

Leading Teams

By Joseph G. Cutcliffe, PhD

Teams have increasingly become a means by which organizations accomplish difficult tasks. Teaming is an effective way of ensuring diverse participation, maximizing creativity, enhancing commitment and providing additional leadership opportunities.

Every team, however, starts out as a group of individuals who must pass through a sequence of specific growth stages before becoming effective as a team. Groups may develop into effective teams without any conscious effort, but when this happens they inevitably have gone through the same necessary stages, albeit unconsciously.

Paralleling similar growth stages in human development, an evolving team has different needs and faces unique developmental challenges at different times in its life cycle. There are specific group skills that must be mastered, and problems to be solved at each stage before the team can move on to the next level of maturation. Trust, always critical to the success of a leader and a team, is a byproduct of this successful passage, or, sometimes, a casualty of its failure. By understanding the necessary sequence and cyclical nature of the stages a team must go through, a leader can facilitate the teams' growth and help team members weather the confusion and frustration which often accompany serious change.

By accurately assessing the developmental maturity of a team, the effective leader can adjust his or her behavior accordingly and facilitate the group's progress. By ignoring this developmental perspective, or by maintaining a singular, unchanging leadership style, a leader can actually cause a team to stall at a pre-productive stage and fail to fulfill its high-performance potential.

Stage 1: Forming

In the first stage of team development, team members want to know and understand what is expected of them. What is the purpose or mission of the group, and what goals or objectives are they trying to accomplish. Anxiety and confusion can quickly follow the initial excitement. Typically, no one feels secure enough to be "real". Hence, this is a polite time without much open conflict or commitment. The leader's job is to provide structure and direction, to set goals and establish clarity, including "ground rules" or operating guidelines. Because the team usually needs clarity more than support, the appropriate leader behaviors are referred to as *High Task/ Low Touch*.

Stage 2: Storming

During the second stage, novelty and enthusiasm usually give way to frustration, conflict and anger. Again, this is an inevitable sequence. Once clarity and purpose have been established, this stage is necessary for the group to continue to move toward productive maturity as a team. The question to be answered now however is not "What?", but rather "Who" is in charge and "Who" plays what role? During this stage the leader may experience mindless resistance, arguing, hostile splinter-groups, jealousies and general dissent. This is not a pretty or polite time. The honeymoon is over. Morale spirals downward and members start to question whether or not they want to belong to the team. It is a stage when the leader needs to exert control and determine clearly who will play what roles. The leader often needs to actively play multiple roles, including coach, player, referee, and supporting fan. For this reason, we refer to the desirable style of the leader during this stage as, *High Task /High Touch*.

Stage 3: Norming

Once goals and roles are clear and accepted, the team begins to regain its balance and enters into the relatively calm "norming" stage. This period often feels so much better than the one that precedes it, that many teams get this far only and don't move on. In this stage, people develop standard ways of doing things. The question is more "How" shall we work together? "How" shall we communicate and share information? "How" will we plan, disagree and make decisions? Team members begin to cooperate with each other, and the power plays, grandstanding, and jousting of stage two disappear. The main danger

now is that team members hold back their good ideas, in an effort to avoid further conflict.

The leader's job in stage three is to help the team overcome their reticence and work together to improve the team's performance. Recognizing that clarity and control have been solved, the team now needs consistency. The leader now needs to be less directive and more encouraging and motivating for the team to grow. Hence, the prescriptive leader behaviors for this stage are termed, *Low Task/High Touch*.

Stage 4: Performing

In the fourth and final stage, the team becomes fully functional and productive. By now, members have learned to disagree constructively, take measured risks, make adjustments and trade-offs, and apply their full energy to a variety of challenges. With this stronger, mature team actively working together to maximize their skills and productivity, the leader can emphasize delegating and rewarding. The appropriate leadership approach now becomes, *Low Task/Low Touch*.

It is important to note that reaching the performing stage does not mean smooth sailing forevermore. A team can experience a stormy period at any time, e.g., when it is under unusual stress. The team can also return to its forming stage if it adds or loses members, or if its mission and goals are changed radically.

If the team begins to recycle through the earlier stages, it must resolve the issues posed in each sequential stage all over again. The leader who understands this dynamic is better prepared to shift styles, and take an active role in helping the team move quickly through the stages to regain its former productivity and high performance.

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