



Unlocking the potential of teams

BetterChange
Adapt. Evolve. Thrive.

Unlocking the potential of teams

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Improving team performance represents a huge opportunity for many organisations. Recent research conducted for McKinsey & Co concluded that the untapped performance in teams is enormous.

When we think about it, virtually everything worthwhile is created through teams. Teams have always been important for execution of strategy and delivery of service. Overall organisational effectiveness depends on the effectiveness of organisational teams. The underlying reason is that 'none of us is as smart as all of us'.

So why do many teams fail to live up to this potential? At BetterChange, we believe it's because too little focus is spent working *on the team* versus working *in the team*.

This paper outlines our perspective on what is required to work 'on the team' and thus improve effectiveness. We introduce the key topics of: configuring a successful team; shaping collective thinking and learning; developing trust; and managing expectations. We also reveal the biggest motivation for team workers (which may surprise you).

Configure (and re-configure) for success

Success, like all other emergent properties, is a phenomenon that cannot be purchased outright. No amount of money can buy trust, integrity, friendship, happiness or success – these emerge from the interactions of people with widely varying backgrounds, motives, capacity and skills working on real challenges and opportunities.

That's why it is critical to take 'emergence' into account when selecting, forming and developing a team configuration. This approach is far more likely to be successful than relying on the common default positions of "it will all work out if we have strong leadership", or "if we provide enough team training sessions".

Truly effective teams do not happen by accident. They flourish and succeed when the optimum conditions for teamwork are in place.

We use the term *configuration* because it encompasses the combined effect of leadership, structure, personality types, competencies and network connectedness.

The starting point for team configuration is to consider i) the purpose of the team and ii) the environment (system) it will be operating within. Generally speaking, smaller teams are more agile. However there are effective techniques for building dynamic larger or multiple teams. For example, rotating key people, or building networks across teams, will help maintain cross-fertilisation of progress, ideas and lessons learned.

Regardless of size or purpose, every team configuration should be able to:

- understand its environment and objectives at all times
- make decisions that the whole team stands by
- have the tools, resources and authority to take action
- perpetuate a supportive culture, and
- learn and adapt in action

Thinking and learning in action

One thing making it harder for teams to work effectively is the sheer pace and complexity of the environment we now operate in. Add to this the hyper-connectivity of today's world – when a change anywhere can affect performance everywhere.

This means it is getting harder and harder for individual team leaders to do the thinking and learning for the whole team. Organisational life is simply too complex and fluid.

This has caused a paradigm shift in the way that successful teams work (as outlined in the final section of this paper).

Successful teams of the future will think and learn together, so that they can move purposefully forward. Thinking and learning together builds commitment to action, and accountability for results.

In our experience at BetterChange, we find teams work better when there is a deliberate effort to:

- collectively agree on the reality they face
- focus on their strengths, rather than their weaknesses
- treat disagreement as an opportunity to learn
- think in terms of their system, rather than linear 'cause and effect'
- balance inward and outward orientation

*“Never confuse
movement with action”
– Ernest Hemingway*

Focus on progress

Teresa Amabile's ground-breaking research in 2010 involved the analysis of nearly 12,000 knowledge worker episodes with the aim of uncovering the biggest motivation for workers. It wasn't recognition (as leaders believed). It was the *feeling of progress on the things that matter*.

Collaboration, support and important work (in that order) were also factors – but nothing motivates like progress on the issues that are important to you and your team.

Our advice is not to get caught up in models, process, methodology or theory. Instead, focus on the outcomes you're wanting. Choosing those outcomes should be a collective piece of thought leadership.

Here are some of our key strategies to help keep your team focussed on progress. We recommend you make a deliberate effort to:

- start small and learn your way forward
- maximise the time spent discussing how to make progress
- let go of old behaviours that impede progress
- understand how the value you add is always changing
- agree real measures of progress

Build trust

Humans are social creatures. We are wired to co-operate in groups that are held together with trust. Trust provides the basis for the social fabric out of which the group's outcomes emerge. High levels of trust form the foundation for a cohesive team ethic.

At BetterChange, we define trust as a willingness to share vulnerability to uncertain future outcomes. In our experience, this is relatively rare among organisational teams. But it can be developed, through deliberately managing our interactions with others.

Trust can be built when there is a deliberate effort to:

- understand the perspectives of each other and their stakeholders in their wider system
- commit to delivering to agreed expectations (and go further to identify and realise added value)
- have the courage to appropriately confront difficult situations
- have a strong sense of self-efficacy, authenticity of self, and accountability for their own behaviour
- understand deeper motivations behind their own and others' behaviours

Team coaching

Our sporting history is rich with examples of teams that are coached to achieve outstanding results. Smart organisations are looking to replicate this in the business arena.

There is a growing acceptance of coaching as a powerful mechanism for developing people. However much coaching is currently delivered to individuals, and it tends to under-appreciate the interdependencies of group dynamics. At BetterChange, we believe coaching is more effective for organisations (and will deliver greater returns) when it engages with teams.

An effective team coach can bring a valuable external perspective, challenge thinking and behaviours, and act as a respected conscience for the group.

In summary, this paper has briefly introduced some of the key principles we believe are necessary for truly effective teamwork. If you're ready to unlock the potential in your teams, we'd welcome the opportunity to share these ideas with you.

There is a paradigm shift in the way teams are working today. The new-generation teams illustrate the transformation:



- from* **hierarchy** *to* **network organisation**
- from* **right/wrong** *to* **learning in action**
- from* **command/control** *to* **empowered emergence**
- from* **fixed/rigid** *to* **fluid/agile**
- from* **closed** *to* **open and transparent**
- from* **independent** *to* **hyper-connected**
- from* **leadership (led)** *to* **citizenship (met)**
- from* **working-for** *to* **working-with**

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