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The Trouble with Teamwork by Patrick M. Lencioni

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Virtually every executive staff I've ever come across believes in teamwork. At least they say they do. Sadly, a scarce few of them make teamwork a reality in their organizations; in fact, they often end up creating environments where political infighting and departmental silos are the norm. And yet they continue to tout their belief in teamwork, as if that alone will somehow make it magically appear. I have found that only a small minority of companies truly understand and embrace teamwork, even though, according to their Web sites, more than one in three of the Fortune 500 publicly declare it to be a core value.

How can this be? How can intelligent, well-meaning executives who supposedly set out to foster cooperation and collaboration among their peers be left with organizational dynamics that are anything but team-oriented? And why do they go on promoting a concept they are so often unable to deliver?

Well, it's not because they're secretly plotting to undermine teamwork among their peers. That would actually be easier to address. The problem is more straightforward—and more difficult to overcome. Most groups of executives fail to become cohesive teams because they drastically underestimate both the power teamwork ultimately unleashes and the painful steps required to make teamwork a reality. But before exploring those steps, it is important to understand how the compulsory, politically correct nature of teamwork makes all of this more difficult.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, teamwork is not a virtue in itself. It is merely a strategic choice, not unlike adopting a specific sales model or a financial strategy. And certainly, when properly understood and implemented, it is a powerful and beneficial tool. Unfortunately, management theorists and human resources professionals have made teamwork unconditionally desirable, something akin to being a good corporate citizen.

As a result, many of today's leaders champion teamwork reflexively without really understanding what it entails. Pump them full of truth serum and ask them why, and they'll tell you they feel like they have to promote teamwork, that anything less would be politically, socially, and organizationally incorrect. "What choice do I have? Imagine me standing up in front of a group of employees and saying that teamwork isn't really all that important here."

Ironically, that would be better than what many—if not most—leaders do. By preaching teamwork and not demanding that their people live it, they are creating two big problems.

First, they are inducing a collective sense of hypocrisy among their staff members, who feel that teamwork has devolved into nothing more than an empty slogan. Second, and more dangerous still, they are confusing those staff members about how to act in the best interest of the company, so they wind up trying at once to be pragmatically self-interested and ideologically selfless. The combination of these factors evokes inevitable and sometimes paralyzing feelings of dissonance and guilt.

Executives must understand that there is an alternative to teamwork, and it is actually more effective than being a faux team. Jon Katzenbach, author of *The Wisdom of Teams*, calls it a "working group," a group of executives who agree to work independently with few expectations for collaboration. The advantage of a working group is clarity; members know exactly what they can, and more important, cannot expect of one another, and so they focus on how to accomplish goals without the distractions and costs that teamwork inevitably presents. (For guidance on deciding whether teamwork is right for your organization, see sidebar, "To Be or Not to Be a Team.")

Of course, none of this is to say that teamwork is not a worthy goal. There is no disputing that it is uniquely powerful, enabling groups of people to achieve more collectively than they could have imagined doing apart. However, the



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requirements of real teamwork cannot be underestimated.

The fact is, building a leadership team is hard. It demands substantial behavioral changes from people who are strong-willed and often set in their ways, having already accomplished great things in their careers. What follows is a realistic description of what a group of executives must be ready to do if they undertake the nontrivial task of becoming a team, something that is not necessarily right for every group of leaders.

Becoming a team is not necessarily right for every group of leaders.



Vulnerability-Based Trust

The first and most important step in building a cohesive and functional team is the establishment of trust. But not just any kind of trust. Teamwork must be built upon a solid foundation of vulnerability-based trust.

This means that members of a cohesive, functional team must learn to comfortably and quickly acknowledge, without provocation, their mistakes, weaknesses, failures, and needs for help. They must also readily recognize the strengths of others, even when those strengths exceed their own.

In theory—or kindergarten—this does not seem terribly difficult. But when a leader is faced with a roomful of accomplished, proud, and talented staff members, getting them to let their guard down and risk loss of positional power is an extremely difficult challenge. And the only way to initiate it is for the leader to go first.

Showing vulnerability is unnatural for many leaders, who were raised to project strength and confidence in the face of difficulty. And while that is certainly a noble behavior in many circumstances, it must be tempered when it comes to demonstrating vulnerability-based trust to hesitant team members who need their leader to strip naked and dive into the cold water first. Of course, this requires that a leader be confident enough, ironically, to admit to frailties and make it easy for others to follow suit. One particular CEO I worked with failed to build trust among his team and watched the company falter as a result. As it turns out, a big contributing factor was his inability to model vulnerability-based trust. As one of the executives who reported to him later explained to me, “No one on the team was ever allowed to be smarter than him in any area because he was the CEO.” As a result, team members would not open up to one another and admit their own weaknesses or mistakes.

What exactly does vulnerability-based trust look like in practice? It is evident among team members who say things to one another like “I screwed up,” “I was wrong,” “I need help,” “I’m sorry,” and “You’re better than I am at this.” Most important, they only make one of these statements when they mean it, and especially when they really don’t want to.

If all this sounds like motherhood and apple pie, understand that there is a very practical reason why vulnerability-based trust is indispensable. Without it, a team will not, and probably should not, engage in unfiltered productive conflict.



Healthy Conflict

One of the greatest inhibitors of teamwork among executive teams is the fear of conflict, which stems from two separate concerns. On one hand, many executives go to great lengths to avoid conflict among their teams because they worry that they will lose control of the group and that someone will have their pride damaged in the process. Others do so because they see conflict as a waste of time. They prefer to cut meetings and discussions short by jumping to the decision that they believe will ultimately be adopted anyway, leaving more time for implementation and what they think of as “real work.”

Whatever the case, CEOs who go to great lengths to avoid conflict often do so believing that they are strengthening their teams by avoiding destructive disagreement. This is ironic, because what they are really doing is stifling productive conflict and pushing important issues that need to be resolved under the carpet where they will fester. Eventually, those unresolved issues transform into uglier and more personal discord when executives grow frustrated at what they perceive to be repeated problems.

What CEOs and their teams must do is learn to identify artificial harmony when they see it, and incite productive conflict in its place. This is a messy process, one that takes time to master. But there is no avoiding it, because to do so makes it next to impossible for a team to make real commitment.

Identify artificial harmony; incite productive conflict in its place.



Unwavering Commitment

To become a cohesive team, a group of leaders must learn to commit to decisions when there is less than perfect information available, and when no natural consensus develops. And because perfect information and natural consensus rarely exist, the ability to commit becomes one of the most critical behaviors of a team.

But teams cannot learn to do this if they are not in the practice of engaging in productive and unguarded conflict. That's because it is only after team members passionately and unguardedly debate with one another and speak their minds that the leader can feel confident of making a decision with the full benefit of the collective wisdom of the group. A simple example might help illustrate the costs of failing to truly commit.

Becoming a team is not necessarily right for every group of leaders.

The CEO of a struggling pharmaceutical company decided to eliminate business and first class travel to cut costs. Everyone around the table nodded their heads in agreement, but within weeks, it became apparent that only half the room had really committed to the decision. The others merely decided not to challenge the decision, but rather to ignore it. This created its own set of destructive conflict when angry employees from different departments traveled together and found themselves heading to different parts of the airplane. Needless to say, the travel policy was on the agenda again at the next meeting, wasting important time that should have been spent righting the company's financial situation.

Teams that fail to disagree and exchange unfiltered opinions are the ones that find themselves revisiting the same issues again and again. All this is ironic, because the teams that appear to an outside observer to be the most dysfunctional (the arguers) are usually the ones that can arrive at and stick with a difficult decision.

It's worth repeating here that commitment and conflict are not possible without trust. If team members are concerned about protecting themselves from their peers, they will not be able to disagree and commit. And that presents its own set of problems, not the least of which is the unwillingness to hold one another accountable.



Unapologetic Accountability

Great teams do not wait for the leader to remind members when they are not pulling their weight. Because there is no lack of clarity about what they have committed to do, they are comfortable calling one another on actions and behaviors that don't contribute to the likelihood of success. Less effective teams typically resort to reporting unacceptable behavior to the leader of the group, or worse yet, to back-channel gossip. These behaviors are not only destructive to the morale of the team, they are inefficient and allow easily addressable issues to live longer than should be allowed.

Don't let the simplicity of accountability hide the difficulty of making it a reality. It is not easy to teach strong leaders on a team to confront their peers about behavioral issues that hurt the team. But when the goals of the team have been clearly delineated, the behaviors that jeopardize them become easier to call out.



Collective Orientation to Results

The ultimate goal of the team, and the only real scorecard for measuring its success, is the achievement of tangible collective outcomes. And while most executive teams are certainly populated with leaders who are driven to succeed, all too often the results they focus on are individual or departmental. Once the inevitable moment of truth comes, when executives must choose between the success of the entire team and their own, many are unable to resist the instinct to look out for themselves. This is understandable, but it is deadly to a team.

Identify artificial harmony; incite productive conflict in its place.

Leaders committed to building a team must have zero tolerance for individually focused behavior. This is easier said than done when one considers the size of the egos assembled on a given leadership team. Which is perhaps why a leader trying to assemble a truly cohesive team would do well to select team members with small ones.

If all of this sounds obvious, that's because it is. The problem with teamwork is not that it is difficult to understand, but rather that it is extremely difficult to achieve when the people involved are strong-willed, independently successful leaders. The point here is not that teamwork is not worth the trouble, but rather that its rewards are both rare and costly. And as for those leaders who don't have the courage to force team members to step up to the requirements of teamwork (see Figure 1, below), they would be wiser to avoid the concept altogether. Of course, that would require a different kind of courage; the courage not to be a team.

Figure 1.
The Role of the Leader in Building Teams



To Be or Not to Be a Team

So how do well-intentioned leaders go about deciding if teamwork is right for their staffs? They can start by recognizing that organizational structure is not nearly as important as behavioral willingness.

Most theorists will call for teamwork in organizations that are structured functionally, but may not do so for those that are organized divisionally or geographically.

In other words, if the work can be organized in departments that operate largely independently (with regional territories, distinct product divisions, or separate subsidiaries), then the executives at the top can follow suit and function as what Jon Katzenbach, author of *The Wisdom of Teams*, describes as "working units." These are groups made up of individuals who, though friendly and cooperative at times, are not expected to make willing sacrifices to one another to achieve common goals that lead to joint rewards.

However, when executives run an organization that is made up of departments that have structural interdependencies, teamwork is usually presented as the only possible approach for the leadership group. But although this is a sound and reasonable theory when all other factors are considered equal, it is not necessarily advisable in the messy and fallible world of real human beings. Before deciding that teamwork is the answer, ask these questions of yourself and your fellow team members.

- Can we keep our egos in check?
- Are we capable of admitting to mistakes, weaknesses, insufficient knowledge?
- Can we speak up openly when we disagree?
- Will we confront behavioral problems directly?
- Can we put the success of the team or organization over our own?

If the answer to one or more of these questions is "probably not," then a group of executives should think twice about declaring themselves a team. Why? Because more than structure, it is the willingness of executives to change behavior—starting with the leader of the organization—that should determine whether teamwork is the right answer.

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