

Building Highly Effective Teams

1.0 Introduction:

There is a commonly used saying that *'people are the backbone of any organization'*. However, it is suggested that human resources provide even more extensive support as they are at the heart of the entire management system, producing products and delivering services and enabling the organization to remain relevant and to survive in the marketplace. So how does an organization capitalize on this most important asset, build on the talent of their people and develop highly effective teams?

2.0 Highly Effective Teams

A team is a group of people working together to achieve a shared purpose and goal(s). Human resources of today's organization tend to perform their day-to-day operations in teams. Those teams can be structured according to the organizational chart or can be unstructured and teams can be permanent or temporal. Table 1 describes different types of teams. The individuals in highly effective teams are committed to results, accountable and consistently deliver superior results and exceed expectations. The success of the team is paramount and supersedes the personal agenda of any one of the team members.

Table 1: Team Types

Team Type	Brief Description
Traditional	Private and Public Sector, Military, Sports
Self-Directed	Law Firms, Real Estate Companies, Franchisees
Cross Functional	Various Departments/Business Units, Partners
Task Force / Committee	Problem-Solving, Accomplish a Mission or Achieve a Task
Cyber / Virtual	Geographical, Varying Modes of Communication

Source: *DNA of Highly Effective Team Course, University of Toronto, 2019*

3.0 Tuckman Team Model

In 1965, Bruce Wayne Tuckman (researcher, consultant and Professor Emeritus of Educational Psychology at Ohio University) proposed the four stages of group development (Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing) as necessary and inevitable stages or phases that should take place in sequence

for any group of people or team to grow and achieve a desired outcome. In 1977, Tuckman added the fifth stage **Adjourning** (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Stages of Bruce Tuckman Team Model

In light of the Tuckman Model stages, there is merit in discussing the dos, don'ts and the role of team leaders at each stage that contribute to highly effective teams in organizations.

3.1 Stage 1: Forming

Highly effective teams are formed from individuals who possess the suitable knowledge and experience necessary to achieve the desired outcomes of the team.

In the **Forming** stage, the team's purpose, mission, long-term goals and short-term objectives must be identified, well communicated and agreed upon by all team members. The team leader role in this instance is to communicate the team's purpose, mission, long-term goals and short-term objectives to the team numerous times (7 times or more) to ensure that every individual on the team understands, has buy-in and will work with the rest of the team to achieve such. It follows that any related changes or updates that need to take place will be well communicated too.

Having the work processes set and the roles and responsibilities of team members identified and agreed upon in the **Forming** stage are extremely important to help the team cooperate and work together to achieve a successful outcome. For highly effective teams, roles and responsibilities should be established fairly among the team individuals and in careful consideration to their background and experiences.

In the **Forming** stage, the highly effective team drafts a Communication Agreement in which vertical and horizontal channels are identified. This Agreement sets the expectation for each team member such as: how feedback should be given, what to do when expectations are not met and how to respond to feedback, and so forth.

The team leader plays an important role in setting the team rules and core values. Some commonly used core values may include:

- Teamwork
- Respect
- Transparency
- Honesty
- Integrity
- Professionalism
- Continuous Learning
- Continual Improvement
- Excellence
- Quality

3.2 Stage 2: Storming

In the **Storming** stage, it's a newly formed team with individuals that have been recently brought together. These individuals have different backgrounds, experiences and personalities and each team member may join with his/her own understanding, priorities and agenda. Although the team's direction may have been set in the **Forming** stage, there may be differences in perception when the team puts the plan into action. As a result, disputes and differences may arise and affect team performance.

Effective communication is the key to overcoming these differences. The team leader must be a good role model for effective communication. This role is characterized by communicating clearly, being straightforward, providing constructive feedback and listening actively. As Tom Peter's says "*team leaders should not be 18-second managers*"! Effective communication will play an important role in building trust among the team members and will pave the way for them to feel confident about peer intentions and alignment with the agreed upon direction.

Managing conflicts will also be important at this stage. Conflict can be defined as '*any tension, real or perceived, visible or hidden, clearly understood or not, between the important interests held by one or more people*'. Team leaders must consider the breadth and depth of conflict when trying to manage it.

For example:

- Conflicts are inevitable and may occur at any time among the members regardless of their organizational levels and/or positions

- Conflicts are not only about real, visible, clearly understood tensions. Team leaders should also be attentive to perceived, hidden, not clearly understood tensions and manage these conflicts as well. Much time and effort can be saved in managing conflict in the early stage when it is more simple and straightforward and has not had a chance to escalate
- Conflicts may be caused by not satisfying human interests that are held by one or more individual(s) or group(s). Thus it is beneficial for team leaders to understand the origin of the conflict or the motivation of their team members. Remaining knowledgeable and curious about these motivations and having open discussions will provide a valuable learning experience for all parties. Such undertakings will pave the way for effective resolution of the conflict and for stronger and healthier relationships going forward
- Team leaders must understand their role is not to resolve conflicts but to manage it so the team can perform well. This undertaking will help the team leader and members to focus on overcoming challenges and moving towards achieving the team's agreed upon aim
- Conflicts provide an opportunity (if effectively managed) to learn more about the team members and to strengthen relationships

3.3 Stage 3: Norming

Once conflicts are effectively managed in the **Storming** stage, the **Norming** stage has team members focus on setting norms and ensuring all work processes are in place and functioning well for the benefit of the team. The level of team cohesiveness at this stage is largely determined by the level of conformance to the acceptable behaviors and agreed upon norms.

Most often, the **Storming** stage overlaps with the **Norming** stage. This overlap is due to the following:

- It may be easier to agree on some matters (e.g. work processes, roles and responsibilities, team rules, communication agreement, goals, objectives, core values) than to implement such. To be successful with implementation, conflicts must be managed well
- When new tasks are assigned to the team, some conflicts may appear again. If the conflict has been managed well in the past, these conflicts will be less intense and managed smoothly given the team building efforts that have strengthened relationships along with the growing understanding that team members have about one another

Norms of behaviors for highly effective teams include:

- Respect the points of view for each member (even if it differs from their own)
- Challenge the idea rather than the person
- Think positive and work towards the desired outcome
- Speak openly and share information
- Admit mistakes and consider these experiences a learning opportunity
- Be constructive in giving and receiving feedback
- Remain committed to your agreed upon roles and responsibilities and to the team's purpose, mission, core values, goals and objectives

Particularly important at the Norming stage is a principle common to the culture of high performing organizations - alignment. Alignment reflects the understanding that the *“organization is a system of interrelated and interconnected work processes and that all activities need to be aligned with the established direction”* (Source: Organizational Excellence Framework, 2010). The leadership team establishes the strategic direction for the organization and reflects the direction in corporate statements (e.g. vision, mission, core values) and plans that have goals and objectives. Every effort should be made to cascade these statements and plans throughout the organizations so that all undertakings serve a common aim and resources are used wisely.

3.4 Stage 4: Performing

Teams that reach the **Performing** stage are mature - work processes, roles and responsibilities, team rules and the communication agreement have been well established and tested. The focus of the team at this stage is on managing performance, evaluating performance and achieving the team goals. Although conflicts may still arise, these conflicts continue to be managed well given the relationships that have been developed and strengthened over time and the norms of behaviors that have been established.

At this stage, the Effort Grid (Figure 2) illustrates how the effort and talent of each team member will contribute to the strength of the overall team. To realize and maintain high team performance, it is recommended that team leaders:

- Focus on members that demonstrate good talent and good effort (Golden Eagles). Related behavior includes listening, providing constructive feedback, assigning new tasks and challenges, inspiring, encouraging and so on. In other words, recognizing these members for the value they bring to the organization

- Invest in training team members that demonstrate poor talent and good effort (Effort Eagles). Improve the talent of this group by training and coaching. Emphasize coaching as a better way to realize desired outcomes over coaxing (persuasion or intimidation) as coaching positively reinforces the team member’s effort to improve performance
- Spend minimal time on team members with good talent and poor effort (Talent Traps) as motivation is difficult to train. Hopefully by witnessing the positive reinforcement available to those making a good effort, these team members will be encouraged to follow suit
- Do not spend time on team members with poor talent and poor effort (Miracle Traps). Instead encourage these people to find employment elsewhere. Otherwise such team members will provide a drag on the organization and negatively influence other team members

For the team leader, using the foregoing approach will clearly reinforce the talent and effort that are desired and required from team member and that will be rewarded.

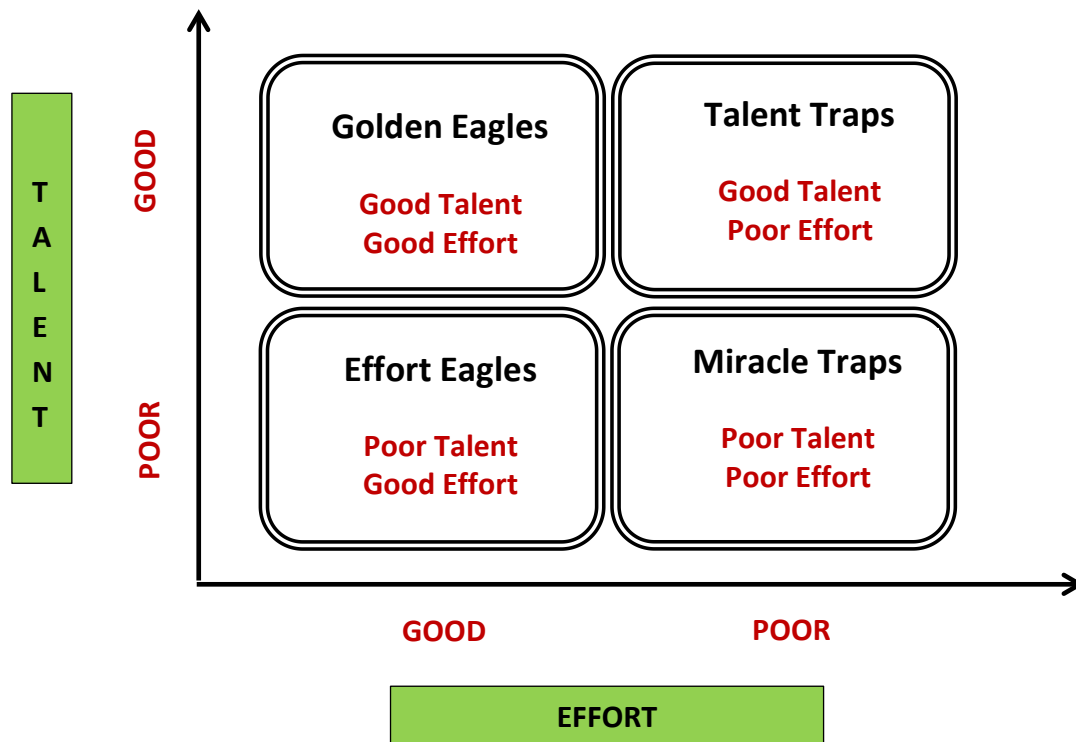


Figure 2: Effort Grid

A practice common to high performing organizations is to share leadership with employees (Source: Practice 2.12, Organizational Excellence Framework, 2010). This practice helps team members learn

about the leadership role (e.g. chair a meeting), enables them to have a new experience (e.g. lead an improvement initiative) and builds their commitment as they accept responsibility and accountability and feel a sense of ownership over the task at hand. This practice is beneficial for the organization too as it helps to develop the leadership skills of and showcases different leadership styles to team members.

3.5 Stage 5: Adjourning

In the **Adjourning** stage most of the team goals have been achieved and the focus at this stage is a gentle wrap-up. For the benefit of a learning organization, the **Adjourning** stage focuses on knowledge transfer for the current and future teams that will perform a similar function. Knowledge transfer should include documenting and sharing the:

- Team's purpose, mission, core values, long-term goals and short-term objectives
- Work processes
- Roles and responsibilities for the team members
- Team rules
- Communication agreement
- Lessons Learnt
- Surveys or studies reporting results or outcomes, including benchmarking of best practices

4.0 Conclusion

Tuckman presented a powerful model that every team leader should be familiar with prior to leading a team. Leaders of highly effective teams should plan ahead and prepare for each stage of the Tuckman Team Model. In doing so, team leaders who understand the typical stages of team development will be agile and able to respond efficiently and effectively to most scenarios that arise during the life cycle of a team project. This preparation will help the team to perform well and to achieve its mission, goals and objectives at the desired level of quality, at a lower cost and within the set timeframe.

About the Author:



Dr. Omer Tigani is a quality management and organizational excellence consultant and expert with more than 18 years of experience blended with academic and professional qualifications in the field from Canada, United States, United Kingdom, Belgium and Switzerland.

Utilizing various quality approaches (ISO standards, excellence models) and quality tools (six sigma), he has led organizations to design and establish robust management systems and to build organizational capabilities that enable the achievement of continually improving and sustainable performance.

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