

How to build a team you'd like to be in

Andrew Price

The territory

- Teams – what and why?
- Innovative teams; the leadership challenge
- How teams learn and avoid learning
- Team leadership
- Organisational culture and teams
- How teams talk; balancing dialogue with discussion
- Team norms

Q. When is a team not a team?

A. When it's a group

- Teams tend to have a number of common features, a group is any collection of people who perceive themselves to be a group
- Effective teams can be powerful and creative, but they aren't the answer to every question and they rarely just happen

What makes an effective (true) team

The myth: it's all about chemistry. If you're in a good team it's a bonus

The reality: great teams are built. Chemistry might help but there are clear principles underpinning great teams

The puzzle: In high performing teams in e.g. sport and armed forces, teamwork is worked at. Why do we think that in business it'll just happen?

What makes an effective (true) team?

- Michael West studied over 400 health care teams in the UK
- Ruth Wageman studied 120 senior teams around the world
- They, and many others, found that effective teams had similar characteristics

What makes an effective (true) team

- **Clear, shared, compelling direction.** The team must have a challenging task that matters
- **Clear membership and clear roles.** Wageman found that most teams *thought* the team had clear boundaries but members disagreed about who was on the team
- **Interdependence.** Members need to interact to achieve goals

What makes an effective (true) team

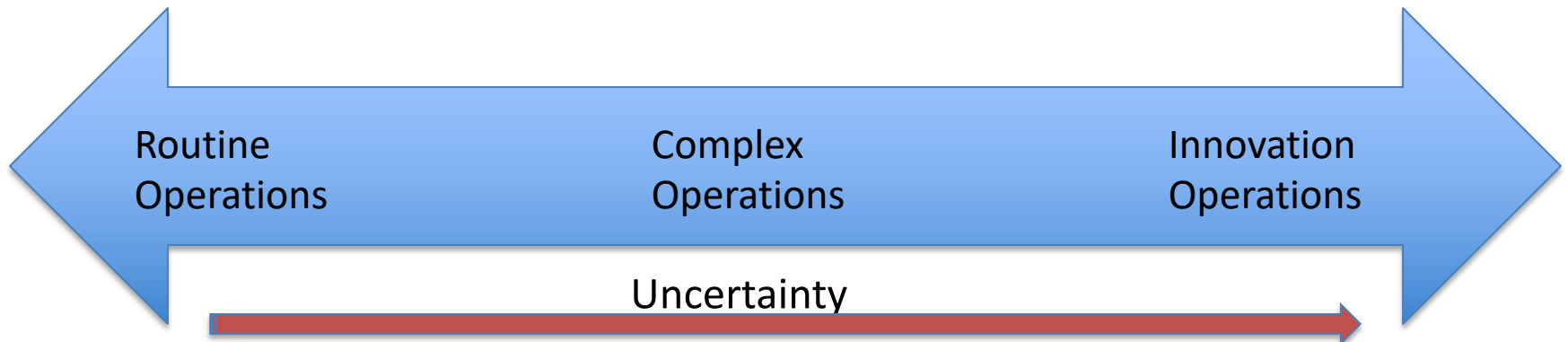
- **The team's structure helps rather than hinders.** Right size, right people, effective meetings, helpful norms
- **Supportive organisational context.** Team rewards, adequate information
- **Availability of coaching.** Intervening in team processes in order to improve them - by team leader and/or external coach

Benefits of true teams in healthcare

(West et al, 2002)

- True teams provide higher quality care and produce more innovations
- Members of true teams have lower stress levels
- **Good**, regular meetings contribute to innovation and improvement
- Clear leadership contributes to effective team processes, quality of patient care and innovation
- There was a significant relationship between the percentage of hospital staff in “true” teams and patient mortality

But...



- Teams operate in a variety of settings as illustrated by the Process Knowledge Spectrum (Edmonson, 2012). Each requires a different emphasis for team leadership and learning.
- “Knowledge” refers to how much mature knowledge we have about how to achieve a desired result.
- At one end is high volume repetitive work such as in call centres or assembly plants.
- At the other end is pioneering research and discovery such as curing a disease or developing new, greener vehicles.
- In the middle are complex operations such as a tertiary care hospital where some knowledge is mature (e.g. taking bloods) but some is unknown or in flux, such as dealing with a rare disease or an unexpected mix of patients

Routine Operations	Complex Operations	Innovation Operations
Well developed process knowledge is codified and applied	Mature process knowledge about some situations while others are unpredictable	There is no blueprint
Learning emphasis is on improvement	Learning emphasis is on problem solving	Learning emphasis on innovation and discovery
Process goal – reduce variance		Process goal: use variance to analyse and improve
Learning before doing		Learning through doing
Performance measurement: Did we do it right?		Performance measurement: Did we learn?
Employee discretion: select among defined options		Employee discretion: Experiment through trial and error
Willingness to conform		Willingness to experiment, make and learn from mistakes

Organising to innovate; the leadership challenges

- Generally, principles of good teams still apply: e.g. clear goals, effective meetings, interdependence, adequate information etc.
- But innovation teams need leadership which encourages discovery and learning, tolerates risk and failure and can work with porous boundaries and changing roles
- Main barrier is a top-down, hierarchical mindset where trust, respect and learning are inhibited
- Speaking up is critical; not easy in most organisations
- Reflection and learning must become an understood and familiar team process

Team leadership style

- Ambidextrous leadership is best for innovative teams (Zacher and Rosing, 2013. Research with 33 architect teams). Ambidextrous leadership can switch between exploration (opening behaviours) and exploitation (closing behaviours), rather than consistently favouring one or the other.

The cost of team failure



Poor teamwork leads to...

- Victimisation, humiliation, isolation
- Time wasting
- Project failure
- Two inquiries into paediatric heart surgery (Bristol 2001, Oxford 2010) highlighted poor teamwork as a factor in high child mortality.
“Effective teamwork did not always exist at the BRI....The point is that everyone just carried on”

The cost of team failure

- A review into 45 avoidable baby deaths in found “failures in team working” and squabbling between midwives, obstetricians, paediatricians and other groups of staff which involved “factionalism, lack of mutual trust and ... bullying”. (Kirkup Report on East Kent Hospitals University Foundation Trust, October 2022)

If it's not working

- Don't just carry on! The willingness to intervene, break patterns, take risks is the critical difference between mere seniority and leadership (Heifetz and Linsky)
- Creating the conditions for effectiveness (roles, goals, membership, meetings, coaching etc.) will require hard decisions
- Focusing on teamwork as well as taskwork

Think about your team – teamleaders' checklist

Purpose	• Is team purpose clear, compelling and shared? (n.b. purpose vs activity) • What sort of team is it? (e.g. consulting, briefing, decision making, co-ordinating) • Balance between Execution and Innovation • Is a team the right answer to the question?
People	• Is membership bounded, stable and not too big (6-8?) • Do you have the right people, bringing the right skills, and are their roles clear? • Is leadership clear? – defining direction, bringing hope, encouraging reflection and learning, coaching the team
Processes	• Are meetings purposeful and productive? • Can the team learn and face up to mistakes? • Does the whole team, as well as individual members, get feedback on performance?

—• HOGWARTS •—

DEFENCE
AGAINST THE
DARK
ARTS

—•••••—

© 2007 POTTER characters, names and related indicia are TM & © Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.
(P. 16)

Defences against learning

- Team learning involves behaviour change and may challenge deeply held assumptions. This is hard and many prefer to avoid it. Here's how to avoid learning!
 - The enemy is out there! Blaming is easier than learning (it's all IT's/HQ's/Finance's fault)
 - The illusion of taking charge. Initiate activity without reflection. Do a SWOT! Brainstorm! Call in consultants!
 - Intimidate people. Learning often involves admitting mistakes. Intimidated people don't do this!

...and if you do want to learn!

- Encourage error reporting. Better performing teams reported more, not less, mistakes (Edmondson, 1999, research with 51 manufacturing teams)
- Encourage “team psychological safety” (no-one will punish me for speaking up) which is different to “team cohesiveness” which can inhibit disagreement and challenge
- Wooley et al (2010) Found that social sensitivity and turn taking was a better predictor of team performance than average IQ. Smart people can make poor teams, averagely intelligent people can make good teams.

...and if you do want to learn

- Model a learning approach. Admit your own fallibility. Listen carefully to other's contributions
- Familiarise the team with tools and processes to encourage reflection (e.g. fishbone diagram, action learning)
- Reward transparency and avoid blame

Learning conversations

- We use dialogue and discussion interchangeably but they are different (Senge, 1990)
 - Dialogue (Greek; dia-logos, through word)
 - Discussion (Latin; discutere, strike asunder, break up)
- Reflecting ambidextrous leadership, one is about opening a subject up, the other is about closing it down
- Effective teams can do both, switching between them as required

Dialogue	Discussion
To broaden or enhance understanding of an issue	To reach a judgment or decision regarding an issue
Divergent	Convergent
Build, explore, develop ideas, generate options	Analyse, test, scrutinise, eliminate options
Suspend judgment	Reach conclusions
Collaborative	Competitive
Listen in order to learn	Listen in order to analyse and find weaknesses

- The two modes cannot be combined. The hard-headed analysis needed for discussion would inhibit the exploratory, speculative conversation needed for dialogue
- Most teams seem to function mainly in discussion mode. This will limit learning and innovation
- Dialogue requires practice and discipline. There must be a conscious (albeit temporary) suspension of judgment

Team norms

- All teams will have norms (shared expectations about behaviour). They are powerful. The question is are they helpful? e.g. If late arrivals go unchallenged, late starts might become the norm
- Performance can be improved by establishing agreed norms - and sticking to them rigorously. They must define what is wanted – and not wanted – from the team

Extracts from Applebee's team norms

These took two days to agree, described by the CEO as “the two most painful days of my life”

- **Build trust.** Honesty and integrity, being loyal to and defending others – even when they aren't present – honouring commitments, no matter how small, keeping no secrets, respecting other's interests and questions about your area (no protecting of one's turf)
- **Be decisive.** Taking measured risks, being innovative, admitting mistakes
- **Hold great meetings.** Meetings should be well planned (with an agenda), start and end on time, and involve all attendees. Only one person should speak at a time. No sidebar conversations. Next steps and accountabilities should be summarised at the meeting's close
- **Have fun.** Life is short

Teams and organisational culture

Using Handy's "Gods of Management" model

- Zeus (all powerful boss) cultures are individualistic, command and control oriented and competitive. Collaboration may be difficult.
- Apollo (bureaucratic) cultures respect position more than skills. Team membership depends on place in the hierarchy. Avoiding blame can be more important than success.
- Athena (task or matrix) cultures respect skills more than hierarchy. Team is the way they do business.
- Dionysus (Existential) cultures will resist corporacy or team accountability. An individualistic culture which struggles to pull together except when all are under threat

Conclusion

- Teams can be much more than the sum of their parts, but only if you are prepared to work at it and face difficult conversations
- They require regular maintenance. What was clear and agreed last year may be fuzzy or forgotten this year
- Effective teams don't just happen. They need leaders prepared to intervene and to model the behaviours they want to see