

Team Development: Taking a Team to the Next Level



In a Nutshell

Some work teams develop to a stage where they're cohesive and achieve impressive synergies of the team members' efforts and capabilities. The process of building such teams requires members to get to know each other and negotiate roles and norms. The negotiation process can involve frustrating interpersonal conflict. On the other hand, some teams don't have enough conflict because they don't engage in a healthy debate of their ideas, and they do a poor job of decision making as a consequence. To promote synergies, managers need to guide teams through the sometimes-difficult stages of team development.

Developing a high performing team will be quite a challenge for the University of Kansas' new men's basketball coach, Bill Self. In addition to having a new coach, Kansas will have to fill the void left by the graduation of the senior leaders, Nick Collison and Kirk Hinrich (in white on the left and right, respectively, in the photo above), of the past season's team. The basketball team will have to dramatically reorganize and develop quickly if it's to realize its full potential. (REUTERS photo by Peter Jones; e-mailed to me from *Yahoo! News*, news.yahoo.com)

In This Issue

- [Developing a High Performing Team at Kansas](#)
- [Demystifying Synergies](#)
- [Leading Teams Through the Stages of Team Development](#)
- [About the Newsletter and Subscriptions](#)
- [Good, Clean Joke](#)
- [LeaderLetter Web Site](#)

Developing a High Performing Team at Kansas

Top basketball coaches can make the challenge of team development look easy, but it's actually quite complicated. Coaches have to decide which plays their team has enough talent to execute, and they have to teach their players to work together to execute those plays. For instance, the bigger players must learn when to expect the smaller players to shoot (so that they can get into position for rebounding) and when to expect a pass. In addition, all players must learn when and how to help each other while playing defense. When basketball season starts next fall, Coach Bill Self will have to do a lot to develop effective coordination among the players on his team at the University of Kansas. Although the Kansas team that just finished the 2002-2003 season was excellent, most of the key players will be in new roles and Coach Self will be new to the team. He was announced as the Head Basketball Coach of the University of Kansas' men's basketball team yesterday. He has his work cut out for him.

Nevertheless, many of us expect Bill Self to be successful at the University of Kansas. In his first season (2000-2001) as Head Coach at the University of Illinois, he took the team to the final eight of the post season championship tournament.

Demystifying Synergies

Achieving synergies is the primary reason why business organizations use teams. In the absence of synergies, team members might be more effective if their team was disbanded so that they could work independently.

Are you having trouble visualizing team synergies? A textbook definition doesn't always help: "A process gain that occurs when members of a group acting together are able to produce more or better output than would have been produced by the combined efforts of each person acting alone."¹ What makes it worse is that corporations have recently used "achieving synergies" as a euphemism for laying people off after a merger. Synergies come from the coordination of efforts and the positive effect that teamwork can have on members' motivation.

Coordination. This scenario illustrates what I mean by synergies: Imagine that you manage a small furniture store, and you have two employees who make your deliveries. When you sell a sofa, one of the first things a delivery driver has to do is take it out of storage and place it on a truck. Because a sofa is so big and heavy, a delivery driver can't really lift and carry the whole thing at once. He or she can only lift one end at a time, pivot that end around, and then go to the opposite end and do the same. Working alone, it might take 60 second and lots of lifts to move a sofa 25 feet. By extension, it would take 60 seconds for two delivery drivers who work *independently* to move two sofas 25 feet. However, two delivery drivers working *together* can carry one sofa 25 feet in about 10 second. Working together is simply what I mean by coordination; (a) they each take responsibility for one end of the sofa, (b) they agree to lift at the same time, and (c) they agree on where and when they will put it down. By coordinating their efforts they can move two sofas in 20 seconds, and in 60 seconds they can move six sofas. Their greater efficiency and productivity is an example of synergies.

Analogous synergies can be achieved in intellectual work. In one month, a cross-functional team with members from marketing, R&D, manufacturing and finance can collaborate to develop new product strategies that are more useful and feasible than the new product strategies that any one of them could ever produce when working independently. The members have diverse areas of expertise, and by coordinating their efforts they can create and implement excellent plans.

Motivation. In addition to coordination, team members' motivation can lead to synergies. The sofa-lifting example above demonstrates synergies achieved through coordination. Employees' motivation can also be increased through teamwork. As the [June 20 LeaderLetter](#) points out, variables such as cohesiveness, norms and roles can boost team members' motivation. People often work extra hard so that they won't disappoint their fellow team members.

Unfortunately, teamwork can also undermine motivation because it can obscure the value of the efforts of individual members. When members don't see a connection of their efforts to the team's overall performance, there's less satisfaction associated with the hard work. And of course, there are the free-riders who intentionally let the other team members do all the work. Finally, when team members spend a lot of their time disagreeing as to who should take which responsibilities and how the group's work should be performed, synergies are less likely to emerge. Thus, teams are formed to achieve synergies, and many teams do so through coordination and motivation, but not all teams are able to get members to coordinate their efforts or maintain a high level of motivation. Improving coordination and motivation is the challenge for team development initiatives.

[back to the top](#)

Leading Teams Through the Stages of Team Development

The dominant model of team development comes from the research of Bruce Tuckman. His model may be more "dominant" than accurate though. Many of us have been taught Tuckman's model, and it does have intuitive appeal. But, I'm sure some of you have had team experiences that don't really fit his model. (Connie Gersick also has a model of the phases of group development that seems to fit project teams much better than Tuckman's does.) Nevertheless, Tuckman's model is a convenient framework for organizing a discussion of team development.

Forming. When teams are formed, members' initial reactions are typically apprehensive and guarded. Unless members are already familiar with one another, they can't be sure how the other team members will react to them. It often takes awhile to figure out whether they have similar interests, priorities, problem solving styles, work ethics, etc. The process of becoming familiar with and trusting each other can be slow. Members might also be uncertain about what they're supposed to accomplish and how they will proceed.

Leaders can help teams progress through this "forming" stage by encouraging ice-breaker discussions and discussing the task to be accomplished. As the *LeaderLetters* from August 29 and August 22 explain, [constructive communication](#) and [effective listening](#) can help members feel accepted and can promote open communication.

Storming. Before roles and norms are defined, there is often conflict over who will perform which roles and what norms should emerge. Roles are a set of expectations for an individual who has a particular position (formally or informally) in a group. Norms are a set of behaviors that are expected of all members. Accepting roles and complying with norms involves some sacrifice of autonomy. People naturally resist that sacrifice. Consequently, teams can experience tension and conflict before they settle on roles and norms.

Leaders can help teams progress through this "storming" stage by mediating conflict and encouraging collaborative problem solving (see the [January 7](#), [January 12](#) and [February 15](#) *LeaderLetters*). Leaders should be suspicious of teams that seem to never have conflict. Sometimes disagreements aren't voiced, and some members acquiesce to avoid conflict. There are problems with that superficial type of agreement. First, everyone's ideas and concerns are important and should be tactfully presented and considered. Members who don't raise their concerns simply aren't giving the team all that they have to offer. Second, conflicts that aren't addressed initially can get worse and lead to a blow-up later. Leaders need to ensure that they're getting everyone's insights and listening to their concerns even if that involves disagreements and tension. After all, addressing and resolving conflicts can actually build trust and closeness in teams.

Norming. Most teams survive the storming stage and begin to settle into their roles and norms. This is not to say that their roles and norms will necessarily promote a high level of performance. For instance, a norm of giving minimal effort to perform tasks is clearly a norm, but one that doesn't contribute to top-flight performance. To achieve the highest levels of performance, teams need to develop a sense of identity and cohesiveness. As the [March 19](#) *LeaderLetter* indicates, there are several things that leaders can do to promote cohesiveness:

- **Keep the size of the team to a maximum of about 12 members**, because people feel more attracted to small, intimate groups. Groups larger than 12 can be subdivided into teams.
- **Promote the perception that membership in the team is an honor.** Members feel more attracted to the team when it makes them feel special. One of the ways this can be achieved is by using a tough initiation.
- **Physically isolate the team** to promote intra-team interaction as an alternative to interaction with outside parties.
- **Have the group face challenges that require cooperation for success.** Through such exercises, members learn to pull together and rely on each other.
- **Stimulate competition with other groups** to emphasize the team's identity and the members' interdependence.
- **Reward the team, not individual members** to highlight interdependence and reinforce cooperation.
- **Focus on the team's successes**--success engenders cohesiveness. It's easy to feel attracted to a successful group. Who feels attracted to a team of losers?

Performing. Teams that reach the "performing" stage of team development have gotten past their initial uncertainty and apprehension, have survived the conflict associated with assigning roles and accepting norms, and have developed a sense of identity and feelings of cohesiveness. Teams at the performing stage are best prepared to pursue the members' common goals.

Although achieving the performing stage is generally positive, that does not mean that all teams at that stage outperform all teams at lower stages of development. First, the competence of the team members is an important moderator. If team members are cohesive but lack the knowledge, skills and abilities to perform at a high level, they won't perform at a high level. In addition, not all cohesive teams achieve the goals that their organizations want them to accomplish. Sometimes cohesive groups have goals, strongly supported by all team members, that interfere with the overall objectives of their organizations. To be really helpful to their organizations, cohesive teams must have goals that are aligned with their organizations' objectives. Maintaining goal alignment is important when leading teams in the performing stage.

Teams can also suffer from decreases in their performance if they become complacent, or if maintaining harmony becomes a higher priority than performing at a high level. Leaders must push cohesive teams to take on additional challenges, continuously improve, and make sure that ideas are challenged. They can remind team

members of the value of debating ideas, and they can assign someone the devil's advocate role to ensure that ideas are challenged.

In Summary ...

The process of building high performing teams requires members to get to know each other and negotiate roles and norms. Team members must learn to coordinate their efforts in a way that uses the individuals' strengths and works around their weaknesses. The best teams develop strong bonds; that is, they become cohesive. But cohesiveness should not be achieved at the cost of healthy debate, because everyone on a team should feel free to raise concerns and voice opinions in a constructive manner.

[back to the top](#)

Notes

¹ From George, J. M. & Jones, G. R. (2002). *Understanding and managing organizational behavior*, (3rd ed). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, p. 370.

Sources

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About the Newsletter and Subscriptions

LeaderLetter is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sooin College of Business](#), Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To [subscribe](#), simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To [unsubscribe](#), e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

[back to the top](#)

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Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please [e-mail](#) them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **Every week, I learn something new from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

Good, Clean Joke

MURPHY'S LAWS ON WORK

- A pat on the back is only a few centimeters from a kick in the pants.
- You can go anywhere you want if you look serious and carry a clipboard.
- Never ask two questions in a business letter. The reply will discuss the one you are least interested in, and say nothing about the other.
- There will always be beer cans rolling on the floor of your car when the boss asks for a ride home from the office.
- To err is human, to forgive is not company policy.
- The last person that quit or was fired will be the one held responsible for everything that goes wrong - until the next person quits or is fired.
- If you are good, you will be assigned all the work. If you are really good, you will get out of it.
- If it wasn't for the last minute, nothing would get done.

- You will always get the greatest recognition for the job you least like.
- Machines that have broken down will work perfectly when the repairman arrives.

[back to the top](#)

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