges that face our species today require us to cooperate effectively in order to maximize the quality of life for all people while, at the same time, sustaining the resources offered by the planet? For thousands of years the most potent solution we have found has been teamwork. So why

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the need for a book on teamwork if we have been working in teams successfully for so long? Because the landscape of teamwork has changed fundamentally in the last 200 years. The growth of modern organizations has created a context in which teams no longer work in isolation. Teams must work together with other teams and with organizational systems and processes to achieve the goals we aspire to and overcome the challenges we face. This book offers guidelines for this new context, largely based on research evidence, for how to ensure effective teamwork and how to enable multi-team systems to operate in an integrated and effective way. More than that what the book offers is insights into how to create outstandingly effective teams – dream teams – teams that achieve more than their members imagined possible and which enable and inspire the success of other teams within their organizations. The book describes both the basic conditions for effective team working and the conditions that will produce dream teams.

The basic conditions for effective teamwork include having a real team whose membership is clear, which is of the right size, relatively stable in membership and working on a task that requires teamwork. The team must have an overall purpose that adds value and which is translated into clear, challenging team objectives. And the team needs the right people as team members with the required skills in the right roles. They must be enablers not derailleurs – people who support effective team working through their behaviours, not people who sabotage, undermine or obstruct team functioning.

In addition to these basic conditions, dream teams are characterized by transformational leadership that reinforces an inspiring and motivating team purpose focused sharply on the needs of the team's stakeholders (clients, customers, patients); that encourages all team members to value the diversity of its membership. Members have opportunities to grow and learn in their roles and there is a strong sense of continuous growth and development as a team. Dream teams have a high level of positivity, characterized by optimism and a healthy balance of positive and negative interactions. Members are open, appreciative, kind and genuine in their interactions with each other and eager to learn from each other. Team members believe in the team's ability to be successful and effective in their work (team potency). They are secure in their team membership and attached to the team because of the level of trust and support they encounter – and the fact that members appropriately back each other up in crises. And the team's relationship with the wider organization is engaged and supportive. The team actively builds effective inter-team relationships and members identify enthusiastically, not just with their team, but with the wider organization of which they are a part. Such dream teams, and teams of dream teams, enable effective communication and fruitful collaborations in which new ideas are shared and integrated, work load is shared, mutual support is provided and

opportunities are exploited to their full potential. Later in the book, the reader will discover how to create these conditions.

Creating and sustaining effective teams requires persistent renewal and discovery of good practice. Moreover, teams vary in the tasks they undertake, the contexts they work in and their membership. And change is a constant: so teams must adapt to the changes that confront them within and outside their organizations. Both the variation between teams and the changing context of all teams requires flexible team members, flexible team processes and flexible organizations. And we have a wondrous capacity to encourage such flexibility. What we are able to do – and no other animal can – is to reflect upon our experiences and consciously adapt what we do to adjust to changing circumstances. And we can use this ability to learn to dance the dance of teamwork ever more effectively. Applied at team level, this is termed *team reflexivity*.

Team reflexivity involves:

- regular team reviews of the team's objectives including an assessment of their continuing relevance and appropriateness, as well as progress towards their fulfilment;
- team member vigilance for external changes that could affect the team's work;
- awareness, review and discussion of the team's functioning with a view to improving performance;
- creativity, flexibility and adaptability;
- tolerance of uncertainty;
- team members valuing the different perspectives, knowledge bases, skills and experience of team members.

Teams operate in varied organizational settings – as diverse as multinational oil companies, voluntary organizations, healthcare organizations and the military – so we need to be cautious about offering one-size-fits-all prescriptions for effective teamwork. Within organizations too, teams differ markedly. Teams are often composed of people with very different cultural backgrounds, ages, functional expertise and personalities. Teams may span national boundaries, including members located in several countries. Differences in work patterns such as part-time, flexitime, contract working and home working all add further mixes to the heterogeneity of teams. As teams become more diverse in their constitution and functioning, team members must learn to reflect upon, and intelligently adapt to the constantly changing circumstances in order to be effective. In this book, it is proposed that, to the extent that team members collectively reflect on the team's objectives, strategies, processes and performance and make changes accordingly (team reflexivity) (West, 2000; Widmer, Schippers, and West, 2009), teams will be more productive, effective and innovative.

Task and Social Elements of Team Functioning

There are two fundamental dimensions of team functioning: the task the team is required to carry out, and the social factors that influence how members work together as a social unit. The basic reason for the creation of teams in work organizations is the expectation that they will carry out some tasks more effectively than individuals and so further organizational objectives overall. In fact, some tasks can only be undertaken by teams of people working together rather than individuals working alone – think of open-heart surgery, the construction of a car, catching an antelope on the savannah without the benefit of modern technology or weapons. Consideration of the content of the task, and the strategies and processes employed by team members to carry out that task, is therefore important for understanding how to work in teams. At the same time, teams are composed of people who have a variety of emotional, social and other human needs that the team as a whole can either help to meet or frustrate. Feeling valued, respected and supported by other team members will be a prerequisite for people offering their ideas for new and improved ways of ensuring team effectiveness. If we ignore either dimension in trying to achieve team effectiveness, we will fail to achieve the potential of team performance.

Research evidence now shows convincingly how important positive emotions, such as hope, pleasure, happiness, humour, excitement, joy, pride and involvement, are as a source of human strength (Fredrickson, 2009). When we feel positive emotions we think in a more flexible, open-minded way, and consider a much wider range of possibilities than if we feel anxious, depressed or angry. This enables us to accomplish tasks and make the most of the situations we find ourselves in. We are also more likely to see challenges as opportunities rather than threats. When we feel positive we exercise greater self-control, cope more effectively and are less likely to react defensively in workplace situations. The litany of benefits does not stop there. It spills over too into what is called ‘pro-social behaviour’ – cooperation and altruism. When we feel positive emotion we are more likely to be helpful, generous and to exercise a sense of social responsibility (for a review, see Fredrickson, 2009). The implications for teams are that by developing a team environment where people feel positive, we can encourage organizational citizenship – in other words the tendency of people at work to help each other and those in other departments; to do that bit extra which is not part of their job. And such citizenship makes a major difference between the most effective teams and the rest. The idea that we can create effective teams by focusing simply on performance and ignoring the role of our emotions is based on the false premise that emotions can be ignored at

work. Positive relationships and a sense of community are the product and cause of positive emotions. We must work with human needs and capacities and potentials rather than against them if we are to create positive teams that succeed and at the same time, foster the health and well-being of those who work within them.

In order to function effectively, team members must actively focus upon their objectives, regularly reviewing ways of achieving them and the team's methods of working – 'task reflexivity'. At the same time, in order to promote the well-being of its members, the team must reflect upon the ways in which it provides support to members, how conflicts are resolved and what is the overall social and emotional climate of the team – or its 'social reflexivity'. The purpose of these reviews should be to inform the next steps by changing as appropriate the team's objectives, ways of working or social functioning, in order to promote effectiveness.

Team Effectiveness

So what does 'team effectiveness' mean? Team effectiveness can be seen as constituting five main components:

- 1 **Task effectiveness** is the extent to which the team is successful in achieving its **task-related objectives**.
- 2 **Team member well-being** refers to factors such as the well-being or mental health (e.g., stress), growth and development of team members.
- 3 **Team viability** is the likelihood that a team will continue to work together and function effectively.
- 4 **Team innovation** is the extent to which the team develops and implements new and improved processes, products and procedures.
- 5 **Inter-team cooperation** is the effectiveness of the team in working with other teams in the organization with which it has to work in order to deliver products or services.

Table 1 shows the two elements of teams, the task and social elements, drawn together in a two-by-two model to illustrate four extreme types of team functioning and the likely effects upon the five principle outcomes of team functioning: task effectiveness, team members' mental health, team viability, innovation and inter-team cooperation (such models are a simplification of reality but for our immediate purposes this model serves to illustrate some important points).

Type A, the *Resilient team*, represents a team which is high in both task and social reflexivity, that is, the extent to which the team reflects on and

Table 1 Four types of teams and their outcomes.

<i>High Task Reflexivity</i>	
<i>Type D: Driven team</i>	<i>Type A: Resilient team</i>
High short-term task effectiveness	High task effectiveness
Poor team member well-being	Good team member well-being
Short-term viability	Long-term viability
Moderate innovation	High innovation
High inter-team conflict	High inter-team cooperation
Low Social Reflexivity	High Social Reflexivity
<i>Type C: Dysfunctional team</i>	<i>Type B: Complacent team</i>
Poor task effectiveness	Poor task effectiveness
Poor team member well-being	Average team member well-being
Very low team viability	Short-term viability
Low innovation	Low innovation
High inter-team conflict	Moderate inter-team conflict
Low Task Reflexivity	

modifies its objectives, processes, task and social support strategies appropriately in changing circumstances. Such teams are likely to have good levels of well-being amongst team members, high task effectiveness, and sustained viability, that is, they have the capacity and desire to continue to work together. Because of the high levels of both task and social reflexivity they are able to adapt to changing circumstances and ensure sustained high performance. Consequently, they are also more likely to innovate and have the capacity to work effectively with other teams within the organization with which they have to work in order to deliver goods or services.

Type B, the *Complacent team*, is high in social reflexivity and low in task reflexivity. This is a team where there is a good deal of warmth, support and cohesion amongst team members, but where the ability to get the task done effectively is low. Team members do not dedicate time to reflecting upon the team's task objectives, strategies and processes and therefore do not confront their performance problems, learn from mistakes or adapt their task performance to ensure effectiveness. Therefore, while team members' well-being is good and they value their colleagues, the organization's satisfaction with team performance is low and team members experience the disappointment of membership of a failing or at best poorly performing team. As a result its

viability is threatened. Even if team members wish to continue to work together over a period of time, the organization is likely to break the team up. In the longer term team members' well-being will be adversely affected by the low levels of competence experienced by team members in a team which is minimally task effective. We like to be successful and effective in our work. Staying in a poorly functioning team corrodes job satisfaction. Such a team, with a lack of performance focus, is unlikely to have the motivation to innovate. Despite their warmth, they will create a degree of irritation and dissatisfaction in the other teams they have to work with, because of their ineffectiveness.

Type C, the *Dysfunctional team*, is the worst scenario – a team that is low on both task and social reflexivity. Such teams fail to reflect on and change their functioning in either domain. They will not be viable in the long term since team members leaders will be dissatisfied with both the interpersonal relationships and with the team's failures to achieve. Frustration with the team's poor performance will cause organization leaders to intervene or disband the team. Interventions to promote both task and social reflexivity in the team should be immediate and sustained since team members will learn to function effectively both in the team of which they are currently members and in teams they are part of in the future. The lack of safety and effectiveness combine to mitigate against innovation and the team's performance creates high levels of conflict with the other teams that rely on them, because of their failure to deliver.

Finally team type D, the *Driven team*, is a team in which task reflexivity is high, but where the social functioning of the team is poor. Members are driven to focus on achieving task objectives as quickly as possible with minimum distractions. Task performance is generally good in the short term, but poor social functioning damages team viability and the well-being of members. Team members do not enjoy working in a team that they perceive as providing little social support and which has a poor social climate. Moreover, because the team does not feel safe, levels of innovation are low. The team fails to reflect on its health as a social entity, so little progress is made in improving the team's functioning as a social unit. In the long term, the team will fail to achieve its potential. Without a positive, supportive climate, levels of cooperation will be low and the team's capacity for creativity and innovation will be limited. In some circumstances (such as a short-term crisis) focusing on the task to the exclusion of all else might make sense but at some point there must be healthy reviews of social functioning. Support, backing up, enabling and coaching are vital team member behaviours in any team. Moreover, because they are driven, they are likely to come into conflict with the other teams with which they need to work, either because they become frustrated by the

speed of delivery from other teams or because they are too concerned with their own team's performance and less concerned with findings ways of helping other teams.

These two aspects of team functioning, namely task and social reflexivity, have a direct impact upon the three principal outcomes of team functioning – task effectiveness, team members' well-being and team viability. In this book we examine these elements of team functioning and describe practical ways in which team reflexivity can be enhanced.

Research evidence drives the content of the book. We will challenge many assumptions about teamwork that the research evidence does not support by informing the reader on what research reveals about effective teamwork, rather than on what consultants and pundits guess makes for effective teamwork. I also offer examples from my experience of working with teams in a wide variety of settings and across many different countries.

Throughout the book, we will focus on answering the question: 'what makes teams effective?' in a way that will prove practically useful to you in working in or with teams, and will help you to develop them into fully functioning teams which are high in both task and social reflexivity.

Exercise 1 The team reflexivity questionnaire

How effectively does your team function?

To measure levels of task and social reflexivity in your team, ask all team members to complete this questionnaire without consulting each other about the answers. Add the scores for task reflexivity and social reflexivity separately, that is, add all team members' scores for the task element and then all team members' scores for the social element. *Divide both totals by the number of people completing the questionnaire.* At the bottom of this box are values against which you can determine whether your team's scores are high, low or average compared with the scores of other teams.

Instructions for completion:

Indicate how far each statement is an accurate or inaccurate description of your team by writing a number in the box beside each statement, based on the following scale of 1 to 7:

Very inaccurate							Very accurate
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

(a) **Task reflexivity**

- 1 The team often reviews its objectives.
- 2 We regularly discuss whether the team is working together effectively.
- 3 The methods used by the team to get the job done are often discussed
- 4 In this team we modify our objectives in the light of changing circumstances.
- 5 Team strategies are often changed.
- 6 How well we communicate information is often discussed.
- 7 This team often reviews its approach to getting the job done.
- 8 The way decisions are made in this team is often reviewed.

Total score

(b) **Social reflexivity**

- 1 Team members provide each other with support when times are difficult.
- 2 When things at work are stressful the team is very supportive.
- 3 Conflict does not linger in this team.
- 4 People in this team often teach each other new skills.
- 5 When things at work are stressful, we pull together as a team.
- 6 Team members are always friendly.
- 7 Conflicts are constructively dealt with in this team.
- 8 People in this team are quick to resolve arguments.

Total score

	(a) Task reflexivity	(b) Social reflexivity
High scores	42–56	42–56
Average scores	34–41	34–41
Low scores	0–33	0–33

As a team, you can discuss how to improve your functioning where it seems low for no good reason. Such a discussion can be a first step towards improving the extent to which the team reflects on its objectives, strategies, processes and social functioning in order to ensure it is a fully functional team.

Key Revision Points

- What are the basic conditions for effective teamwork?
- What are the conditions necessary for outstanding or ‘dream’ teams?
- What is team reflexivity and what is the difference between task and social reflexivity?
- What are the main elements of team effectiveness?
- How do task and social reflexivity affect team effectiveness?

Further Reading

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- Fredrickson, B. (2009) *Positivity*, Random House, New York.
- Linley, P.A., Harrington, S. and Garcea, N. (eds) (2010) *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Work*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
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- Widmer, P.S. Schippers, M.C. and West, M.A. (2009) Recent developments in reflexivity research: a review. *Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 2, 2–11.

Web Resources

Reflexivity: http://reflexivitynetwork.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47&Itemid=53 (last accessed 25 July 2011).

Team development: www.astonod.com (last accessed 25 July 2011).

Positivity: www.positivityratio.com/
www.cappeu.com/ (last accessed 25 July 2011).