Teambuilding

Misused? Overused? Poorly Understood?

By Jaime Jusidman

Team Approach, the distinctive working style that harnesses the collective talent and energy of a group of people, has been a cornerstone of managerial philosophy for over 30 years. It has become particularly relevant lately, as the workplace has become a complex, turbulent environment, and exponential use of technology has led to the overabundance of and increased demands for productivity.

Given these changes to the workplace environment, the traditional hierarchical style of managing and leading of organizations has essentially become unsustainable. Most leaders are grappling with how to lead an organization in an environment where people demand empowerment, where they have access to any information they want whenever they want it, and where they can often perform their work without ever having to come to the office. Fundamentally, the traditional form of a leader's power is being challenged by employees' evolving expectations regarding his or her role in the organization.

The Meaning of Team

In this article, I will explore the importance of teambuilding, how it is currently used or "misused," and why people are often skeptical about the process and its outcomes; but first, I'd like to call your attention to some key terms: **team spirit, "teamness,"** and **team**.
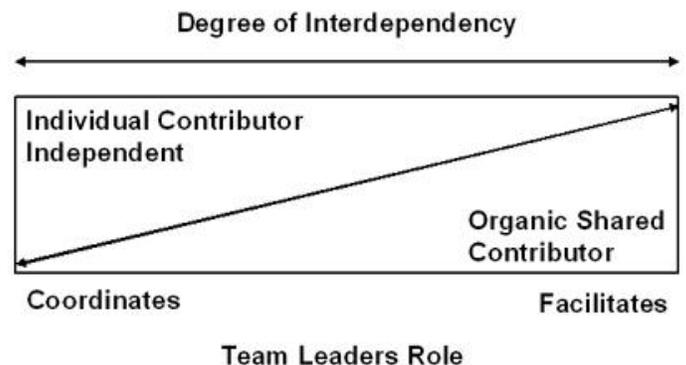
For starters, a **team** is essentially a group of individuals who share a vision, are committed to achieving a common goal, work **interdependently,** and feel collectively accountable for achieving the end-result. The basic assumption under the **team approach** philosophy is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Team spirit and "**teamness,**" on the other hand, refer to the feeling of being part of an entity, unit, or organization in which people feel a strong sense of belonging and loyalty. Leadership with a team spirit or "teamness" approach necessitates that people identify themselves with a purpose, icon, brand or mascot.

Unlike an actual team, team spirit does not require them to actually interact. Their individual efforts may or may not result in the achievement of a goal. For example, fans of the LA Dodgers certainly have team spirit, but they are not actually part of the team. What separates them from the team is interdependency. Every **team** needs to have **team spirit**, but not every group with **team spirit** is a **team.**

When I say interdependency, I mean the level to which the action of one individual affects another individual and vice-versa. This exchange results in the achievement (or failure) to reach the team's goal.

There are many degrees of interdependency (see illustration below). I think of it as a continuum. On one end, we have individual interdependency in which each member has a clear definition of the role, accountabilities and deliverables. They understand the impact of their actions to the outcome or results of the team. Each individual performs within the boundaries of his/her role (strict definition), and the leader's job is to coordinate interaction between the members to assure quality and timely delivery of their output. The leader shares the success or failure with the team, but is ultimately accountable for the outcome, and therefore must be able to easily identify the contribution of each member and hold them individually accountable. Think of this kind of interdependency as a baseball team.

Degree of Interdependency

Individual Contributor Independent

Organic Shared Contributor

Coordinates

Facilitates

Team Leaders Role

On the other end of the continuum, we have organic shared interdependency, in which each member has a

clear definition of his/her basic role but still has the freedom to move across roles to fill in any gaps in order to achieve the team's outcome. The leader facilitates the team process and shares the success and owns the accountability. Think of this kind of interdependency as a soccer team.

Symptoms of Lack of Teamwork
How do we know when a team is dysfunctional? Some of the most common symptoms of a dysfunctional team are blaming, finger-pointing, indifference towards "teamness" or team spirit, lethargy, over dependency to the work of the leader, chronic or late delivery of results, disengagement during team meetings, and obsessing over the past rather than orienting toward the future. Team meetings may be postponed often, and the leader of the group becomes solely responsible for owning the weekly meetings and the agenda. Members of the team don't actively participate in the meeting, and when they do, their participation is strictly determined by their role boundary. The team members act in compliance to the expectations of the leader for fear of repercussion. Alternatively, there may be lots of meetings with no outcome or results because agreement or compliance is overlooked or sabotaged by members of the team.

"Aren't you glad we had this meeting to resolve our conflict?"

Enter Teambuilding
Teambuilding is the process of deliberately creating and maintaining a team. The notion of teambuilding suggests that some meaningful connection must be constructed between the members, and that the entity crosses developmental stages over time. It requires constant maintenance (a.k.a. teambuilding).

Teambuilding - Initiating the teambuilding process often requires a specific motivating factor. Following are some examples of positive intention that will likely lead to successful teambuilding:

• A newly appointed leader who wants to achieve rapid acceptance in an established group
• A pragmatic leader who wants to use teambuilding to further an open, problem-solving approach to management
• A leader facing new challenges and demands who needs to leverage the creativity and commitment of others to handle the job
• A leader facing personal conflict, low commitment, or lack of clarity and wants to break out of the doldrums

During the teambuilding process, the team needs to collectively answer a set of guiding questions such as:

• What are we here to do?
• How should we organize ourselves?
• What kind of leadership style we need in order to accomplish what we have set out to do?
• How do we work through problems?
• How do we deal with internal conflict?
• How can we leverage the power of our own diversity?
• What does each of us need from each other and from the team as a whole?
• How do we establish and maintain a climate of trust that our team needs in order to be effective?

These questions are not answered in a structural step-by-step process. The learning must be organic and issues should be worked through as they become a hindrance to the team's progress. When an issue is worked through successfully, the team becomes stronger and significant learning occurs, so clearing the blockages is the most important part of the teambuilding approach. "Working through" problems requires time, effort, and resilience to push through with uncomfortable situations.

Once the team learns to deal with these tough situations, the sense of identity, community, shared responsibility, accountability, and emotional investment increases exponentially, resulting in superior team results.

What is a teambuilding process? A teambuilding process dictates that any group of individuals who aspire to be a team must go through different phases of development as a unit. Different models of group dynamics have been used through the organizational development field to describe these phases, but the most common model includes four phases:

■ **Forming** or Testing
■ **Storming** or Infighting
■ **Norming** or Getting Organized
■ **Performing** or Mature Closeness

The process must occur organically and cannot be forced or accelerated. The most significant learning occurs during the storming/infighting phase, in which each member engages in integrating individuation with the teaming process. At the end of this phase, members should have gained significant insight into themselves by addressing the following:

- Who am I in this group?
- How do I impact others?
- What behaviors do I display that generate impact and/or elicit reaction from others?
- What triggers my behaviors?
- What does that trigger say about me and my history?
- What is my style as a leader and as a team member?
- What are my boundaries?
- What does it take to gain my trust?
- What does it take to lose my trust?
- What do I need from others to feel fluid within the team?

A common misconception is that the teambuilding process is finite and a remedy that will last forever. The truth is that no living organism lasts forever, and entropy rules. As such, teams need to be maintained and reinforced.

During the history of a team, the processes of *Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing* are constantly revisited with different levels of intensity. This intensity often reflects the nature of the team, the degree of required interdependency and the time to deliver the results/tasks at hand. Sometimes, renovation is required in order to sustain its effectiveness. This may mean onboarding several new members or even replacing the entire team with new members. Regardless, every time a shift in membership occurs, the cycle of team dynamics repeats itself.

Compensation Rewards and Teambuilding Initiatives
When embarking on a teambuilding initiative, keep in mind that if the reward structure is aligned exclusively with individual performance, teambuilding efforts will most certainly be a waste of money and resources. Without proper incentive alignment, teambuilding efforts may achieve a short lived feeling of team spirit that will quickly dissolve into the old spirit of individual competition. Shifting the reward structure to balance individual rewards with team rewards will help facilitate the teambuilding process. However, this alternative approach may result in intense discussions in the storming phase regarding how to identify and deal with underperforming team members.

Misuses of the term "Teambuilding"
Many leaders use the term "teambuilding" in ways that undermine the complexity and deliberateness of the process; they label activities such as playing golf, going out for a drink, a conference over a weekend or other social gatherings as teambuilding. Unfortunately, while these activities can certainly help to build team spirit, they may also backfire in the long-run. Playing golf may be perceived as an exclusive activity by those who don't know how to play or don't like playing. Going out for a drink may pose problems for team members with a chemical dependency, health problem or simply feel uncomfortable in that type of environment. Often these activities feel "forced", which may create feelings of resentment instead of achieving the desired bonding experience.

"We like the teamwork idea, but Mr. Superstar won't let us play with his ball."

On the other hand, social activities can be a good maintenance option when the team has already gone through an effective teambuilding process and members enjoy spending time together. At that point, the trust should be so strong that members feel comfortable enough to laugh at their idiosyncrasies and manage possible discomforts created by the selected activity.

It is fundamental to remember that before you engage in a teambuilding activity, there should be clarity regarding the level of interdependency of the team and how team performance is rewarded. Always keep in mind, just as a living organism; a team needs to be constantly maintained, invigorated, and renewed.