



Managing team performance

Nevin Stewart and **Joe Wainwright** outline their new approach to developing teams

Today's business landscape is all about versatility, productivity and teamwork.

Modern teams are not hierarchical; they do not rely solely on job titles or even skill sets to define roles and responsibilities but demand high levels of responsibility and emotional intelligence to work well.

In a complex world in which alliances, collaboration, mergers and multidisciplinary, short-term project teams are the norm, new methods are needed to develop, manage and measure the performance of the whole team, not just that of the individual members.

Individuals find it harder to develop if they are stereotyped in too rigid a team role for too long

A new approach is required to creating and sustaining teams, which is robust, fast-paced and proactive, enabling new and existing teams to get to the heart of the issues and identify their bespoke development needs quickly.

The team challenge today

Teamwork is widely acknowledged to be more important than ever for sustainability and growth, but what exactly is a team in modern organisational terms?

A team can be defined as a group of people who co-operate on a temporary or permanent basis to achieve an objective¹. But formats once thought of as fundamental to the nature of a team – such as a shared office or traditional management hierarchy – are being eroded and replaced with new models. These days, teams come in all shapes and sizes, with diverse memberships. They are fluid; they can be temporary; they may fluctuate, diminish, grow or be amalgamated.

As L&D specialists working with a wide variety of teams in different sectors, we have come to understand that today's modern teams need more than a one-off team-building event to resolve

complex issues and deliver sustainable results for their organisation.

Traditional team development solutions have focused on personality types and associated behaviours, and worked from the assumption that team performance would be enhanced if individuals were able to value and work with difference. We observed that even teams who are interpersonally skilled and appreciative of each other's strengths and capabilities may not always perform well. In some cases, capable, compatible, balanced, well-behaved people are struggling to get the really good team results they deserve.

Consequently we started to look at what antecedents enable top-notch team performance.

We began with a critique of existing theories and established solutions and went on to develop our own methodology that would enable any team, whatever its shape, size and make-up, to pinpoint and prioritise its development needs, allowing it to accelerate towards top-notch performance.

Evolving the theory

The trusted theory and methodologies of the past can be divided into categories according to their approach (Table 1 right). Each methodology looks at one part of the picture: what people are doing (individual competencies), how they are doing it (behaviours) or why they are doing it (culture).

A review of some of the more recent experiential research into teaming behaviours confirmed that they too were working from a similar basis to analyse just one aspect of the team functionality.

Individual competencies and behaviour theories In the past, management methodologies traditionally looked at a team as a group of individuals who bring differing skill sets, strengths and weaknesses, personality types and approaches to the table.

Since Carl Jung², management theorists have been developing psychometric tests to measure personality types and traits.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator assessment was designed to measure psychological preferences in how people perceive the world and make decisions³. In the 1970s, Dr Meredith Belbin worked on team roles⁴; the latest version of his work lists nine: *plant, resource-investigator, co-ordinator, shaper, monitor-evaluator, team worker, implementer, completer* and *specialist*⁵.

Subsequently Margerison and McCann described the need for complementary skills within a team as a "team management wheel"⁶. They identified eight skills: *advising, innovating, promoting, developing, organising, producing, inspecting* and *maintaining*. Interestingly, there was a ninth skill, 'linking',

identified as being essential for the team to work together effectively, suggesting that one of the team members should perform this function in addition to their main role.

This body of work has been recognised as highly valuable and has been much employed over the years. However, it has also been criticised →

Table 1

Expert View	Key Messages	Focus	Target
Carl Jung 1923	Founded analytical psychology with work on identification of personality types	Behavioural	Individual
Myers-Briggs Type Indicator	Measures psychological preferences in how people perceive the world and make decisions	Behavioural	Individual
Bruce Tuckman 1965	Maintains that the forming/norming/storming/performing phases of development are necessary and inevitable	Culture	Structural
Occupational Competency - McClelland 1973	Focuses on characteristics that distinguish outstanding from typical performance in a given job or role.	Behavioural	Individual
Belbin Team Roles 1981	Identifies personal behavioural strengths and weaknesses in the workplace	Behavioural	Individual
Peter Drucker	Employees are assets and not liabilities; people are an organisation's most valuable resource	Culture	Structural
Margerison & McCann	Puts complementary skills on a 'team management wheel' with linking skills at the centre	Behavioural	Individual
Lumina Spark – Stewart Desson 2009	Measures the individual's traits on a continuum – does not 'force the choice'	Behavioural	Individual
Andy C Edmondson 2012	Scoping, structuring and sorting tasks leads to successful 'teaming' even in the most widely distributed and fluid teams	Culture	Structural
Alex Pentland 2012	Patterns of communication are crucial to the performance of a team	Behavioural	Individual



What exactly is a team in modern organisational terms?

for its tendency to put individuals into boxes. In reality, most of us embrace a range of skills and personality traits in varying degrees and are far more capable than the tools suggests.

Team development Bruce Tuckman's *'forming, storming, norming, performing'* model (1965) maintained that every team must move through these phases in order to deliver its best results. His description of the *performing* stage is one of a highly functional team, able to address issues and solve problems as they arise, and, as a result, able to work together in a highly productive way.

Tuckman's work has been widely used in developing 'fixed' teams, such as a sales team or customer service department, but could be said to be not so well suited to more fluid environments.

We have also noted in our work that fixed teams can become staid and unimaginative if they are together too long. They may form bad habits and their ability to innovate may be dimmed by familiarity or skewed by hierarchy. Individuals find it harder to develop if they are stereotyped in too rigid a team role for too long.

These psychometrics and approaches and variations of them are still widely used in organisational management today, although critics argue that it leads to an over-emphasis on achieving targets, an assumption that valuing and leveraging differences will resolve all the teamwork challenges and an under-emphasis of complexity, working practices and context.

Embracing paradox More recent research and developments attempt to acknowledge complexity. For example, Stewart Desson, a humanistic psychologist working at the University of Westminster's Business Psychology Centre, developed the Lumina Spark model in 2009. Unlike the earlier work, this is an approach to psychometric testing that does not 'force the choice' but instead measures the individual's traits on a continuum with a Likert scale. In this way, people are acknowledged to differ in the *quantity* of a quality they possess, and may be allowed to claim qualities at both ends of a polarity.

Communication is key Alex 'Sandy' Pentland, of MIT's Human Dynamics Laboratory, has done

some work recently looking at the chemistry of high performing groups. He shows how patterns of communication are crucial to the performance of a team. In other words, he maintains that how teams communicate is more important to their success than what they are saying.

In the MIT study, data collected by wearable electronic sensors, which capture people's tone of voice and body language, showed highly consistent patterns of communication associated with productive teams, regardless of what kind of work they were doing. The fact that the data did not take into account the substance of the conversation led Pentland and his colleagues to conclude that it is the *pattern* of communication that matters more than any other factor, such as skill, intelligence, experience and so on.

Interestingly, the study came up with a profile of the 'ideal' team player as someone who circulates widely, engages others in short, high-energy conversations and who actively listens to others.

These findings fit well with our long-standing observations that those people who show high levels of emotional intelligence and have an ability to engage in high quality conversations do well in today's complex and fast-moving team environment.

A new methodology

Without the traditional solid structures of yesteryear, teams now have to take responsibility

Case Study 1

This team of senior professionals work in a large commercial organisation. They were brought together from different departments and tasked with implementing a new improvement initiative.

The team members were all capable and intelligent. As we worked through the traditional approaches, we saw that the team was well balanced in the mix of skills and personality types represented. They had good behaviours, got on well and communicated well with each other. And yet, their performance as a team was still not as high as it should have been.

Working more closely with this group, we discovered that they lacked clarity about what their roles and responsibilities were in the team. Understanding that this was where the problem lay was a breakthrough for this team. They went on to address the issue and developed a whole new culture of accountability that improved their performance dramatically and, ultimately, filtered through the whole organisation.

Case Study 2

This team of scientists worked in a highly pressured and fast-expanding research and development unit. Each was involved in valuable work but, as a team, they lacked an identity and shared purpose. As a result, they did not have the confidence to work together to find creative solutions.

When the team came together to develop a better focus and mutual understanding, they made significant improvements in productivity.

for the entire picture of what, how and why they do what they do. Where hierarchies and work patterns might have provided a relatively constant context in the past, this is no longer reliably the case. Navigating politics, dealing with ambiguity, diminishing resources, handling emotions and 'managing upwards' are all key elements of teamwork today.

In this environment, we find that the team must take on a much greater level of responsibility for creating its own identity, context, recognition, purpose, governance, communication structures and behavioural norms if it is to execute plans and deliver results. Accordingly, we concluded that to focus only on personal behaviours is too narrow, and that understanding the stages of team development helps but is not enough to guarantee top-notch performance. If any of the above aspects is not in place, the team is out of balance and will find it hard to perform really well.

For example, in a world in which roles and responsibilities are not fixed or pre-determined from on high, the team has to be able to allocate and manage them quickly and effectively (Case Study 1 left).

Similarly, if members of the team do not share the same identity or purpose, they are likely to find themselves pulling in different directions at some point. Unless they work out why this is and address it, they are unlikely to perform at their team best (Case Study 2 above).

The Stratagem Development Methodology for Teams (SDMt) identifies eight fundamental aspects that enable top-notch performance (Figure 1 overleaf):

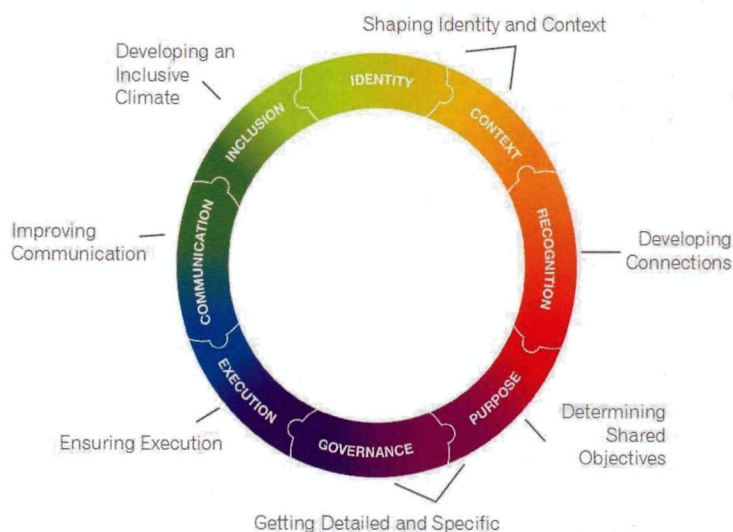
1 team inclusion Our observations showed us that teamwork requires rounded, emotionally intelligent players with the skills and expertise to take on team roles. In addition, they need the ability to adapt their behaviour and communication for their audience if they are to get heard by each other, peers and their bosses.

References

- 1 CIPD *Team working factsheet* (2010) www.cipd.co.uk
- 2 Jung C *Psychological Types* (1923)
- 3 The Myers Briggs Foundation www.myersbriggs.org
- 4 Belbin R M *Team Roles at Work* (1993)
- 5 Belbin R M *Management teams: why they succeed or fail* (2004)
- 6 TMSDI Margerison & McCann and the *Team Management Wheel* www.tmsdi.com



Fig 1: The Stratagem Development Methodology for Teams identifies eight fundamental aspects that enable top-notch performance.



Now more than ever, they need the emotional intelligence, (self-awareness, self-regulation, social savvy and organisational awareness) to empathise, collaborate and engage in dialogue. This is where psychometrics can help raise self-awareness and create insight into how to value and leverage differences

- 2 **team identity** Individuals often find themselves in teams as a result of structural change or a new organisational initiative. They don't feel a sense of connection or belonging and often distance themselves in order to cope with the change. Developing a brand and a team unique selling point is essential to promote synergy and staying power, and to enable all to embrace change
- 3 **team communication** Experience has taught us that cross-functional teams often have competing time pressures and priorities and need to make an explicit commitment upfront. Agreeing how you will work together, share information and organise team meetings really clarifies behavioural boundaries and fosters commitment, shared effort and interdependent working
- 4 **team context** Localising the organisational vision and enabling the team to clarify how they contribute to the overall business success is highly motivational when leading and developing team performance. Creating a shared vision of success, being open to ideas

and experimentation, enables a team to explore opportunities and put forward creative solutions.

- 5 **team recognition** To get things done, the team will need to draw on other departments and people. Successful teams take the initiative in developing and maintaining a wide range of internal and external networks and proactively managing their profile. They celebrate success and acknowledge individual and team achievements
- 6 **team purpose** The celebrated management guru Peter Drucker drew attention to the need for individuals to have clear, integrated objectives so that each person could see where they fitted into the team and everyone could pull in the same direction. Creating shared team goals and a common purpose is important. Dialogue is needed to clarify boundaries and enable the team to make and own decisions

- 7 **team governance** Every team is part of a bigger organisation and needs to position its contribution and be clear about reporting lines. If there is confusion about decisionmaking boundaries, roles or reporting lines, it can have a negative impact on performance as the team begins to plan their work and allocate tasks. Belbin's Team Role Theory and the development of high levels of emotional intelligence can be used to enable constructive dialogue around both sensitive resource issues and/or organisational politics

- 8 **team execution** Sometimes organisational process can be a disabling influence. Every team needs to be able to get things done so, if the team is not delivering, it is essential to identify the exact reason why. If it turns out to be a fault with the fish tank rather than the fish, the team needs to be enabled to put forward a case for change or to agree how to swim around it.

Conclusion

Like people, each team has its own unique 'personality', which manifests itself in preferred ways of working, communicating, interacting and processing. Team personalities exist in the context of their organisational structures and cultures.

By joining up the *who*, *why* and *what* aspects of team operation, SDMt enables the rich communications and precise interventions that provide a much-needed solid basis for the development of today's fluid professional teams. **TJ**

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