

Comitted Teams: Three Steps to Inspiring Passion and Performance

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John Wiley & Sons
1 edition (19 April 2016)
Language: English
ISBN-10: 1119157404
ISBN-13: 978-1119157403.
Review DOI
10.1108/DLO-02-2017-0017

A practical guide to a perennial challenge for all executives – how to get the best out of each and every team. High performance is the Holy Grail for all managers. This book highlights the techniques that research and close observation prove work for all types of teams and in all contexts. The book focuses on the practices that truly matter.

All three authors teach at the Wharton School of Business. The book is based upon the experience of running the Executive Development Program at Wharton, especially the business simulation. The authors also draw on the wider literature on and research into teamwork.

The book comes in two parts. The first describes the three essential steps that produce high-performing teams (HPT) and the challenges that teams face when trying to achieve their full potential. Part 1 consists of four chapters. Part 2 applies the three steps in five common types of teams, for example, committees. Part 2 consists of five chapters. Examples are drawn from a wide range of organizations, including Microsoft, Amazon, IBM, Yahoo!, Apple, IKEA and Starbucks. There is a comprehensive set of notes that allows the reader to follow up

on any supporting research or literature. In addition, there are a few pages of resources that allows the reader to assess her own team context and apply the three essential steps for herself.

The introductory chapter naturally sets the scene. For many, teams produce much talk and little accountability. The authors point out that teams are everywhere, all the time. There is nothing remarkable in this. What is remarkable is identifying what makes the difference between ordinary teams and HPT. The authors note that all teams potentially suffer from *social loafing*. That is, as the number of people who get involved in a team increases, the less effort each member invests in the team tasks. HPTs overcome this tendency. The authors outline the basic model that the rest of the book describes in detail: the 3 × 3 Framework. The first numeral in this formula represents the three foundations of: clear goals, roles and norms. The second is a three-step process for resolving differences and deepening loyalty to the team mission: commit, check and close.

Chapter 1 covers the first step of *commit*. This commitment is to the foundational rules of behavior in a HPT – the rules that matter. There are three sets of rules covering: goals, roles and norms. The authors recommend that these be established using what they call a “structured conversation” to establish a team charter. Goals should cover both the task goals for the team *and* the developmental goals for each individual. Then, barriers to achieving such goals should be consciously anticipated

and *replacement strategies* crafted to overcome such obstacles.

Teams differ from “co-acting groups” that simply consist of “[. . .] a collection of people working in parallel”. Teams need roles, both technical and social. First, the technical expertise required has to be within the team. Second, the roles have to fit together to constitute a *team structure*. The actual structure depends upon two dimensions: one, the degree to which authority is either hierarchical or distributed across the team, and two, the degree to which the team’s working relationships are individualistic or interconnected. The combination of these two axes defines four *team cultural archetypes*: troops, believers, virtuosos or friends.

The last of the three sets of behavioral rules covers *norms*. As with the other rules, the authors focus on the rules that matter. In this case, the rules cover: conflict, communications and decisions. Finally, in this chapter the authors remind us that working on the three sets of foundational rules is not a one-off event. It is recurring “[. . .] because the nature of team culture is to be in constant flux”. This flux ensures that the team is adaptable. However, this adaptability means that misalignment can readily develop. To maintain high performance, an HPT relies upon perpetually addressing alignment and realignment.

Chapter 2 deals with *check*, that is the need to reflect and assess the degree of alignment. The authors introduce their concept of the *saying-doing gap*: “a disconnect between what a team says it is doing and what it is actually doing”. This arises for one of two reasons: first, because of conflicting team commitments; second, because of those commitments being out of line with the external environment.

Through situational awareness, observation and reflection any gap can be identified. Here, it is essential to create the space for problem solving. Rapport and trust are key.

Chapter 3 explains *close*: bridging the saying-doing gap.

“High-performing teamwork is based upon the interactive process of cultivating an ability to notice and respond to the seemingly insignificant details that matter most to closing gaps between goals and actions”. The authors advocate acting as a STAR to close the saying-doing gap. STAR stands for: be *specific*; take small steps toward improving; *alter* the environment; and be *realistic* optimists.

Chapter 4 outlines the seven common mistakes teams make. These are:

1. overemphasizing abstract goals;
2. underemphasizing roles;
3. undervaluing relationships;
4. making too many rules;
5. ignoring reflection;
6. failing to sell the change; and
7. putting procedure before process.

All of these come down to “[. . .] ignoring small data”. The authors describe several tools to overcome these common errors.

Chapter 5 analyzes the specific issues arising in virtual teams. Trust and commitment are particularly strained for such teams. The authors therefore recommend that rapport building should be a specific agenda item for team meetings. The team also needs to discuss and agree suitable tools for communication and collaboration.

Chapter 6 deals with startup teams. In such settings, the team does not “[. . .] really have time to think about “[. . .] team culture”, and yet “a culture

is going to form whether you like it or not". Hence, the authors suggest that startup teams need to *triage* culture. That is, the team needs to dedicate energy to team culture despite the time pressures faced. In the startup context, bright ideas are worthless; it is execution that makes the difference. So, startups are built more on perseverance and resilience than on products or solutions. Thus, hiring for talent and not for task should be the focus as roles change rapidly in this environment.

Chapter 7 describes teams dedicated to innovation. Innovation depends on discipline, sound interaction and learning. Through asking *kickstarter* questions teams can develop an innovative culture. The authors offer questions such as: "What does your team stand for?"; "How can we create work-based experiments to test and refine our ideas?"

Chapter 8 explains the distinctive features of leadership groups. Any error in these groups is critical because top teams infect the whole organization. Top teams are prone to two fatal errors: confirmation bias and groupthink. The authors point out that good teams make bad mistakes and "top teams that have performed well in the past are often derailed by common biases". To correct for these faults the authors recommend three questions that should be on each month's agenda:

Q1. Are we still having productive discussions?

Q2. Do we need to realign our priorities?

Q3. Have we become too isolated?

Chapter 9 examines the case of committees. One more committee may not seem like a big issue. However, a study calculated that in one organization, a single new committee cost the company 300,000 hours per year due to the extent employees had to feed the committee with reports, papers, analysis, sub-committees, etc. Committees can thus drain energy. To inspire passion to overcome this drain, the authors recommend that it is essential to get the right people in the room. Further, for each committee member, it is important that the leader identifies what is important for him and for his organization.

The final chapter deals with what the future holds for teams. The authors conclude that technical and cultural changes mean that even more time and energy will have to be spent on managing relationships.

An easy-to-read book that distills the essence of good teamwork.

Reference

Moussa, M., Boyer, M. and Newberry, D. (2016), *Committed Teams: Three Steps to Inspiring Passion and Performance*, Wiley, New York, NY.

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