

TUNING UP YOUR TEAMS

Team performance is critical to any organization, perhaps never more so than during a period of a major economic recession. In a study conducted by the Centre for Creative Leadership, 91% of respondents indicated that they believe teams are central to organizational success. However, in this same study, respondents indicated that most teams within organizations are functioning below optimum level. Only about 50% of leaders believed their teams exceed organizational expectations. Areas of particular concern were the coordination of activities, revolving team memberships, and ineffective conflict resolution.

Even in our work of growing and refining leadership potential at some of the best-managed companies in Canada, we often hear tales of teams not performing to expectations. It's no surprise that creating high-performance teams can be such a challenge given the complexities of human nature. We are quite a "piece of work," to quote Shakespeare's Hamlet, and the nature of human dynamics can often mask the real reasons why our teams are not humming at peak efficiency.

So how do you know if your team needs a "tune-up" and if yours is one of those 50% of teams functioning less than optimally? It's easy in a basketball game to tell when your team is not operating effectively. A simple glance at the scoreboard lets the team and any observers know how well or how poorly the game's objectives are being met by each team. What about the game of business? How do team members and observers know who is winning or losing? My colleague David Gibbons, a renowned business strategy expert, would be quick to examine the corporate financials. Indeed this metric is often the place to start investigating the health of the company as a whole – the fusion of all of the teams within the organization.

If the score looks bad on this scale of the inspection, then we know we have some serious work to do on a variety of levels. However, more often than not, our clients have respectable, even enviable financials and have come to us not as turn-around specialists but to help position them for enhanced performance. Their teams are by no measure dysfunctional, yet are certainly not operating at peak effectiveness.

When we examine the performance of teams at these companies, we typically find one or both of two types of teams. The first type is performing well but given the talent, could easily perform much better. The second type is under-performing but unaware their performance is falling short or perhaps aware but unsure of what to do about it. This latter type of team is often hitting the one discordant note in an otherwise strong ensemble of teams.

As facilitators and team-development practitioners, we have in our arsenal a number of tools to enhance team effectiveness. However, before we can determine the best approach, we need to understand what is going on within the team. To design a team intervention without a diagnostic would be putting the cart before the horse. Thus, the first stage of team development must be a diagnostic. Although the diagnostic process can take many forms, such as conducting one-on-one interviews or administering a series of confidential surveys, we often start by using a simple tool created by Patrick Lencioni who has articulated what he calls The Five Dysfunctions of a Team. The diagnostic tool is easy, quick and painless to administer and can often be done remotely over the Internet. The results focus the team on their effective and ineffective dynamics and are invaluable in helping teams overcome any handicaps and move on to peak performance.

Once the issues have been surfaced through the diagnostic phase, there are multiple ways of moving toward solutions depending on the breadth of the problem and the commitment of the team and the company. For some teams, simply seeing the results of the diagnosis is enough to prompt a change in behaviour. For example, one team we worked with had an overwhelming fear of conflict that kept all discussions at a very superficial level. When the diagnosis exposed this fear, the team, of their own accord, engaged in some soul searching to trace the root of that fear. They discovered the team leader had previously worked under a caustic supervisor who ridiculed every attempt at innovative thought, and he was still living in fear of his former boss's sarcastic wrath. With that out in the open, his teammates were able to assure him they valued frankness and the ability to "tell it like it is."

For other teams, even after their members intellectually understand the nature of their dysfunction, they remain unable to effect change in their behaviour. We often see this situation arise when a team is made up of superstars. Although by all appearances the team may be performing well, they are just not reaching their true potential. Team members are so attuned to their individual goals or career development that they lose sight of the big picture. A brief intervention that is often very effective with these teams is to administer an Emotional Intelligence (EQ) assessment followed by a personal debrief.

In the debrief, we tend to see strong imbalances between perceptions of self and others and relationship strategies where trust of others is very low. Prescriptions for these teams are often along the lines of developing better EQ fitness and practicing that EQ in their team engagements.

Among the variety of possible interventions, some teams opt for an even more thorough investigation of their interpersonal dynamics. For example, we have worked with several teams that specifically sought out experiential-type outdoor team-building exercises where they could explore in much more depth how they interacted.

We brought these teams to a remote wilderness base camp on Vancouver Island's west coast and ran them through unique outdoor experiences where they naturally came face to face with their team dysfunctions. In one case, the problem was absence of trust and in another, lack of commitment. Seeing the same dysfunctions appear in a radically different context shocked the team members. The subsequent evening debriefs around the campfire drove the point home. The fact that the team members were operating out of their traditional environment, out of their comfort zone, gave them the courage to chart a new territory of openness and a willingness to admit their weaknesses. The change in both cases was overwhelmingly positive.

These are just some of the options available to teams, but many more customized solutions are possible. Before committing to any team intervention, however, we recommend that those who lead teams do a simple "check-up."

Ask yourself whether your team is operating at peak performance. How do you know? How confident are you about this? If you're interested in doing a quick check-up, contact me at tim@refineryleadership.com. With the results of the diagnostic in hand, you can quickly and easily assess the health of your team. If it's good, fabulous! If you determine that your team is not working at their optimal level, then together we can decide on the cure.

As a side note, we should mention that our diagnostic tool is available in Spanish as well (as are any of our program offerings). The Refinery Leadership Partners now has a presence in several Latin American countries. If your company has a Latin American subsidiary or branch office, ask us about how we can customize our programming for them.

This article was written by Tim McGrady who is a Consultant with The Refinery Leadership Partners Inc., a Vancouver based consulting company. Tim heads up the Mexico/Latin America operations for The Refinery. We are interested in hearing from our readers. E-mail your questions, comments and ideas to tim@refineryleadership.com.