A Structured Approach to the Development of High Performing Teams

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1.   Introduction

The difference between an indifferent team and a high-performing team is striking. Take for example the 2010 England World Cup football team of highly paid, high profile individuals, put to the sword by a genuine team in the form of the young, largely unfeted, German outfit in the quarter finals.

Surveys[1] and studies[2] also show that the outputs of an effective team are greater than the sum of the parts. The traditional command and control, hierarchical model of management is generally incongruent with most of today's fast moving, flexible, customer facing, global, innovative and technologically based organisations.

We need to recognize that there are many different types of teams operating in very different environments. Some of the most typical are functional teams e.g. production, customer service and sales; cross functional teams often set up for a limited time span to achieve a specific objective e.g. product development teams, new installation or facility build teams. Virtual teams may also be set up often spanning the globe where telephone, e-mail and teleconferencing are the prime communication medium rather than face to face.

Nonetheless, irrespective of the kind of team, there is a potential to generate significant performance improvement through learning and careful attention being paid to team processes and interactions. As a general rule, with rare exceptions, high-performing teams don't just happen. They require nurturing, training, facilitating, supporting and developing.

2.   Benefits and Criticisms

The many and varied benefits of effective teamworking include delivering results and exceeding expectations. Quality, customer service, creativity, process or cycle times and cost are all areas where superior results are demonstrably achieved. Sound teamworking can improve employee relations and communication, generate more clarity and less ambiguity, increase motivation, engagement and self-esteem.

Some critics[3] of team working and teambuilding suggest that the outcome is just "group speak" or consensus politics. This is the antithesis of effective teamworking which demands rigour in processes and demands that team members tell it how it is and challenge each other constructively. Other critics reduce effective teamworking

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to bonding and mutual respect, developed naturally as people come together in the right environment. Bonding and mutual respect is an element but more structure is needed. The bringing together of the organisation, striving to achieve its objectives, the team itself and the individuals who comprise it is no easy feat.

3.   Characteristics of a High Performing Team

The following are typically regarded as some of the most important characteristics of a high performing team:[4]

♣   Leadership who live and breathe the business vision, values and plan. They are driven and motivated.

♣   Process driven managing style which is supported by effective problem solving capacity as well as a creative inclination.

♣   Team composition – a suitable diverse mix of qualified and well trained individuals who are aware of the need for social sensitivity, showing confidence and energy to meet the organisation plan and their personal aspirations. They demonstrate "Collective intelligence".

♣   Well organised and defined team structure and roles which are developed through a team approach.

♣   High commitment to each other with a capacity for recognising and supporting differences with care.

♣   Caring environment – where personal reviews enable weaknesses and opportunities to be examined and actioned in a safe place.

♣   Climate of openness and trust whereby people feel relaxed and are able, for example, to take risks by

speaking their mind and create new opportunities and ways of working.

♣   Team and personal training plans – well structured, flexible plans which are managed by the team.

♣   Concern to achieve high quality outputs which is a demonstrable result of their capacity to work for each other and the organisation.

♣   Creative strength and capacity to deliver new thoughts and ideas to support business/team change programmes which enable a

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continuous improvement culture to be operated.

♣ Clear vision and values which are communicated, lived and breathed by all.

♣ Strong working and personal relationships provide the capacity for effectively building relationships with other departments/functions, people, organisations and customers.

♣ Operating plans Realistic (stretch) timescales apply which the team has contributed to, shared and are understood by all.

4.   Creating and Developing High Performing Teams

So, how can high performing teams be created and developed within an organisation?

Teambuilding events achieve most when they relate to real issues facing organisations. This enhances the value perceived by the stakeholders in investing time away from the day-to-day to achieve a result.

A teambuilding programme's focus typically combines 3 elements:-

- Goals
- The team and its capacity to add significant value to the organisation.
- The individuals and their social sensitivity, personal skills, development needs and learning opportunities.

The programme needs a relevant senior manager as a sponsor who can articulate the broad aims of the programme, has accountability, authority and credibility.

Without this in significant proportion the programme will fail, as new ways of doing things or changes needed which emanate from the outputs of the teambuilding exercise itself will be seen to be falling on deaf ears and the whole initiative will be regarded as a damp squib and a waste of Company resources.

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In addition, there needs to be a facilitator experienced in organisational development and experiential learning. The facilitator must be seen as independent, objective and credible.

Enough time must be given to the event including pre-programme preparation and time for the facilitator to engage with the participants. Post programme there will be a need for follow-ups and reviews to do justice to the challenges set and the improvement opportunities potentially available.

Perhaps the most important precursor to any programme is to define the aims and objectives.

Example:-

In relation to a new product introduction a cross-functional Product Development Team needs to be developed for xyz product ranges. The objectives should be around the design of processes which can deliver profitable new product development opportunities, address functional support for product development, look at team and personal skills to sustain robust delivery, clarify roles and responsibilities and challenge the effectiveness of current approaches.

The following is an example workshop structure and process needed to create or develop a high performing team. (Each workshop has to be customised to take into account client objectives, organisational structure, people and culture. The structure below contains a wide range of instruments from which the facilitator would select those most appropriate to achieve the workshop goals in the time allocated.)

- The Sponsor or Manager to present the vision, the challenges ahead and the expectation, the support to be afforded to the teambuilding exercise and then provide an opportunity for participants to question and clarify.
- Participants share their understanding and the implications of the presentation given.
- Exploration of team and organisational objectives and the opportunities ahead.
- Problem-solving to design a plan to identify and deliver the applicable objectives.
- Team effectiveness review using questionnaire - how does the team's current effectiveness measure up?
- SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of organisation.

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- Sharing of participant personality profiling.
- Social sensitivity and the implications for "collective intelligence".[5]
- Emotional intelligence in the team.
- Belbin team roles[6] and the implications for the participants and the team.
- Pair coaching sessions – Giving feedback, listening skills and coaching.
- Team processes.[7]
- 360° feedback.
- Ongoing development of presentation to Sponsor/Manager.

Reference has been made to experiential learning[8]. This is the essence of the whole approach. It is, in itself, not new. It is based on individuals working on real problems that are capable of having action taken on them. The individual needs to be able to identify and share the problem, own it and identify steps necessary to resolve it. Individuals learn primarily by questioning their own and others' proposed actions, identifying a course of further action and a time scale.

5.   Conclusion

In summary, effective teamworking is the cornerstone of delivering many of an organisation's performance requirements.

Although some organisations are devoted to one particular way of enhancing teamworking, e.g. outward bound programmes, the approach above can be applied globally (with cultural modification) to any level from boardroom to frontline or shopfloor and to different kinds of team and has a proven track record.

The teams in any organisation inevitably need to perform even better, exceed expectations and deliver faster. A structured approach to the development of teams will inevitably support individual, team and organisational performance improvement as well as other variables which are key to organisational health.

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About the Author

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Mike is an experienced facilitator and a Senior HR Director with over 30 years global experience, at both Board and operational levels, spanning all aspects of Human Resources. His clients include Smith & Nephew Plc, First Milk, Premier Foods Plc, Airbus, Sun Chemical, Tarmac and Humberside Fire and Rescue Service.

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About A2Z

A2Z is a consortium of over 100 experienced business experts. Mike is a member of the A2Z HR Team.

A2Z adds real value to businesses by combining diverse expertise to deliver a bespoke solution to solve a business critical issue. For more information on the A2Z HR Team, please click here.

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