

Lesson One: Why Do We Need A Team?

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This course has been designed and is taught by Brian Cooke, senior leader of Iris Learning. Iris Learning is an Albuquerque-based business performance consulting group that focuses on executive coaching, strategic direction, leadership development, and customized learning that accelerates progress toward specific business targets. For more information about Iris Learning, please visit our web site at <http://www.irislearning.com>.

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A. Key Learning Points

1. Teams are more important than ever for organizational/business success.
2. Individual success depends more today on teamwork than ever.
3. Some projects and tasks are poorly suited for teams.
4. Teamwork is too often poorly defined and/or misunderstood.
5. A team is not a group.
6. Effective teams are defined by their achievements.
7. Effective teams realize that good intentions, effort, and behaviors are only important when they contribute to team achievements.

B. Real World Examples and Considerations for Practitioners

1. Teams are more important than ever for organizational/business success

In the past decade, American business has experienced a dramatic shift away from big, bureaucratic, vertically-integrated enterprise. The introduction of new technology, the rapid growth of global markets, the ever-increasing expectation for superior service quality, and the phenomenal success of small, entrepreneurial, horizontally organized companies with strong supplier relationships has increased corporate emphasis on small, fast, flexible, virtual teams.

Where we once valued corporate size, structure and associated economies of scale, we now better appreciate the value of virtual, entrepreneurial, knowledge-driven, team-oriented organization. This is especially evident in the current valuation of high-flying, creative technology-based businesses. (Although in some industries, such as financial services, businesses continue to grow in size through consolidation, they are concurrently striving to retain a lean, local, responsive, team-based approach to operation of business units.)

At their best, teams offer businesses significant opportunity for improved earnings through potential team-related performance gains in speed, quality, productivity, profitability, and growth.

- Improved speed and quality are possible when teams 1) draw on the diversity of team member's knowledge and experience to understand and respond intelligently together to complex company-wide opportunities, challenges, or problems, and 2) create

cross-functional, real-time communication and collaboration that focuses on customer and market requirements and minimizes structural obstacles, control, internal competition, and misunderstanding.

- Improved productivity is possible when teams take self-directed responsibility for their work and the cost-effective allocation and management of resources needed to achieve desired results.
- Improved profitability occurs when teams achieve significant gains in speed, quality, and productivity.
- Growth is possible when the market/customers appreciate a business's superior speed, quality, and value.

The potential value of teams is explored in greater length and detail by Katzenbach and Douglas in their recent best-seller, *The Wisdom of Teams*. They argue, quite rightly, that:

“In any situation requiring the real-time combination of multiple skills, experiences, and judgments, a team inevitably gets better results than a collection of individuals operating within confined job roles and responsibilities. Teams are more flexible than larger organizational groupings because they can be more quickly assembled, deployed, refocused, and disbanded, usually in ways that enhance rather than disrupt more permanent structures and processes.”

Our real experience with teams, however, reminds us that teams do not always function “at their best.” In fact, many businesses and their employees have been greatly disappointed by well-intended but under-achieving team initiatives. Our challenge, then, is to identify ways we can increase our prospects for actualizing the real potential of team-based business.

2. Individual success depends more today on teamwork than ever because teams are more important than ever for organizational/business success.

Whether you are seeking a new job or striving to advance your career, here are a few team-related considerations:

Many employers are initially less interested in your technical skills/knowledge and more concerned about your professional character, attitude and ability to work effectively with others. More and more businesses believe they can teach you the skills you need – they “hire for attitude” and “train for skills.”

In many job markets and/or when pursuing a specific opportunity for promotion there typically is an abundance of qualified, knowledgeable, skilled laborers or promotable candidates. In these competitive circumstances, your character, your attitude, and your

ability to work effectively in teams will distinguish you from many other technically “qualified” but less team-oriented people.

If you expect to enjoy a healthy, quality personal life, you likewise must achieve a healthy, quality professional life. Our experience at work is enhanced and enriched when we work happily and effectively with other (the inverse, of course, is equally true). From a personal, social perspective, we will improve our lives when we improve our professional communication, collegiality, and teamwork.

3. Some projects and tasks are poorly suited for teams.

Too often our enthusiasm for teams defies reason. We are frequently too quick to refer to ourselves as a “team” or to launch a new “team” effort.

Robbins and Finley describe this tendency well in *Why Teams Don't Work*.

“Teams are great. Cuisinarts are also great. But you wouldn't mow your lawn with one.

The great sin of the age of teaming is that people are so high on the idea of teaming that they are asking teams to do everything. A job done by a team is better than a job done by a single individual. You get that synergy going, you know, all that shared information ... yeah

The truth is that teams are inherently inferior to individuals, in terms of efficiency. If a single person has sufficient information to complete a task, he or she will run rings around a team assigned the same task. There are no handoffs to other individuals. No misunderstandings or conflicting cultures. No personality conflicts.

Beware. Teaming can be bad. Sometimes managers prefer teaming because it spreads accountability around, makes blaming more difficult. Sometimes it means a bigger travel and entertainment budget. Or it means hand-picking team members.

The saddest thing we hear is “We were told we had to do everything as a team.” The CEO is ga-ga about teams, so now unless you do something as a team you're a pariah in your organization. What's sad is that we hear it a lot. Mandatory teaming is misapplied as team enthusiasm ... it is team tyranny, and people resent it.”

Although teams do promise potential for performance gains, they also require considerable investment of corporate and team player time, emotion, and cash. Teams are not an enterprise to be entered into or taken lightly. When poorly conceived and poorly managed, teams create more ill will and disappointing performance than they are worth.

Next time, someone (especially your boss) uses the word team or calls for the formation of a team, you might do yourself and your company a great service by asking whether the team is necessary and why the task is best-suited by the team. You also might want to

assess the real need for and purpose of the “teams” you are currently a member of. In many instances, the potential return promised by the team is far less than the reality.

4. Teamwork is too often poorly defined and/or misunderstood.

Stop. Take a moment now to write down your definition of teamwork. Now, ask two other people to define “teamwork.”

If your experience is like ours, when we ask three team members to define “teamwork,” it is not surprising to get six different responses.

Teamwork is one of those universal principles that people embrace wholeheartedly but struggle to define clearly and consensually. Without a shared definition of “teamwork”, how can we ever hope to manage and experience an effective “team.”

The most common misunderstanding about teamwork is that it is the same as “socialwork” – ie. teamwork is a word used to describe people who work together. CEO’s often use this meaning for teamwork when they challenge, implore, motivate their employees to work together positively and productively as a corporate “team.” While the spirit of this executive message -- working together as a team -- is positive and well-intended, it is unrealistic and ill-advised for a corporation as a whole to function as one “team.” This is especially true at a time when highly diversified corporations are cutting or divesting teammates who work for some of its business units.

All work in all companies requires some degree of social interaction and professional interdependence. Such common social interaction and professional interdependence – even when it is positive, productive, and profitable – should not necessarily be described as “teamwork.” As we shall discuss, the word “team” should be respected and reserved specifically for tasks that are specifically and exclusively team efforts.

5. A team is not a group.

Just as many people confuse socialwork and teamwork, people also tend to misrepresent their affiliation with a group as membership in a team. While both groups and teams are associations of people; groups and teams have very distinct and different purposes.

A group is an association of people who gather together to share information, experience, and expertise for purposes of problem-solving or for creative exploration. As an individual member of a group, you contribute your perspective and expertise and draw on/benefit from the perspective and expertise of other group members. Your success as a group member will be defined by what you contribute personally to the group and what you learn or gain by association with the group. The rewards of group work are fundamentally personal and are often quite different for each group member depending on their individual contribution.

A team, by contrast, is an association of people who gather together to achieve a common, shared measurable collaborative result. As a member of a team, you contribute your perspective and expertise to help the team achieve its urgent shared purpose. Your success as a team member will be defined by the team's overall success. The rewards of teamwork are determined by the team's achievement.

In sports, championship "teams" share a singular, collaborative focus on winning the championship. Individual statistics and personalities on championship teams are insignificant compared with the team's overriding goal. World champions tend to distribute the rewards of their team victories to everyone who contributes, including the clubhouse personnel, ballboys, equipment managers etc.

Teams that do not excel at the championship level, tend to suffer from excessive "groupwork." Team members may wear the same uniform and work together within a shared offensive and defensive system. But they tend to focus first on their own individual performance while wearing that uniform and playing in the system. Groups tend to focus on individual rewards based exclusively on their individual contributions/performance.

6. Effective teams are defined by their achievements.

You are a team when every member of your team defines their success exclusively in terms of your team's achievement.

When a team is clear and mutually accountable for achieving a shared, overriding, urgent purpose, it must and will develop the methods, skills, attitudes, and behaviors it needs to succeed.

When we advise teams that are experiencing problems with team trust and team dynamics, we typically discover that these teams are struggling with shared agreement and commitment to the team's goal and purpose. No amount of trust and teambuilding exercises and consultation will compensate for a team that lacks focus and commitment to a shared, urgent, measurable goal.

Once the goal is clear and consensual, the need for trust and constructive communication becomes self-evident.

7. Effective teams realize that good intentions, effort, and behaviors are only important when they contribute to team achievements.

Dr. Deming, the celebrated "godfather" of total quality management, often taught that "we are being ruined by best efforts." He argued that we too often confused hard work and good intentions with quality results. He reminded us that our customers don't care

how much we “try” to serve them. They only care how well we “produce” the goods and services they require at a reasonable market price.

Dr. Deming’s observations are equally applicable to teamwork. While good intentions, best efforts, and positive behaviors are desirable for teams; measurable team achievements are necessary and non-negotiable both for your business and your career. Too many teams we have advised spend too much energy and attention on the team’s effort and behaviors -- and too little on the specific management methods needed to achieve targeted results. High-performing teams, by contrast, have a high-performance orientation.

C. Recommended Reading Assignment & Highlights

Selections are from Finley and Robbins, *Why Teams Don’t Work*. Part One - Broken Dreams, Broken Teams

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The reasons why organizations have been turning to teams has been put forward many times before and in several places. To sum up these advantages:

- *Teams increase productivity*
- *Teams improve communication*
- *Teams do work that ordinary groups can’t do*
- *Teams make better use of resources*
- *Teams are more creative and efficient at solving problems*
- *Teams mean higher-quality decisions*
- *Teams mean better quality goods and services*
- *Teams mean improved processes*

This list reads like something taken from the team bible. The fact is that many, many organizations have been switching over - at least in their own minds - from the old pyramid hierarchy to the team ideal, and they have not been experiencing the organizational bliss they counted on.

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The premise this book takes is that the human race is not a species of individual loners, each making our way by himself or herself, all alone in the world.

Nope. We are social creatures. We not only like one another’s company, but we seek one another out in one situation after another. Deep down, we need this interaction, just as we need air, water, and life insurance What do we get from one another? Affection ...

Affiliation ... Acknowledgement and Recognition ... Exchange of ideas ... Personal self-worth

All we are saying is that people have a need to work with others. It does not begin to get at the problems that arise when people begin to drive one another crazy once they become teams.

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People are born: teams are made. Both hurt like the dickens. Why? Because despite human beings' attraction to belonging to a team, we are not willing to uproot our individual lives and priorities for the sake of some lousy workgroup. So a conflict exists between individual team members' goals and the overarching goal of the team itself.

Effective teamwork means a continual balancing act between meeting the team needs and individual needs Whatever the personal goals, we need to know what they are and to deal with them, or at least acknowledge them, as a team - perhaps even make them corollary team goals. When we know what our fellow team members want us to achieve and what we ourselves want, that is a terrific bond between team members.

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The stated purpose for a team is to gather people together and collaborate to jointly accomplish agreed upon team outcomes; ie. get things done together. The purpose of socialwork, on the other hand, is to get your personal needs for affiliation met by being involved in a group.

One is work related, the other not.

Sometimes the line between teamwork and socialwork gets a bit fuzzy. You can usually tell this is happening when everyone on a team is pissed off. An example of the teamwork/socialwork clash is when Team Member A is working on a task while Team Members B, C, and D are in the next cubicle chatting away about nonwork-related things. While A is doing teamwork, B, C, and D are doing social work.

All work and no play makes you dull. All play and no work makes you unemployed. A coordinated balance makes you more productive. While both teamwork and socialwork are essential to team success, getting the whole team in sync is important.

D. Additional Resources and Links to Others Sources

Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*. (Harvard Business School Press)

Kevin Freiberg and Jackie Freiberg, *Nuts! Southwest Airlines' Crazy Recipe for Business and Personal Success*. (Bard)

E. Question(s) for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why have you enrolled in this course? What do you hope to accomplish in this course?
2. What is the difference between teamwork and groupwork? Give an example of teamwork. Give an example of groupwork. Why is this distinction between teams and groups important?