

# High Performance Teams: Separating Truth from Myth

## Part 2: The REAL Purpose of Team Development

By Mark Samuel

(Editor's note: Part 1 of this article addressed the fundamentals of teamwork, which form the basis of the first three Team Principles. Part 2 addresses team building and team development.)

In organizations, we tend to focus on the individual. When an employee's performance drops off, we send them to a skill-building course rather than focusing on the team's functioning. Organizations that apply Total Quality will set up a task force to study the problem, rather than get the team to work out their functioning breakdowns as a group and examine their processes or their roles and relationships. Likewise, a baseball team will perform poorly if the individual players don't meet after each game or practice to review their functioning as a team.

Thus, Principle #4 addresses the purpose of team development:

### **Team Principle #4**

The purpose of team development is for improving and optimizing the team's operational functioning, in order to maximize the team's measurable results.

If a team improves relationships or communication, but their team functioning doesn't significantly improve, the team development effort may have been a waste of time. Also, if two members of a team are in conflict or disagreement, and their mutual need to communicate impacts their team functioning, they won't be performing at an optimal level to ensure team success. Their functional relationship in terms of their functioning must be developed and improved, regardless of how they may feel about each other. Of course, teams that create trust and respect for each other tend to perform at a higher level.

I can't tell you the number of times I've been asked for a team building program by a client who was expecting a training program that would automatically create an effective team or magically transform their organization into a team-based culture. Optimizing team functioning cannot be done by any stand-alone team building program.

Whether you use a "ropes" course, a team or skill-building program, or even a team systems approach, a team can only be formed with these types of programs; teams cannot be optimized using such programs alone. Since our goal is optimal functioning, these programs, while important, can only have a short-term impact. This would be like a group of baseball players or musicians who get together once, discuss how they will operate as a team by going over their plays or parts, and then separate until the game or concert. This is a foolish approach that many organizations spend thousands of dollars supporting. While there is an important role for such programs, there is never a single, one-shot solution for developing effective teams. Therefore...

## **Team Principle #5**

Team development is not an event or retreat, but an on-going process of measuring, reviewing, changing (optimizing), and practicing team-player functioning (relationships, processes and performance) in order to optimize the team's quality output.

Just as pitchers and catchers have their own practice, infielders have their own practice and outfielders have their own practice, organizations must break their teams up into combinations of people who must work together to produce an outcome. It is not only appropriate for an intact team, project team or a task force to function effectively as a team; it is necessary for any two or more people, who are linked either by their performance or need to communicate, to review their linkages and streamline their involvement. As we can see, team development has less to do with formal teams than with the natural functioning and linkages of people in the organization.

However, as with our baseball team, the infielders, outfielders, pitchers and catchers must all come together at the end of their practice to review their overall functioning as a unit. Likewise, sections of an orchestra (strings, percussion, horns, etc.) will all practice separately, and then come together to practice as a whole. Once a team of professional players is assembled and assigned positions, their coaches (or musical directors) are expected to schedule routine practices to maximize their performance. Yet, how often do managers and leaders have their organizational teams practice and review to ensure that optimal performance is achieved?

Since optimizing a team's functioning is an on-going process, it is essential that a system be created that includes regular practice. Most athletic teams and music groups have a routine for practice or rehearsal, which typically begins with a review of the previous performance, warm-up for today's practice, separate drills to focus on weak spots, and team practice as a whole to put it all together. This leads us to the 6th Principle:

## **Team Principle #6**

Organizational teams need a consistent system to optimize their functioning and their performance, which includes:

1. Measurement of performance and functional outcomes
2. Identification of breakdowns or weaknesses
3. Review of agreements and processes
4. Commitment to new actions.

Notice that all five of these points are action-oriented, not information-oriented. As I meet with top performers and top-performing teams, the most prominent similarity is that they all have a method for measuring their outcomes, and then use this information to streamline their functioning and thus improve subsequent results.

Measurement, however should never be confused with the outcomes; measurements are only indicators, and they sometimes need to be changed in order to more accurately reflect performance. For instance, twenty years ago we used the ration of body weight to height to measure physical fitness, whereas today we regard the percent of body fat to be a more accurate measure.

While team development is an on-going process of improvement, the system for improving team performance must be set up for the team to follow. Many team building programs motivate people towards teams or give them teaming skills, but the results are generally not sustained consistently, primarily due to the absence of a system for the team to continually review breakdowns and refine their team functioning.

### **Team Principle #7**

When implementing a team program, be sure that the program provides the team with a personalized system which sustains their team development effort and which also fits into the constraints of their working environment.

While providing a team system is essential, it is not enough to make a team effective. The system must be followed regularly and consistently in order to be successful.

In addition, most athletic teams have a variety of coaches, but in organizations this is not always possible. It is critical that a team have at least one qualified coach who assists the team and tracks their performance and their improvement efforts every three to six months, similar to the practice of many professional athletes who hire a personal trainer in addition to their coach. Again, what would the consequences be for an athletic team and its coach (leader or manager) if they didn't practice or didn't improve their performance and functioning? Someone would be let go; it's simply that important.