



# The DNA of Teams

Many professionals today are asked to work in a team environment. The quality of teamwork has always been important to a team's success. What causes some teams to function so effectively and others to suffer so thoroughly?

As we know teams are made up of people. This singular characteristic indelibly makes each team unique. In the same vein, the qualities each person brings to the team and the chemistry between the team members serves as the foundation for what the team will later accomplish.

## **DIVERSITY AND DIRECTION**

Teams may be measured on the degree of diversity found among its members. Do not underestimate the value of this differentiating team characteristic. Diversity sets the limits for team success. Darwin pioneered the notion that biological diversity was the driver of species survival. In his theory diversity was seen as a plus. The notion is akin to the folk wisdom of "don't put all your eggs in one basket."

Diversity, as it is meant here, is not the commonly described dimensions of diversity such as age, sex, or ethnicity. It has more to do with differences in people's natural thinking and acting styles. There are a number of practical models available to determine the extent to which the individuals on a team are similar or different. Three of the more useful models describing individual differences are measured by: the Personal Profile System (DiSC); Allen Fahden's "Strong Suit Profile," and the (HBDI) Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument.

All of these models recognize the value of having diversity among the way team members think, behave and relate to each other. Balancing this diversity is seen as the key to success. Over dominance of any one style or mode of operation leads to an over-abundance of some critical talents and the lack of others.

The more a team functions in a rich, changing, and uncertain environment, the higher the need to have team members representing a richer set of diverse thinking and behaving styles.

Diversity, the more you have of it, the more it needs to be managed. The more people see, feel, and act differently, the more the need will exist to somehow integrate these attributes. A beginning for this needed integration comes from the team having a shared purpose or direction. Having a common direction is a binding force, like a gravitational field, pulling the diversity of the team into alignment.

When teams first form, the most useful activity they can engage in is the development of a team charter. A good charter lays out a direction, a set of norms, and generally expected accountabilities.

## **NORMS AND NETWORK**

A wise model for team development states that teams progress through four stages: forming, storming, norming, and performing. The sooner a team "norms" the sooner it can settle down to performing.

Norms are behavioral expectations. If you want to know what a team's norms are simply watch what gets rewarded and what gets punished. What gets rewarded is behavior that is valued and expected. Behavior that gets punished violates team norms. It is interesting to note that teams cannot avoid developing functioning norms. They are a natural byproduct of people interacting in groups.



If norms are inevitable, what is key is the development of healthy, positive norms versus norms that interfere with team success. In many teams it is not a matter of possessing good or bad norms. Teams develop both. Some contribute to the team's success, some retard it. More effective teams spend the time to clearly define their norms as part of the chartering process.

The norms that do exist are transmitted via the social network. New members joining a team learn them from others. Who talks with whom tells a lot about the nature of the team. Who gets what verbal messages, e-mails?

Similar to the complexity of neural pathways in the brain or the internet, the complexity of networked pathways in the team leave a telltale imprint. Patterns of communication become institutionalized. Identical to the characteristic of diversity in the team, the complexity of the network should match the complexity of the environment in which the team has to operate. The more complex the issues and tasks performed by the team, the more the team's network should be described as multi-channeled, ubiquitous, fast.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

Just as all teams have norms, all team members contribute something to the team. Everyone plays a role. A genuine attribute of effective teams is the high level of productive energy by each individual. Team members depend on each other and support each other.

For instance, all team members take on the responsibility of enforcing the team charter, its direction and norms. There is no "passing the buck" to others. Ineffective teams possess a more limited set of accountabilities. Individual team members all may feel they are doing their part, or fair share. Unfortunately, the collective effort belies this belief. The team under performs.

When you combine the level of diversity inherent in the team, the direction taken, the set of norms adopted, the network (patterns of communication) that gets hard-wired, and individual accountability of each team members you have the structure that has a profound effect on team performance.

Accomplishment is the final component of the team's DNA. It is the team's history, its track record of success. Past and current success set the stage for future success. Momentum is a valuable thing. There is great satisfaction being part of something special. Equally, it can be very de-motivating to be part of an ongoing losing effort. New teams are fragile. Getting off to a winning start can stimulate a team to put out the extra effort to stay a winner.

### **ASSESSING THE TEAM'S DNA**

No one element of the team's DNA is any more important than any other element. It is the combination of elements that determines the upper and lower limits the team may achieve. What is important for a team to do, whether in its infancy or maturity, is to assess its DNA.

Does the team have the necessary diversity to succeed? Is the existing diversity being used properly? Is the direction the team is taking today appropriate? Is it clearly understood?

What are the norms operating in the team? Do they need modification? How is the network functioning? Where do these patterns need to be modified?

Who is acting accountable for the team's success? Any need for change? What successes have the team accomplished of late? How are these successes being rewarded?



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