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The Leadership Edge

Passionate Leadership for a Rapidly Changing World

Introduction

We all tell stories about an amazing team that we worked on a long time ago in a place that was truly special. We remember how much we enjoyed coming to work, recalling with pride how tough teammates were, challenging each other to succeed. We talk about high producing teams that had more fun, were more dedicated, and got more done than anybody else on the project. Then, with a bittersweet sigh, we talk about how those days came to an end when the project ended, or the

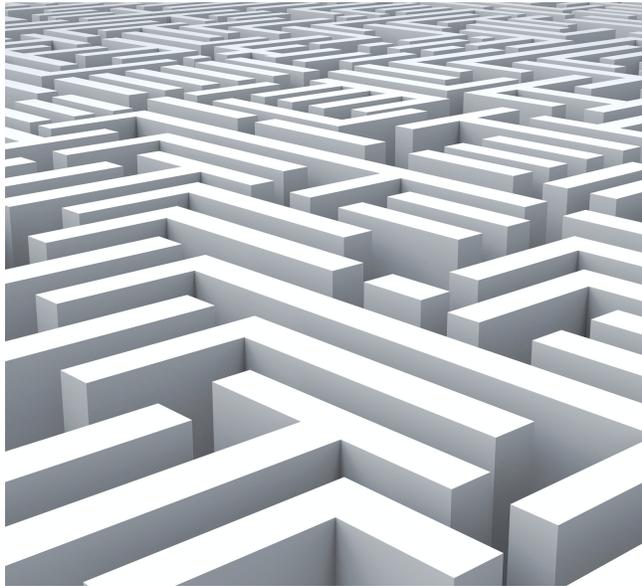
department reorganized. We are disappointed when we realize we remember only a few teams like that. Most teams we've been part of in the past always seemed to be missing something — especially the ability to get things done. Why



has it proven so difficult to routinely create truly great teams? Certainly, there's been no end of attempts to improve teams and team productivity.

Organizations have introduced quality management systems to improve product quality and reduce wasted effort. They have introduced mega-frameworks like Rational Unified Process (RUP) to provide structure and consistency in the management of projects. They have spent millions of dollars ensuring ISO 9001 compliance so that everyone knew exactly what to do. They have employed CMMI to ensure continuous learning and

progressing. They have implemented Total Quality Management (TQM), Business Process Reengineering (BPR), and Lean Six Sigma. They have talked about and promoted empowered employees, positive motivation, and self-directed workgroups. The litany of frameworks, processes, methodologies, and management best practices



has been overwhelming. While there's a lot of very useful material scattered across all these frameworks and approaches, the reality is that we usually fall short of our goal of creating highly productive, effective teams capable of producing polished products.

The nature of IT work has moved beyond complicated to extraordinarily complex. Unfortunately, the management of IT work and personnel has not kept pace.

Today, we build 21st century products and services using outdated development practices and outdated management techniques. We require detailed estimates from product developers when we aren't sure exactly what we want them to build. We embrace a corporate version of attention deficit disorder, requiring our employees to work concurrently on 10 projects because we can't decide which one of the "top-priority" projects are most important. We focus on individual utilization, ignoring the reality that effort is not the same as output and that overworking personnel results in significantly increased overall costs due to lost quality.

To succeed in the future, we must make difficult changes to move our organizations into the 21st century. The most crucial change is to focus on creating autonomous, empowered, self-organizing, cross-functional teams.

Teams Are the Heart of the 21st Century Organization

The customer controls day-to-day business decisions more than ever. Products are highly customizable, from automobiles to homes, business cards to clothing, and books to music. With the tap of a finger, customers can download what they want or schedule it for delivery within the next two days. If customers are dissatisfied for ANY reason with their purchase, their response is equally immediate. They return the product, order what they want from someone else, and complain about the product on the internet, writing comments that may result in thousands of dollars in lost sales.

To create an organization that can effectively respond to heightened customer centricity and product customization, you will need effective and coordinated product development teams. The loose association of unfocused, over-taxed, and uncoordinated developers that we used to call “teams” in the past, simply won't get the job done any longer. Teams, REAL teams, are the new heart of the 21st century organization. In order to respond to customer needs quickly, teams need to be autonomous, empowered, self-organizing, and cross-functional. They must take high-level direction from management and then, through intense collaboration, complete work more quickly than their predecessors. They must be more focused, more accountable, and more committed to being successful by doing their part to help the company thrive. To create teams like this, there are a few things you will need to do.

Teams Need Working Agreements

Over the years, we have used the term “team” to inaccurately describe any group of people that work on the same product or project. A proper team must possess all (or most) of the skills they will need to do the work they are being asked to do and they must be trusted to do the work properly. Teams can create working agreements to help ensure that all team members understand their jobs, scope of control, and responsibilities.

A working agreement sets out how the members of a team agree to work with one another to get things done. The agreement should be kept relatively short; long working agreements become overwhelming and useless. A basic working agreement is created by the team and determines how members will accomplish tasks. Some examples of good working agreement items include:

- Everyone participates; everybody's ideas are important, but stay on task/topic
- Respect confidentiality
- Meetings begin and end on time
- If you miss a meeting, support decisions made in your absence
- Share all relevant information
- Listen with an open mind before you speak
- One person talks at a time
- Cell phones are off or set to vibrate

Working agreements establish the ground rules needed to encourage acceptable behavior, create dependability, and foster consistency in day-to-day work. They also signal the intent of the individual employees to work together as a team. Without a working agreement bringing employees together, it's hard to imagine that a highly productive team might emerge.

Teams Need a Customer

Teams should have a real customer at the end of the production line. In my coaching work, I frequently assist organizations that have "front-end" teams and "back-end" teams. As is common, my clients' teams were created based on the structure of the application they are building rather than on the customers the

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organization serves. In these situations, the “front-end” team will become focused on building a cool user interface and the “back-end” team will become focused on building an extensible programming interface (API). When I ask, “Who’s focused on what the customer wants?” the answer, ultimately, is, “no one.” If what the customer needs isn’t front-and-center of everything the team does, the customer will be ignored and dissatisfied, despite the best attempts of a product manager.

Teams that have a customer in mind will tend to be more focused on satisfying customer needs and generating business value. They will be less distracted by work that doesn’t fulfill the intended vision of the product. Whenever possible, teams should be staffed to have all the skills they need to go from “concept to customer.” If you don’t have enough people with the necessary skills to staff the teams properly, share individuals with the important skills across multiple teams. Be prepared to invest time in cross-training. Ideally, each team will be capable of doing most of the job most of the time without relying on help from other teams.

Teams Need Coaching

Creating an effective product development team is not all that different from training a professional football team. A significant amount of coordinated effort is required to learn how to use the team’s skills to achieve an objective. For a football team, a properly executed field goal is a thing of beauty: most of the team members protect the kicker as he kicks the ball. The kicker’s foot goes higher than his head and the ball describes a perfect arc absolutely centered between the goal posts.

Opposition players do their best to create impediments for the kicker: trying to leap high enough to block the kick or run in front of the kicker to cause the kick to go awry. Some teams even cause a delay in the game using a time-out for the sole purpose of upsetting the kicker’s concentration. In chaotic environments like these, teams, whether in sports or in companies, do best when they have coaching support. A coach can help the team understand the strengths each member brings and can help team members determine the role they’re expected to play. A coach can help team members deal with



changes and manage conflict and disagreement. A coach helps the team achieve its objectives. While a manager may be able to be a coach, development teams are more likely to grow and bond together working with someone who does not exercise authority over the team.

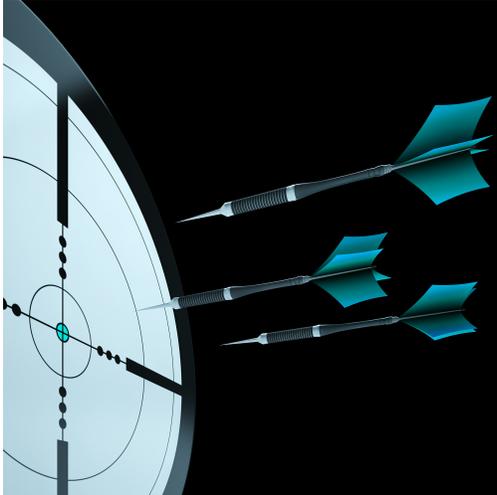
All sports teams have coaches that are tasked with helping the team achieve its full potential, focusing the team on what needs to be done and helping members learn how to work well together. Phil Jackson, championship-winning NBA coach puts it this way — “Good teams become great ones when the members trust each other enough to surrender the *me* for the *we*.” Taking the time to create teams, not groups, can open the door to significant innovation, productivity, and achievement in your organization.

Teams Need to be Focused

The effect of interruptions and poor focus on teams has been drawn in stark and undeniable detail. Context-switching, or moving from one task to another unrelated one, results in significant losses in both productivity and product quality. Context-switching generally occurs when a team has many different work items (and thus, several contexts) in progress or when people outside the team ask questions of team members. According to a study performed at the University of California Irvine, the average amount of time lost when an employee experiences a context-switch is 23.5 minutes. The more complex the task, the greater the time lost to recover context. The nature of the interruption is important: some interruptions have almost no effect; many interruptions have significant consequences. The

“The average developer loses as much as 3 hours of productivity every day to unnecessary interruptions.”

same UC Irvine study showed that the average office worker is interrupted every 3 minutes and 5 seconds. Consider the impact. If only 5% of the interruptions causes a



time-wasting context-switch, the average developer can lose as much as 3 hours of productivity every single day. My personal experiences coaching teams has often discovered this “lost productivity” to the tune of 2x and 3x improvements.

To correct the context-switching problem, three things need to happen. First, the team must decide upon a clear approach for allowing questions from outside the team to interrupt the team. How can someone outside the team pass questions to the

team in a manner that minimizes interruption? Which questions get priority? How do we determine which questions get deferred or even refused (because an answer could be acquired through other means)? Does a manager's question get answered before everyone else's?

Second, teams must limit the work items in progress to the smallest number possible. For many teams, this should be one or two work items. Think of a sports team. How many balls are on the field at any one time? To focus your team and maximize efficiency, you must get your team regularly focused on no more than two work items at a time.

The third thing you must do to improve focus and productivity is to teach your team how to work together on a single work item. Software development teams have internalized the unfortunate mistruth perpetuated by traditional software development lifecycle frameworks that analysis, design, coding, and testing activities are linear. This is, simply put, ridiculous. Analysis and design can be done by team members working together. Coding, testing, and documentation (and even continued analysis and design when needed) can be done simultaneously and collaboratively once a good solution is

postulated. The real power in this approach is that, as the understanding of the work item improves, every other aspect of the solution (design, coding, testing, documentation, etc.) is likewise and concurrently improved.

Teams Need Guardrails

Teams also need constraints on what they are permitted and not permitted to do. While this sounds like a limit is placed on teams trying to evolve into highly productive teams, the reality is that an effective set of constraints, or guardrails, frees a team to become more empowered, more accountable, and more responsible for its work.

Without guardrails, teams must get approval on most decisions before they can proceed. We see this frequently encoded in product development workflows



as complicated documentation templates accompanied by extensive review and approval feedback loops that provide questionable benefit and serve mostly to slow progress and cause substantial rework.

Guardrails, when properly constructed, can empower the team to self-organize by allowing the team to get their work done in any appropriate manner so long as the guardrails are not violated. Consider: when the work is done in a way that satisfies customer needs, including quality, and abides by the established guardrails, does it really matter who on the team did what, when, or what or exactly how they did it? Let your team do the job you hired them to do without requiring your permission to make decisions.

To establish guardrails for your team, I recommend taking the following steps:

1. Explain the purpose of guardrails to the team. Within the guardrails, the team will have the authority to do what it needs to do to get the job done. If, at any time, the team needs to ask advice of experts and management outside the team, it is welcome to do so.
2. Enlist your team's help to create the guardrails. Guardrails consist of all items required to complete the work with a high degree of quality, all documentation and records needed by the organization, all applicable product standards (coding, naming, data, etc.), all regulatory requirements, all non-functional characteristics of the product (performance requirements, platform needs, etc.), and all architectural needs. In an agile development environment, the team's "definition of done" would be included in the guardrails.
3. Validate the compliance with guardrails during work inspection (i.e., backlog review in Kanban, iteration review in XP, sprint review in Scrum). Similarly, eliminate review/approval steps from your procedures and require stakeholders to attend actual work inspections. This will result in better inspections and more valuable, and timely, feedback.

Of course, you should also plan to review and improve guardrails at least six times during the first year, reducing frequency as appropriate afterward.

Conclusion

The value of a great team to an organization has never been questioned. The relatively brief history of information technology is replete with tales of teams that created amazingly innovative products like the first Apple Macintosh computer, IBM's first personal computer, and even Google's Gmail. What these teams all had in common is a single vision, a customer on which they could focus, a coach or leader to help them focus, and the authority to work within specific guardrails without having to stop to get permission in order to make decisions.

Teams are more important now than ever for an organization wishing to compete in the 21st century. It is no longer enough to adapt your policies, frameworks, or department

structure. Organizations wishing to leverage the power of highly-productive teams must learn how to adapt their behaviors, culture, and management beliefs to succeed. It won't be easy to accomplish. Many organizations will look at the creation of empowered teams as giving up management control of what is being done and, therefore, creating a situation where direction may be lost, and unnecessary effort is expended needlessly. This is a real concern, but the organization that learns how to create, lead, and coach highly productive teams will succeed, while the organization that continues to encourage independent, unfocused, and uncoordinated work will struggle to respond quickly to its customers... and will eventually fail.

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