

Building Exceptional Teams: Critical Factors: Part One

Recently I was asked to identify the factors that I considered critical in the creation and development of exceptional teams. This request came as a result of a conversation with a client about the reasons behind the scarcity of exceptional teams, and the necessity, within the UK, for significantly greater focus on team development as we lose the security and comfort of the EU and organisations seek, out of necessity, the greater advantages of team operation and the higher ROI of investment in teams. This is an initial distillation of my thoughts:

1 Effective foundation communication:

We live in a complex society, we play complex games; the language we use within a team can complicate any aspect of communication leaving team members unable to make accurate interpretations. Simple, foundation-level jargon-free communication is a most critical factor in developing exceptional teams; developing a communication system that avoids misunderstanding, misinterpretation and misdirection is a key factor in any high-performance organisation.

Judgement-free communication is part of the same factor; it is too often the case that the speaker considers that the responsibility for accurate interpretation and understanding lies with the listener and will judge that person according to that false notion; such a mistaken belief supports closed, covert communication, prevents confident expression, prevents checking of understanding and, as a result, increases the chance of miscommunication.

Teams develop their own communication system as they develop; this is likely to be more effective if the original seed-language was uncomplicated foundation level plain English, especially as new team members join and need to adjust their interpretation to understand their new team language. Using plain English is a much under-rated skill.

Team development action:

- Encourage team members to explain ideas, instructions, requests, etc in plain English;
- Discourage use of jargon and acronyms, etc;
- Avoid making assumptions about understanding by encouraging and supporting checking and clarifying;
- Encourage and support the notion that the speaker is responsible for ensuring the listener understands their message;

2 Responsibility for the success and failure of each other team member:

Teams start to form when individuals grouped by a common purpose realise that they create an advantage by taking responsibility for the success of others and by enabling others to contribute to their success. Without that catalytic initiative, the people in a group may work together but a team will not develop. It is often the case that people work together, merely imagining that they are working within a team, without ever realising the potential available through the interdependence that stems from interpersonal responsibility.

Inseparable from this notion is the fact that no two people are the same, have the same capacity for work, intelligence, knowledge and expertise and, in taking responsibility for the success of each other, each team member will depend to a greater or lesser degree on others to provide that which they don't have. The realisation that one team member will need more support than another, one works faster than another, one has a more agile imagination than another, one has a propensity for logical evaluation, another has an especially sensitive and intuitive mind, etc. is likely to stimulate the growth of a culture of mutual support and acceptance, and leads to the realisation that these differences are the most powerful resources of the team.

Team development action:

- Encourage and support interpersonal responsibility;
- Discourage protectionism of and within roles;
- Encourage sharing of expertise and knowledge;
- Welcome and nourish diversification; celebrate the variety of perceptions, preferences, capabilities, and skills, etc;
- Discourage the notion that character or role cloning is advantageous, that similarity is superior;
- Take advantage of every idea, every viewpoint and every preference to extol the advantages of variety and diversification and extend the potential to explore new territory;

3 Identical objectives:

Each member of an exceptional team is aware of the objectives of the entire team. This differs from each member of the team being aware only of their own objectives and the overall objective. Being knowledgeable about what the team is intending to achieve, when and how is absolutely essential if a team member is going to make a valuable contribution to the achievement of other team members; the greater their knowledge the more likely they are to create or encounter an opportunity to make a contribution other than within their own role.

Objectives are hierarchical according to function and time; for example today's sales objectives indicate a contribution to the longer term organisational objectives; sharing objectives on every level is one of the most critical factors in maximising the potential of the team.

However, each team member's perception and understanding of those objectives must be identical; otherwise the value of contribution is significantly reduced and rapidly becomes a burden. Imagine being on the receiving end of a handful of contributions, each made with good intention but without an accurate knowledge of the intended outcomes. Responses to such contributions are highly likely to become a deterrent against future contributions.

Team development action:

- Publish, clarify and share the team's objectives, hourly, daily, weekly, etc;
- Enable each team member to openly express and explore their perception of the team's objectives;

- Encourage investigation, exploration and opportunism in the creation of opportunities to make a contribution to the overall team objectives and to each team member's objectives.

4 Clarity of purpose and responsibility:

Real clarity of purpose and responsibility is critical for each individual team member to avoid confusion, contradiction and lack of direction and so often a factor which is paid lip-service though without the degree of detail and commitment required to ensure efficient achievement. I have encountered, on so many occasions, the dissemination of direction from a team manager or director with insufficient detail about the associated purpose and responsibilities leaving team members to then stumble their way to clarity over far too long a period with the opportunity for waste and error to multiply. Having also witnessed the psychological benefits of clarity of purpose and responsibility in both my own business and in other organisations that I've worked with, I can attest to utter joy replacing the negativity of such a state. That negativity erodes creativity, positivity and good nature and can evoke team paralysis.

In any team there is a need for a clear description of the purpose or reason for that team member being in that team and clear identification of the parameters and subjects (recipients of the benefits) of responsibility.

Team development action:

- Encourage all team members to seek such clarity at the first available opportunity;
- Take the time to describe each team members purpose;
- Take the time to clearly identify each team members responsibility, for what, to whom and where when and how;
- Look for negativity, confusion and lack of direction and you'll find a need for clarity;

Simon McElroy is an experiential development coach and facilitator of learning based in Cumbria, UK, specialising in delivering [team building events](http://www.keyadventures.co.uk) using challenging activities to enable teams to consider the value of their actions and behaviours.