



Organizations That Get Teamwork Right

By Dianne Nilsen and Gordon J. Curphy

Since early homo sapiens discovered they could better defend themselves against predators by working together, teams have contributed to human progress. Our most significant accomplishments have been the result of team efforts, but never has the need for collaboration and teamwork been more critical than today. Faced with rapid change and complex challenges, organizations are increasingly harnessing the power of teams to provide breakthrough solutions and innovative ideas. Teams have become so commonplace that employees frequently find themselves working on multiple teams. In fact, 20 percent of employees recently surveyed reported working on four or more teams at any one time.¹

While there's a bigger need for effective teamwork, today's teams also face bigger challenges than teams of the past.

They're more diverse, virtual, matrixed, and dynamic (with members coming and going). Although teams have tremendous potential, research shows that effective teamwork is relatively rare. Numerous studies have shown that only 1 in 5 teams are considered high performing. Sadly, leaders have an even more pessimistic view of team performance, stating that only 1 in 10 of the teams in their organizations are high performing. Despite their promise, teams usually end up being *less* than the sum of their parts.

High-performing teams don't happen by accident. Most team-building efforts focus on what's happening within the team itself, and while team dynamics can't be ignored, they aren't the full story. The broader organizational context also plays a role in a team's success. Simply put, some organizations are more team-friendly than others. In our work with



teams across thousands of organizations, we have seen the following six organizational practices boost team performance.

1. Start at the top. Those organizations that are most successful in leveraging teams make sure their top team is working together effectively. Like any change initiative, the odds of success go up dramatically when the top team buys in and models the desired change. This is particularly true with organizations wanting to improve teamwork; if the top team is dysfunctional, teamwork has little chance of succeeding elsewhere in the organization.

“Do as we do” is a more credible approach to promoting teamwork throughout the organization than “do as we say.” Although we’ve yet to come across a senior leader who disagrees with this point, we find that top team dysfunction is a primary source of ineffective teamwork elsewhere in the organization. Turf wars, artificial harmony, mistrust, and ineffective decision-making at the top always trickles down.

A situation we recently faced with one of our clients illustrates this point. Over the previous three years, this software company saw its employee engagement scores plummet, key talent leave for competitors, and turnover rise to twice the in-

dustry average. Comments on exit interviews and engagement surveys indicated silos and a lack of teamwork were to blame; employees felt they couldn’t succeed in that environment. Business results were also starting to suffer.

Based on the comments from the exit interviews and engagement surveys, the CHRO sought outside help to diagnose and solve the problem. We started by administering a team assessment survey and interviewing the top team and key talent one level below them. The data was eye-opening. Within the product development function, the software engineers were enamored with cutting-edge technology and focused on building new apps. Their product roadmap was driven by the latest technical innovations with little input from sales and marketing. The marketing function was focused on mining big data to gain customer and market insights. When planning marketing campaigns, they did not include input from product development or sales. The sales organization made whatever promises were necessary to close big deals and make their numbers. They left product development to pick up the pieces and routinely ignored marketing altogether. Frustrated by a perceived lack of support from marketing, the product development function planned to hire marketing expertise in their area. Likewise, the sales team was also seeking to hire marketing resources within their regions.

During executive team meetings, the SVPs for product development, marketing, and sales gave every appearance of being team players. The CEO, to whom they reported, observed them being cordial and agreeable and was unaware of any friction. While strong norms dictated artificial harmony in the executive suite, the SVPs were using the managers in their respective functions as proxies in a covert war. In a war zone, enemies don’t collaborate, no matter what team-building interventions are thrown at them!

Faced with the data about the dysfunction on the top team, the CEO recognized that the tension between the three functions was becoming a significant obstacle for the business and made improving teamwork one of his strategic initiatives. With his buy-in, we worked with the top team to create aligned goals; clarify roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes; and establish more effective norms for surfacing and working through disagreements. We also worked with teams one level down to reinforce the changes that were happening on the top team. Once the top team was modeling effective teamwork, collaboration improved throughout the organization.

2. Provide a roadmap. Simply bringing together a diverse group of individuals and hoping they will figure out how to work together rarely works. This is because most team leaders and members, despite having good intentions about promoting teamwork, don’t know the steps needed to build an effective team. This point was hit home for us when we asked leaders in executive education sessions about teamwork. Most told us they knew a high-performing team when they saw one, but were unable to describe the steps needed to build a team. They lacked a roadmap or framework for building teams, and without a roadmap, it’s difficult to arrive at the desired destination.

Drivers expect roadmaps to reflect reality: The location of streets and intersections on the map should correspond to what they see while driving. The same is true about roadmaps for teams; they need to reflect the reality of team functioning. (In scientific jargon, we use the word *valid* to describe frameworks that reflect reality.) Based on our research on thousands of teams, we have validated the following eight factors as being critical to team performance (illustrated in Figure 1: The Rocket Model™):

- **Shared View of Context.** A team does not operate in a vacuum. Stakeholder expectations, industry and societal trends, government regulations, economic realities, and other external factors have implications for the team. When team members are on the same page about contextual issues, team functioning improves.
- **Aligned Mission.** Teams are most effective when members agree on what success looks like. This goes beyond getting team members to agree on their mission statement into specifically defining success: what needs to get done and

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by when. Goal clarity is the first step toward successful execution and helps the team ensure its day-to-day activities are connected to key priorities.

- **The Right Talent.** Having team members with the right level of IQ, EQ, and capabilities is necessary, but not sufficient. High-performing teams also have clear roles and responsibilities, and they organize themselves to optimize performance. Having the right talent also means having the right number of members. (Some teams are like popular cliques; everyone wants to belong.)
- **Effective Norms.** Norms include formal processes and procedures as well as the informal rules teams use to get work done. Effective teams ensure their processes and norms help (rather than hinder) team performance. Important norms include how the team conducts meetings, makes decisions, keeps members informed, and holds members accountable.
- **Buy-in.** For a team to be effective, its members need to be committed to the team's success. Buy-in is concerned with the level of engagement and motivation team members bring to the team's goals, roles, and rules.
- **Resources.** To be successful, teams need the appropriate resources, which can include budget, software, data, authority, and political support.
- **Constructive Conflict.** Successful teams raise difficult issues and resolve differences in an effective manner. Low-performing teams either promote artificial harmony (i.e., avoid controversial issues and difficult

topics) or engage in destructive conflict, making issues personal.

- **Focus on Results.** Merely having goals isn't sufficient. The best teams also keep their goals front and center, regularly track progress, and make time to learn from successes and failures.

Based on our work with the top teams at the software company, they adopted this framework as their approach to building teams. When a new team was being formed or a team was struggling, leaders were asked to pay attention to these eight factors.

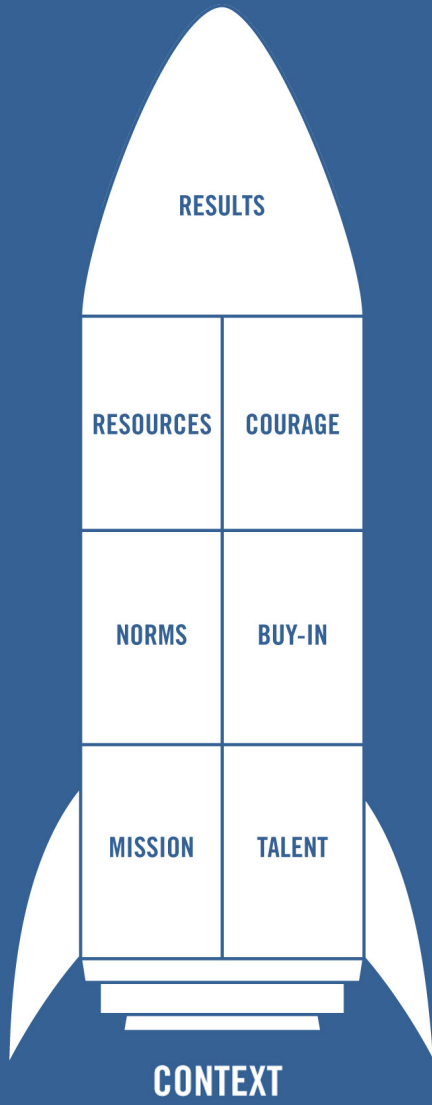
3. Enable leaders. Organizations with the highest performing teams equip their leaders with proven processes and team-building practices. Without having these tools in their toolbox, leaders equate team-building efforts with feel-good activities such as potlucks, happy hours, and other diversions. While fun activities have their place, they rarely succeed in making a measurable, lasting impact on a team's performance.

Organizations that are the most effective in supporting teams teach team-building skills in their leadership development programs. The CHRO of the software company told us, "I was seeing too many leaders relying on HR or external consultants to do team building. Building teams is a leader's job; it's too important to be outsourced. Because our leaders didn't know where to start, we redesigned our leadership development program to teach team-building skills. With teamwork being one of our strategic initiatives, we devote fully a third of the course to team building. We put the top 500 global leaders through the new program this year and got such great results that we are rolling it out to the next 1,000 next year."

4. Bake it in. Organizations with good intentions about promoting teamwork sometimes overlook the need to incorporate it into their talent management systems, tools, and practices. A common example of this problem is that most competency models carefully spell out expectations for how leaders should work with *individuals*, but they don't provide much guidance around how leaders should get those *individuals working together as a team*. Because competency models are often at the core of selection, on-boarding, development, performance management, and succession planning systems, if they don't adequately address team leadership, they are missing a key aspect of leadership.

Organizations that are the most successful in promoting teamwork use multiple levers. Consider the experience of the software company. The CEO asked the CHRO what could be done to boost teamwork and team effectiveness across the organization. The HR team responded by incorporating teamwork into the company's competency model, added it to the performance management system, increased the attention given to teamwork in development programs, and saw that the ability to build high-performing teams was given weight in promotion decisions. Because of this integrated approach, employee surveys showed significant improvements in collaboration and teamwork within 12 months and turnover was trending down.

Figure 1: The Rocket Model™



5. Measure it. Peter Drucker once wrote, “What gets measured gets managed.” This applies to teamwork too. Without feedback, teams don’t know how they’re doing or where they need to improve. Organizations at the forefront of promoting teamwork use team surveys in addition to other talent measurement tools, such as 360 reviews, personality inventories, EQ tests, and leadership style indicators. Benchmarked surveys on validated models of team effectiveness can help teams identify gaps that need to be addressed.

Consider the experience of a global professional services company whose top 100 leaders and their teams completed a benchmarked team survey. One senior leader commented, “Before going through the team survey, I had a sense my team wasn’t hitting on all cylinders, but it was impossible to pinpoint where we were going wrong. As a result of getting feedback on the different aspects of team functioning, I was better equipped to get the team on track. The team gained an awareness of the extent of our problems and learned where we should start.”

6. Don’t overdo it. The most successful organizations recognize that teams are not the answer to all organizational problems. In fact, over-relying on teamwork creates its own set of problems: collaboration fatigue, wasted time, and diffused responsibility. An example of misplaced emphasis on teamwork is the sales team that becomes overly enamored with collaboration and team-building activities. When sales people have individual quotas, separate territories, and are incented by individual commissions, team-building efforts can be counterproductive because they detract from the individual efforts necessary to achieve goals. Savvy organizations distinguish between work that is best accomplished by individual efforts and work that is best accomplished by team efforts.

Parting Advice

Teamwork has never been easy, but in recent years it has become even more challenging. And the trends that make it more difficult seem likely to continue, as teams become increasingly diverse and dispersed. Taking a systematic approach to supporting teamwork in your organization can go a long way toward helping teams succeed.

Based on our work with organizations, teams, and leaders, we offer the following advice:

- Consider the role of the organizational context and culture in promoting teamwork.
- Ensure the top team is high-functioning to avoid negative trickle down.
- Provide a roadmap to provide helpful direction and guidance to teams.
- Treat team building as a core leadership skill, embedding it into leadership development initiatives.
- Incorporate teamwork into competency models and other talent management systems and practices.
- Provide benchmarked feedback to teams.
- Provide leaders with tools specifically designed to improve team performance so they don’t rely on “fun and games.”
- Distinguish between work best done by individuals vs. teams. 📌

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References

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