

Lesson Four: Why Teams Fail

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A. Key Learning Points - Top Ten Reasons Why Teams Fail

1. Lack of urgency
2. Lack of/or conflicting measures
3. Poor reward systems
4. Business barriers
5. Anti-team culture
6. Ineffective leadership
7. Unresolved roles, responsibility, and accountability
8. Communication shortfalls
9. Personality conflicts
10. Lack of trust

B. Real World Examples and Considerations for Practitioners

1. Lack of urgency: Teams that must win are more likely to win. If a team does not believe its purpose is urgent, it likely will be beaten by a team who believes that it is. Urgency emerges in situations where there is fear, risk, adversity and competition. Urgency also emerges in situations where there is an unusual opportunity for gain, advancement, and/or profit. Urgency also is time certain. Teams with an urgent purpose know that they must succeed within a non-negotiable time frame. If a team does not have a deadline to achieve its targeted purpose, the purpose is not truly urgent. Team leaders can use aggressive project schedules to establish and maintain team urgency throughout a team project.
2. Lack of/or conflicting measures: a) People will work on the things that you measure. b) If you can not measure it, you can not manage it. c) Measure what matters. (These three points are discussed in greater detail in BA 101 Fundamentals of Continuous Quality Improvement). Winning teams select key performance measures that help them track and accelerate team progress toward the team's performance goals. Sales teams, for example, track sales revenues, revenues from new accounts, revenues from

new products, percentage of cold calls converted to sales etc. These numbers help the team stay focused each day on activities that drive quarterly and annual team performance.

When teams do not have performance measures, they tend to substitute indicators of good intention or hard work or numbers of meetings or hours the team has spent on the project. These indicators typically do not have much correlation with the team's real progress toward absolute performance targets/results. As Dr. Deming so often reminded us, "We are being ruined by best efforts."

3. Poor reward systems: A team member, by definition, is successful when the team is successful. A team member, therefore, should expect to be compensated, at least in part, in proportion to the team's success. Companies that depend on winning teams are becoming creative about blending individual compensation with team compensation. The easiest way to reward teamwork is to allocate bonuses, gain-sharing, or profit sharing based on the team's contributions to business improvement. Many quality companies now pay quality improvement team members a fixed percentage of the value of cost savings, cost avoidance, or revenues created. Organizations such as public sector agencies with restrictions on profit sharing and bonuses tend to reward teams by investing savings in improvements in the team's physical work environment or in training and travel.
4. Business barriers: Most winning teams sooner or later recommend action that conflicts with the business's standard operating policies and procedures. This is especially true of cross-functional creative teams seeking significant business innovation and/or improvement. While teams tend to be forward looking and future-focused, policies and procedures tend to reflect the present, or more likely, the past. Such policies and procedures also tend to reinforce functional thinking and vertical management. Businesses that are serious about winning teams must be willing to scrap policies, procedures, and traditional operating structures when it is clear that they no longer serve the team's or the company's best future interests. Much of General Electric's recent successes have been achieved through a quality improvement approach that specifically emphasizes "boundarylessness." This GE initiative has sought to identify and minimize barriers that work groups experience when they are working: 1) laterally with other functions, 2) "up" the organization with senior management supervision and governance, 3) "down" the organization with line employees and subordinate work units, and 4) "outside" the organization when working with suppliers.
5. Anti-team culture: As much as businesses tend to celebrate the theoretical value of teams, many businesses are locked into traditional, hierarchical, functional management structures and approaches that conflict with many of the team principles discussed in this course. Large corporations tend to protect creative teams from their anti-team corporate bureaucracy by locating the work groups in remote and/or

separate locations where they can experience physical independence. When California-based Hewlett-Packard needed to reinvigorate its printer business, it chartered a creative team and sent it to Idaho where it would be freed from daily corporate obstacles and oversight. This team was responsible for the wildly successful DeskJet and Ink Jet printers which became the cornerstone of HP's recent business success. The team that created Macintosh, likewise, was physically located in a separate building from Apple's main operations. In companies where an anti-team culture may exist, it also is important for teams to have control of their own dedicated budget and other key non-financial resources.

6. Ineffective leadership: For better and for worse, people are naturally self-interested. Leadership, by definition, is responsible for clarifying and communicating a purpose that compels people to direct their self-interest toward a shared aim or purpose. As we have discussed, a team leader is responsible for building team members' understanding and assuring commitment to a shared urgent purpose. Without effective team leadership, team members tend to pursue diverse, independent interests. An effective team therefore requires effective formal and informal leadership - this topic is addressed more fully in BA 106 Leadership.
7. Unresolved roles, responsibility, and accountability: We have already discussed this point at length. Winning teams clarify team members roles, responsibility, and accountability as soon as possible. Winning teams also are smart enough to encourage appropriate flexibility in team roles, responsibility, and accountability as the team's work progresses. The team player matrices introduced in Lesson Two can be helpful when addressing problems in this area.
8. Communication shortfalls: Communication problems occur when team members: 1) do not value the knowledge, experience, and perspective of their teammates, 2) do not listen and understand the ideas or perspective communicated by their team mates regardless of whether they agree with it or not, 3) do not communicate their ideas or perspective clearly and simply so that they can be easily understood by their teammates, 4) do not recognize and respect fundamental differences in personal and professional style, 5) are more interested in being "right" than in achieving the team's ultimate purpose, 6) do not communicate disagreement directly and promptly to the team mate with whom they disagree. The communication triangle introduced in Lesson Three can be helpful when addressing/arbitrating communication problems.
9. Personality conflicts: Personality conflicts occur when team members: 1) do not have a mutual commitment to a shared urgent purpose, 2) do not appreciate and value the importance of diverse personalities to the team's ability to achieve its overall purpose, 3) do not behave professionally despite personal differences and/or dislikes, 4) do not communicate differences of perspective or opinion directly, promptly, and openly with each other, and 5) do not have a skillful leader. Iris advises team members that they need not like their teammate as long as they appreciate how the skills and

experience of each team member will help the team achieve its urgent agreed-upon goal. We also believe that the Myers-Briggs typology discussed in Lesson Three is helpful to depersonalize conflict and refocus team members on their professional relationships.

10. Lack of trust: Although many struggling teams invite Iris to assist them first with trust issues, we believe that “trust” results from several more fundamental issues. We believe teams will not experience trust unless they: 1) are committed to a shared urgent purpose, 2) appreciate the importance of team members’ diverse experience, skills, and perspective, 3) are committed to honest, direct, prompt communication of their individual beliefs, especially when they conflict with those of others, 4) act and speak professionally -- do not make or take any comment or criticism personally.

Perhaps most important, if you seek trust, it is essential that you be “trustworthy.” Sadly, we find that many teams that complain most about trust are also made up of team members whose individual conduct is most often unprofessional and unworthy of trust.

And finally, trust at some point requires a leap of faith at a critical moment when the team requires interdependence and mutual support that exceeds its prior demonstrated trust level. If you seek more trust in your team, you must trust your team more. Ironically, trust increases when we are most trusting – even in situations when we might be justified in doubting our teammates. This is how winning, trusting, rewarding relationships grow and prosper – at work, in our community, and in our families.

C. Recommended Reading Assignment & Highlights

All selections are from Glenn M. Parker, *Team Players and Teamwork*. Chapter 4

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Sometimes we try to hard to help the team. We get so committed to the team effort, so absorbed in our view of what the team needs, that we become ineffective ...

The motivations for behavior are many and complex. Our purpose here is not to root out all causes of ineffective team players. However, observation tells us that some people try too hard to be helpful and, as a result, go beyond the zone of effectiveness. Their strength becomes a weakness. Observation also teaches us that the pressures of business lead to an impatience with alternative team-player styles. Style differences are seen as blocks to progress. On the other hand, some people may have never learned how to be an effective team player.

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Ineffective team players cost the organization. Their behavior results in wasted time and effort, lost opportunities, poor customer relations, low morale, and high turnover. Ultimately they have a negative impact on the bottom line.

Are You an Ineffective Team Player?

Responses: Yes (Y), Sometimes (S), No (N)

- 1. When forming a new team, do you select only those people whose approaches are similar to yours?
- 2. When things are not going your way, do you sit quietly or sulk?
- 3. Are you impatient with other team members who want to discuss process issues?
- 4. Do you try to avoid or smooth over differences among team members?
- 5. Do you go along with some team decisions even though you are not sure going along is the right thing to do?
- 6. As a team leader, do you set goals without the real involvement of team members?
- 7. When things go wrong on the team, do you quickly blame the leader?
- 8. Do you bad-mouth the team to other people in the organization?
- 9. Do you miss deadlines for completion of team assignments or submit incomplete work?
- 10. Do you push for individual recognition of team members rather than team acknowledgement and awards?

Summary: If you answered “no” to all ten questions skip to the next chapter (ie. you are a very effective team player). If you answered “yes” or “sometimes” to at least five questions, stay tuned (ie. you have significant opportunity for improvement as a team player). If you answered “yes” to all ten questions, start the book over again (ie. you have little or no understanding of teamwork).

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The task-oriented Contributor who helped the team by providing useful technical information, by always doing the required homework, and by being a model of excellence can become ineffective because of (1) data overload (reports that are too long or too detailed), (2) pushing for unrealistic performance standards, (3) losing sight of the big picture (the goal or charter of the team), or (4) a lack of patience with the need for a positive team climate. When things go wrong, the Contributor believes the solution is more and better information, reports, and presentations.

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The goal-directed Collaborator pushes the team to develop a mission and goals and helps by pitching in, sharing resources, working outside his or her defined role, and doing what is required to maintain that commitment to the team goal or charter. But the Collaborator can become ineffective because (1) failure to revisit or challenge periodically the mission or goals, (2) lack of attention to the basic team tasks and work-area performance, (3) failure to focus on meeting the needs of other players (“The

mission is everything!), or (4) complaining publicly about team failures. When the team is perceived as decreasingly effective, the Collaborator believes the solution lies in greater commitment to the vision, mission, and goals of the team.

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The process-oriented Communicator who helped the team by effectively facilitating member involvement, conflict resolution, consensus building, and other positive climate management activities can become ineffective by (1) seeing team process as an end in itself (“Are we having fun yet?”), (2) failing to challenge or confront other team members, (3) not recognizing the equal importance of completing task assignments and making progress toward team goals, or (4) overuse of humor and other process techniques. When the team fails to make progress, the Communicator assumes the reason must be that “We don’t work well together” and proceeds to push for increased emphasis on listening, feedback, and participation.

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The Challenger who helps the team by candidly questioning the team’s goals and methods, raising ethical issues, disagreeing with the leadership, and encouraging risk taking can become an ineffective team player by (1) not knowing when to back off and let the team move on, (2) pushing the team to take risks that are beyond reason, (3) becoming self-righteous, rigid, and inflexible, (4) painting himself or herself into a corner where challenging is an end in itself, or (5) using so-called honesty as a cover for attacks on other team members. When the team is not moving ahead, the Challenger believes that there is a lack of candor or innovativeness and that the solution lies with greater confrontation and risk taking.

D. Additional Resources and Links to Others Sources

Terence E. Deal and M.K. Key, *Corporate Celebration: Play, Purpose, and Profit at Work*. (Berrett-Koehler, 1998)

Terry L. Paulson, *They Shoot Managers Don’t They: Managing Yourself and Leading Others in a Changing World*. (Ten Speed, 1991)

Bob Pike and Christopher Busse, *101 Games for Trainers: A Collection of the Best Activities from Creative Training Techniques Newsletter* (Lakewood, 1995)

Bob Pike and Christopher Busse, *101 More Games for Trainers: A Collection of the Best Activities from Creative Training Techniques Newsletter* (Lakewood, 1995)

E. Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Describe a team that you have worked on that failed. What was the most significant reason for its failure? Be specific.
2. What have you learned about teamwork in this course that you will remember 12 months from today?