

Team questions

When forming a new team what can you expect?

All teams start as a group of individuals. And they bring with them the hopes, expectations and concerns of any disparate group of individuals. This will include both good and bad experiences that they have had in the past. This first stage is important as this is when they will form their first impressions, of each other, of the situations, of you as their leader. They will be eager with high expectations, and some anxiety. They will also be in the position of wanting to test the situation and central figure. They will want to check out their own status against each other and want to find a place for themselves in the pecking order and establish themselves.

A good example might be to look at the new government formed last year. Initially there was considerable uncertainty about how they might work together, both at a party level, but also at an individual level.

So what comes next once the group has been together a little while

*The next stage of group or team development is often called the **STORMING** stage after Tuckman's model of team development. At this stage there can start to be a level of dissatisfaction creep in. The team are still trying to find out where they sit with themselves and with external forces. There can often be power struggles, negative feeling about the leadership and each other. They are struggling with the role that they have taken on, there is uncertainty about how to proceed, sometimes lack of knowledge about how to complete the job successfully. And at this stage there have often been no "wins" yet to celebrate.*

Some teams go through this stage very quickly, where as some can get stuck here and find it difficult to move on. Unfortunately some teams, move on and then can move back again. This is one of the most difficult stages to overcome



when things are not going well.

We have already seen some of this in the coalition government, with people leaving because they don't quite fit, whilst others are trying to assess where their position should be and the position they should adopt on different issues.

But not all teams stay here?

*By no means. The next stage is called **NORMING**. This is when the major blocks to moving forward and working together have been removed. Here you get settled into a way of working where everyone knows their role, there is a more open culture and trust and respect come to the fore. Increasingly at this stage there is also a team language that forms. Most teams operate at this level.*

So is there another stage?

*There is a final stage called **PERFORMING**. This is where the really high performing teams sit. Here there is a recapturing of the excitement that existed at the beginning. The team is collaborating well and feeling confident and positive. Here the level of management is actually quite low, because the team accept responsibility for themselves to a large degree and only need to refer to the leader for major decisions.*

A characteristic of a High Performing team is their ability to give and receive feedback, both within the team and externally. This can only be achieved if the team has developed a good sense of empathy and rapport when working together. Spending time together outside the work environment can be an excellent way of increasing this empathy and rapport.

What can go wrong?

*Most teams either don't reach this stage, or will only operate at this level for short periods of time on specific projects before slipping back to a **NORMING** level. In fact teams move forwards and backwards across all the levels*



dependent on the other influences that have an impact on them. So for example the loss of a leader or manager can make a huge difference, but also key team members coming and going can upset the "normal" functioning of the team and send them back to the storming stage. A new person who comes in and is vying for attention and status can completely upset things.

For the team to get through the four stages successfully, the team leader must know when to be directive, when to coach and when to share power and control.

Where do you start to develop your High Performing Team?

You need to fully understand:

- 1. WHO your team is*
- 2. what you want your team to BE*
- 3. what you want them to DO*
- 4. WHY they need to do this*
- 5. The GROUND RULES for team behaviour*
- 6. the ENVIRONMENT in which they operate and how to get the best from them*

What are some of the mistakes when leading teams?

Perhaps one of the key mistakes is believing that everyone knows exactly what the teams' target is and where they sit within that. It is easier with a new team to ensure that everyone knows exactly what they are trying to achieve. It is more difficult over time when new people join and maybe the training is done by someone who is changing roles or moving on, or was the last one to join. Messages can get diluted, changed, through no one's fault but as a process of attrition. The effect of "chinese whispers" can be very strong in a constantly changing environment.

Another mistake might be the overall level of control from the manager or



leader. Too controlling may lead to resentment and lack of ambition. Too lax and there can be the loss of direction. No one said that the manager's job is easy!

Who do you rate as a good team leader?

An obvious answer to this might be Richard Branson, or Winston Churchill. These are larger than life characters who stand out. But I also admire Karen Brady who has quietly worked her way to the top without having to shout the odds. Perhaps the people I admire the most are the unsung heroes. Whether they are managers who do their job well but get little recognition for it or army team leaders who have to cope in extreme situations and keep their troops motivated and focussed.

You specialise in Team Building and Team Events. How might they help?

I mentioned earlier that building respect, rapport and empathy in a team are one of the essentials in high performing teams. One of the key aspects of a team event, should be to foster just that. When you take people out of their normal environment and ask them to perform together differently, they have to look at their fellow team members in a new way. So we have had a number of occasions where a team member has shown that where they are a shrinking violet in the office, they come into their own in a different situation.

Alternatively, you can use an event to highlight or explore a specific issue. An example might be:

A couple of years ago we had a group of women who worked for a spa. They came to do a team building event with cookery. They were asked to create a series of pasta dishes, starting with making the pasta from scratch with egg and flour and then the fillings and sauces to go with them.

Their HR manager had asked me to ensure that 2 specific individuals were put in the same teams and for me to monitor their behaviour during the event.



There was a feeling that the older one of them (let's call her Brenda) who was in her late 20s was patronising the other (let's call her Anna) and running her down at work. If they could find external evidence of this they were going to have words with the Brenda about how her behaviour was causing a problem.

During the day however, I observed something different happening. Anna was the youngest in the group and at 22 was still living at home. She claimed that she was "not allowed" to cook at home and was worried about the exercise. All the other women in the group, with the exception of Brenda, were aged 35 plus and immediately leapt in to reassure her. This went on all day. Brenda on the other hand, just let Anna get on with things. She did not offer to help where she knew that Anna was capable of doing a task - even if it did stretch her. Brenda was not prepared to play Anna's game of "I'm useless and I need constant attention."

As a consequence, when I sent my report in to the HR manager she was very surprised and had to review her approach to the situation.

In this instance, working together in an unusual environment, highlighted the underlying issue and allowed for a different course of action to be taken.

What sort of events do you find works particularly well?

We tend to concentrate on events that require your head rather than endurance or testosterone. So we don't climb mountains, or camp overnight in a forest or race go-carts. These events are great if you like that sort of thing. However, we find that many of our clients want something that is fun but can be more inclusive in its appeal and can highlight various learning points.

High performing teams have high communications skills and high emotional intelligence. So with this in mind, we organise events which involve cooking, such as creating a meal together or theatre skills - learning about getting your message across, or music - such as writing your own song. We do have one



event that takes you into the woods, but it is still about learning how to achieve things together rather than being physically difficult.

Tell me more

However good or bad a cook you are, working together as a team in a kitchen to create a meal from unfamiliar ingredients can be quite a challenge. You can see in microcosm some of the stages that were mentioned earlier. However, working with an experienced professional chef, ensures that your team does not "fail" and most people are highly surprised about what they can achieve. And of course they can enjoy the fruits of their labour!.

Similar results can be found with some of the other activities that we offer. Theatre skills tends to concentrate on exploring communication skills. How do you get an idea across to your colleagues and present it using body language, voice projection etc. When you put on a production you are very dependent on others performing their job well.

We often tie together the activity with more traditional teaching techniques. So asking a team to look at their strengths and weaknesses and then create a marketing campaign for their team including adverts, radio plays or TV ads.

We used this technique last year for a team of scientists who were having difficulty relating to the rest of the business. They were highly skilled at their jobs, but their focus was on data, facts and logic, required to ensure that they could deliver accurate results to their internal clients. Unfortunately this sometimes put them in a position where they could not understand their more emotionally intelligent marketing colleagues.

They knew that there was an issue and they were proposing to invite the marketing department to visit them so that they could explain in detail what they did in the labs and how it could help their colleagues. However, in



discussion they came to realise that they may have to take a different approach.

We conducted an exercise where they had to create a marketing campaign for their department to sell themselves to the rest of the organisation. They had to put together a post, TV ad or Radio ad to get their point across.

In doing so they learnt about how difficult it can be to boil down a message to make it simple but appealing. They developed a new respect for their colleagues.

By having to "act it out" they were able to internalise some of the concepts of marketing communication and the issues surrounding it.

Getting people to act through a scenario can make it more real and therefore reinforces the learning points.

In fact we are using the activities as metaphors of things that are happening right now in their teams that need to be overcome. The use of metaphors, stories and getting involved have always been very powerful ways of improving peoples' awareness and developing their skills.

What are your three top tips for when creating a new team?

- 1. Get your communications right. Make sure that the flow of communication works: upwards, downwards and sideways.*
- 2. Know when you need to direct, coach or delegate to your team. Teams need different amounts of each at different stages.*
- 3. Know your teams strengths and weaknesses. It can be well worthwhile profiling your team members to find out where their strengths and weaknesses lie. If your team is made up of detail people, and you need out of the box thinkers you are going to struggle. There are lots of profiling tools out there.*



In summary?

Managing and developing teams can be one of the most rewarding skills of a good leader. Getting them to a high level of performance can be tough, but very satisfying. It is however, a skill that is sometimes overlooked or taken for granted.

