



UNITY IS STRENGTH

The world is challenging, fragmented and dislocated, but the practice of teamwork reverses this, restores balance and takes us towards integration and wholeness in our relationships and collaboration in our endeavours. Teams can bring together individuals to produce the emergent qualities that make them stronger and more effective. Through teamwork people are able to collectively meet extraordinary challenges. Obviously, just calling a group a team, does not automatically make it one.



ARTICLE BY JOHN VARNEY, FOUNDER & FACILITATOR - CENTRE FOR MANAGEMENT CREATIVITY

A team, usually comprising three to 12 people, is a social entity. It is more cohesive than a group because it has a unity about it; an identity hard won by deliberate effort and intent. In complex systems, emergent properties arise as parts come into relationship. Individuals cannot produce such properties. They can only emerge from the system as a whole because they are products of relationships as well as the parts themselves. Very often, of course, the word team is used as no more than a handy title. Its members may as yet lack the shared identity, cohesion and alignment that characterise real teams. So, for instance, knowing we will need a marketing team, we will select members to cover all aspects of marketing expertise. But in addition to those task-related skills, relationships between the people will need transforming if they are to become a team. That

may be challenging and is by no means inevitable. For a group to become a team, some kind of integrative process is required.

There are three parallel capabilities in any team; technical, relational and process. We have all come across co-called teams where, although all the necessary technical skills are present, the fluency of teamwork is absent and their process is sluggish or ineffective. Distinct from and in addition to their internal team relationships and technical contributions, every team member has process roles to perform. Different energies and qualities are required at different stages of any process, sometimes divergent and sometimes convergent. Early stages are exploratory. Later stages are action orientated. Somewhere in between we need creativity. Each of us have our predilections, yet to optimise performance of the team as a whole

all roles need to be fulfilled. Furthermore, at this stage of evolution of human society, we can clearly identify two different kinds of team. In one the coherence is externally determined and in the other it is internally generated. Historically, the most common kind of team is the hierarchical model by which a group is closely held together and able to act effectively because it has a strong and capable leader. All team members are thus followers, generally responding to the leader's directions. They have technical roles and need to keep the leader well informed so that good decisions are made and clear instructions issued. Their collaborative relationships are orchestrated by the leader.

This model of team is essentially mechanistic as opposed to organic. It can be described using terms like leverage, motivation, performance, efficiency. This kind of team is

excellent when dealing with familiar challenges and is best developed through rehearsal (practice and training), so everyone knows their role and what is expected of them. Although such teams can contribute to the development of individuals, they can often be manipulative. This model fits well with control and command hierarchies. Because this is the most common form of teamwork, representative of the mainstream, it is what you are most likely to be offered by providers of team and leadership development. An alternative notion is of a team as a self-organising living system in which leadership is largely distributed among team members. Indeed in this version, the adaptability of the team as a whole depends upon a flow of leadership to which all members contribute, as and when appropriate.

As leadership is fluid, so is followership. There may be a nominal leader but this person does not direct individuals and no one is in a follower role any more than another. The nominal leader will have specific roles and responsibilities, particularly in relation to the world outside of the team. This alternative model we could call organic as opposed to mechanistic. In describing its behaviour we would need to talk of synergies, cooperation, co-creation, internal dynamism and flow. This latter kind of team is more subtle, more complex, agile and adaptable - harder to bring into being and hence rather rare. It requires more maturity on the part of individual team members, who need to be self-directing as well as being highly aware of the wider team and its context. For this reason such teams place much emphasis on individual development and continuous learning. Because this is not the mainstream of team and leadership development, you will need, if this is what you want, to carefully research and select your providers.

Collaboration can be a temporary expedient or it can become a way of life - a philosophy that integrates us with others to produce those emergent qualities we spoke of. There is no doubt that there are peaks of performance whereby people in teams excel. The experience of exceeding your personal limitations is exciting, fulfilling and deeply rewarding. HR can aspire to bring such experience to the way their organisation organises. Collaboration requires that people are free to make their own choices. They can choose to let go of partisan interests and sacrifice their independence for the good of the whole. Where once people may have felt a need to compete, they can choose to collaborate as mutually-valued colleagues. A major factor in this is for everyone to choose to believe in a shared vision of success. Results cannot be guaranteed. HR with its facilitators and consultants can only help. Unless members of a group are willing to make the necessary efforts and sacrifices then no amount of coaching or facilitating will turn a group into a team. However, where members buy into the idea, then external help and internal initiatives can align them to bring about a magical transformation; shared vision and values, mutual alignment, common aims and mutual stimulus, driving towards outstanding



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Are there still siloed departments in your business?



performance and high achievement. Those unwilling to join in can be let go.

There is a fractal principle that brings about self-similarity at different scales. Just as it is obvious you cannot have an effective team of ineffective individuals, a dysfunctional executive team is not likely to elicit top performance from within their organisation. Conversely a high-performance close-knit executive team will inspire confidence and competence throughout. For example, a senior policeman observed that the way the bobby on the beat treated the public was a reflection of the way the chief constable treated his senior colleagues. On a wider scale, the executive group of a national organisation invested in intensive off-site developmental workshops over several years. These highly successful interactions brought about a shift of perspective and participants enthusiastically anticipated impending cultural transformation. However, although the off-site break was a great success, they quickly reverted to business as usual. Without effective follow-through the transformation was never completed. Periodically they repeated the same highly successful first steps without ever progressing further. By contrast, the struggling executive group of a floundering organisation really took those first steps seriously. Because they were deeply committed to the whole process, 18 months of facilitated development and coaching support enabled them to transform. As they tackled the challenges of survival they became a highly effective team. This earned them great respect, internally and externally. Drawing in resources, they transformed both workforce and plant which turned their business around. The company went from being a dispirited organisation under threat of closure to being a successful and expanding exemplar to their parent organisation.

HR can influence the culture which in turn determines what kind of team is aimed at. Although the distinctions between the two kinds of team are profound, they will rarely be made explicit. If a high level of collaboration is required, then beliefs, values and behaviours will be influenced to support it. HR enjoys the challenging role of helping people imagine the possibilities, highlighting different options and offering appropriate development paths. It can help ensure wise choices are made and provide processes of team, leadership and personal development of the appropriate kind. HR can also show that every individual is in a position of influence, even those who are unaware of the fact because they have no power in the formal structure. In our living and in our work we touch the lives of many and the quality of that touch is our leadership gift. ●

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