

Wake Up and Smell the Coffee

The Imperative of Teams

by **Dr. Simon Mac Rory**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Around 90 percent of what organizations do is accomplished through collaborative effort. Indeed, teamwork is a quintessential and critical element of organizational life. However, some organizations do not seem to grasp that concept. They pay close attention to other organizational functions—for example, technology and human resources—but fail to develop a comprehensive strategy for effective teamwork. About 40 percent of teams are dysfunctional.

Wake Up and Smell the Coffee: The Imperative of Teams describes an approach to teamwork that, if implemented across the organization, can deliver up to a 20 percent improvement in effectiveness.

Simon Mac Rory, a specialist in team development who for more than twenty years has worked with senior staff leaders to help them discover how to have a truly high-performing team, wrote this book for team members, team leaders, and organizations. It puts the imperative of teams in context; discusses the characteristics, strengths, and challenges of the basic team types; and teaches leaders and team members alike how to have effective teams.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- What teams are and why they are crucial to business success.
- Why “giggers” and Gen Y make teams even more important.
- The four basic team types and their strengths and weaknesses.
- The twelve criteria for team effectiveness.

The Imperative of Teams

A team is “a group of people, normally fewer than ten, that needs to work together to achieve a common goal, normally with a single leader and where there is a high degree of interdependence between the team members to achieve the goal or goals.”

Organizations seem to think that teamwork happens by magic, to judge by their actions. If they didn't, they would have a corporate team strategy; a requirement that all teams reflect on *how* they do things, not just on *what* they do; and minimum standards for all teams.

Ninety percent of organizational output is achieved through teams. Thus, an organization with a defined strategy for teams and the commitment to see it through can drive a 10%–20% improvement in their effectiveness, productivity, and bottom line.

There are many benefits to taking teamwork more seriously and focusing on it:

- Efficiency
- Innovation and creativity
- Enhanced working environment
- Minimized risk
- Learning and talent

These benefits don't happen by putting a group of talented people together, calling them a team, and standing back. It takes hard work, strategy, an organization that enables teamwork, and a culture that recognizes the importance of teamwork.

Two recent workplace developments only make teams more important. The first of these is the gig economy. Though “giggers” are independent contractors, they matter as much for an employer brand as full-time employees do. They can seriously damage an employer brand by giving negative feedback to the company publicly. The most effective way to integrate giggers is through a culture of teaming and teamwork.

The other recent development enhancing the imperative of teams is the presence of Millennials (Generation Y), those born between 1981 and 2000 who now make up about 40 percent of the workforce. By 2025, that share will be 75 percent. Organizations must have a teaming culture to ensure that they fully connect and engage with this generation, which is demanding a changed workplace.

Organizations must commit resources and budget to design

that promotes agile decision-making and teamwork. What is needed is a corporate team strategy (CTS). A CTS is about understanding what, why, and how teams are deployed into the organization and how they are supported.

Many organizations and their leaders seem to believe many things about teams that are, in fact, myths:

Team development and teamwork are fun. No—they are hard work that require consistent effort and continuous attention. Work teams are nothing like sports teams.

Team building at offsite events takes time away from real work. This does not need to occur. Outdoor events don't help create an effective team because their structure is not like workplace norms. Team development occurs in normal work hours and is about giving time to reflection on how the team does things, rather than on what it does.

Team development is only for problem teams. In reality, every team, even the CEO and their team, can do better. Team development is for all teams, all the time.

Teams are there to support their leader. The converse is the reality: leaders are there to support their teams. Leaders can only be successful through the success of their team.

Harmony is essential and conflict is anathema. The truth is that conflict is essential and the source of innovation—it is how it is managed that can cause problems. Properly managing conflict requires rules of engagement, planning, and evaluation.

Organizations and senior leaders are champions of teamwork. Many of them pay lip service to teams but fail to have a genuine team strategy.

There are six hot topics, discussed below, that need to be considered, understood, and incorporated into any team strategy.

Team size. Size matters because it affects team effectiveness. The accepted range is three to twelve, and three to ten is preferable.

Psychological safety. It is critical that team members experience no negative consequences for speaking up, expressing new ideas, and openly seeking new ways to improve the team or the company.

Reflexivity. Teams need to take time as part of day-to-day work to engage in an intentional and structured process to think about and discuss how they do things. Reflexive teams are more innovative and more effective.

Team-based assessment. Performance appraisals once a year is rapidly being abandoned. Real-time feedback, little and often, is what is now required. Team assessment, integrated with individual assessment, is imperative.

Diversity and inclusion. Companies with effective diversity and inclusion strategies will outperform their competitors.

Morale and motivation in teams. Morale is the state of mind of a person or group with regard to the function or tasks at hand: *esprit de corps*. Motivation is more complex. Leaders should address the issues of morale and then create the conditions where motivation has a good chance to be exercised by team members.

The author and his colleagues at The ODD Company developed an effectiveness model, assessment tool, and methodology for teams to drive performance: the Team Diagnostic Profiler (TDP) model. Team members answer questions related to goals, leadership, relationships, process, climate, and structure on a seven-point scale and then—the most important part—discuss the outcomes. The TDP model can be directly linked to morale and motivation.

Four Types of Teams

The Traditional Team

About 60 percent of teams are traditional teams. These are teams that are functionally oriented and stable over time in which specialists work together and share a common operational language. The leadership is predetermined by the hierarchical structure of the organization and is often led by the most senior person on the team. The members work in close proximity to each other and develop a group memory and rapport that improves effectiveness and efficiency. Challenges can include that the most appropriate team leader is not in place and members who are promoted may be technically competent but not have people management skills. Such teams in different parts of the organization see problems and solutions through different time lenses because of the nature of their work; this must be understood and well managed. Team members may not understand the organization's big picture, which can lead to misunderstandings of priorities. The purpose of such teams within the larger organization and how they do things should be reviewed regularly. The traditional team has a tendency to be complacent and that must be monitored.

The Project Team

The project team, formed to accomplish—of course—a particular project, is problem-solving, innovative, change-orient-

ed, short-term, and often cross-functional. Its strengths include that they have a clear focus, deadlines, and milestones. Goals are well-defined. Challenges include the need for the team to clearly understand why its mission is important to the larger organization. Teams formed quickly and made up of people who don't know each other can cause confusion and inhibit progress. However, project teams are the norm for more and more employees. Like all teams, they need to take time out to reflect on how they are doing what they are doing.

The Virtual Team

Virtual team members are geographically dispersed and rely on communication technology in order to collaborate. Their strengths include access to more talent at the most competitive cost, less disruption to work time since travel is eliminated or minimized, reduced bureaucracy that creates greater productivity, and greater diversity, which fosters innovation. The challenges faced by these teams include unmanaged or unappreciated cultural diversity issues. Because of distance, trust between team members is more difficult to establish and maintain. A group memory doesn't develop naturally.

The Teaming Work Group

The teaming work group (TWG) is based around shifts, so it never comprises the same people two shifts running. It is a variant of the traditional team and has many of its strengths. But these teams present more challenges than any other team type. Maintaining standards of performance is more difficult. Leadership is difficult because team leaders never work with the same individuals. Error rates and mistakes are higher because TWGs don't have the same opportunity as other teams to learn from mistakes. It is very difficult to bring all members of the team together to discuss challenges and maintain team spirit because of the large size of the pool drawn from.

Six Factors of the TDP Model

Goal and Role Clarity

A team's goals must be clear to, and understood by, each team member. A process to track progress against goals must be put in place and followed.

Team members must know what is expected of them, how their work contributes to team goals, and how their performance will be evaluated. Role clarity is the team leader's responsibility and requires one-on-one and team discussions so that everyone understands others' roles.

Leadership Behavior and Participation

Team leaders should understand that leadership needs to be flexible and evolve with time. Team leaders must engage individually and in team meetings with the team. The leader's job is to get everything that impacts or inhibits the team's performance out of the way. The team leader should embrace this inverted hierarchy—the leader at the bottom, supporting the team.

All team members must participate—be engaged and expressive—for the team to succeed. Psychological safety is crucial to participation. The leader should create the conditions for it, be sure every team member gets equal air time, and, if someone is not participating, understand why.

Commitment and Communication

Team members' commitment to the team and each other can be evidenced by the degree to which they feel they can depend on each other. Achieving a level of trust and a sense of reliability within a team takes time and requires lots of consistent good practices.

Honest communication occurs when team members feel free to say what they think, believe they are being listened to and heeded, are not punished for reporting bad news, and have regular forums for open information exchange. Good communication drives enthusiasm and thus morale.

Planning and Evaluation

Teams can be addicted to action to move toward the goal, which can undermine the need to plan. Over-planning can also occur. Inappropriate planning causes unnecessary frustration, inferior work, re-working, confusion, unseen risks, customer dissatisfaction, and damaged team or team leader reputation.

Evaluation requires the team to evaluate what is being done, why it is being done, and how it is being done. Leaders should not call out poor performers in front of their peers; doing so creates an unhealthy environment and discourages team members from participating in the evaluation process.

Recognition and Conflict

Recognition of the positive contributions of team members should be publicly recognized. But bad and average performance also need to be recognized and dealt with. Better performers are often overloaded and poorer performers underutilized. This has negative consequences if it is ongoing. It is unfair to poor performers to not be supported to improve and they may not understand they need to improve or what they need to improve.

Whether conflict is harmful or beneficial is due to how it is dealt with. When managed poorly, it can lead to discord, strife, stress, anxiety, and reduced productivity. When managed well, it can have positive outcomes that lead to increased productivity, more efficient processes, or product and service innovation.

Composition and Organization

Having a well-balanced team requires knowing the strengths of each member and plugging the gaps. In teams, as in architecture, form follows function. Function refers to the goals or purpose of the team; form, to the number of members and their skills and abilities.

There is no one-size-fits-all way for teams to be organized. The team should discuss the most appropriate management practices for their situation, their goals and tasks, and their interdependencies.



Dr. Simon Mac Rory is a team development specialist. He works with senior leaders to help them discover that edge to become truly high performing. He founded the ODD Company in 2011 to deliver TDP (a cloud-based team development tool and methodology) to the international markets. He received his doctoral degree from Nottingham Trent University for his work on the application of generic frameworks in organization development and is a visiting research fellow at NBS.

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