



Teaming in wilds – Performing at work

A clear vision of a unified purpose is what welds a group of people into a high-performance team. Naseem Zafar Iqbal invokes his hands-on experience as a trainer to identify the most vital ingredient of 'teamness'.

For the last ten years it has been my practice to start all training sessions with a standard key question eliciting a short written response: How do you rate yourselves as a team?

The 'teams' that participate in the programs come from a variety of departments – ranging from sales and supply chains to customer services, from finance to production and procurement. Sometimes I have cross-functional teams from departments that interact closely with each other, being mutually dependent to achieve organizational objectives.

Occasionally, I train cross organizational teams consisting of customer and vendor organizations working

in tandem. In terms of status and scope of work as well, teams again may differ to include senior managers, new product-launching groups or new project teams. So the variety is enormous, but the starting question is the same.

After this first rating, I take the participants through some experiential learning coupled with theoretical framework of what a high performance team is and how it functions. Against this backdrop – and almost halfway through the program – I repeat my initial question asking for a written

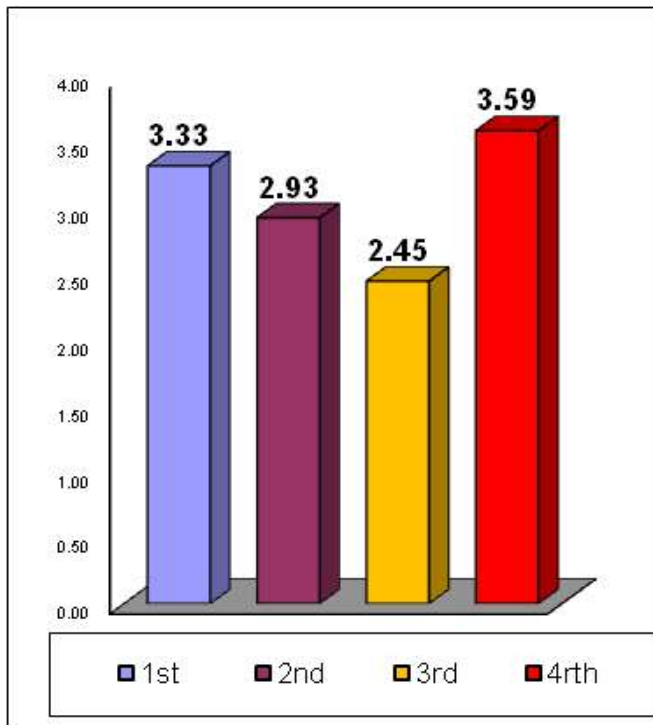
response by using newly-introduced conceptual frameworks as parameters. This is our 2nd rating. Next the participants go through a series of activities spread over a period of mostly 2 to 3 days, during which the participants get an opportunity to interact with each other in a number of ways.

Towards the end of the program I ask for the participants' 3rd rating as a team retrospectively, assuming that it is the starting point of the program. Finally I ask for their real-time rating –

the 4th – now that they have completed their training and equipped themselves with, presumably, much improved parameters of team assessment.

This practice, over the last several years, has come up with astounding statistics based on comparisons of the four ratings: initial ratings at the start of the program with a rating half way through and retrospective evaluation followed by the final assessment at the end of the program. All of us – those who head corporate teams or are part of various teams in our organizations – need to take some time off to evaluate this amazing and largely consistent data. Having a look at the summary of this data and its graphical representation of the first,

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second, third and final ratings will be quite interesting:

The first rating at the start of the programs gives an average of 3.33 on a scale of 1 to 5. As we proceed with the program, the rating starts to come down.

This shows an anomaly in our understanding of teams and groups. When we work together we tend to consider ourselves as a team. We are working together, so we are colleagues, even great friends, enjoying excellent work relationships. The first

ratings are based on these subjective presumptions. On the other hand, the second ratings are based on a more objective appreciation of what a team should be. We can say that our parameters have now become more rigorous, so the graph has dipped down.

What are these (new) ingredients or parameters of assessment that constitute our criteria of a good team? In other words, what is it that turns a random group of people into a team? This vital question is intimately linked with a number of factors, but



there is one that has a fundamental and defining role. Other considerations notwithstanding, this key factor is what, in reality, transforms a pseudo-team into a high performance team.

I vividly remember that in our Leadership Expedition program for a multinational company in year 2008, I tested this phenomenon in an extremely challenging environment. This was a remote location in the middle of snow-clad mountains somewhere off the main Kaghan Valley, in northern Pakistan. We divided the group of participants into two teams – Bravo and Romeo.

Bravo Team was shown – by physically pointing out to them – a distant location on

The Bravos had a handicap and an advantage at the same time. The handicap was the lack of detailed instructions about the route. They didn't have any path-finding equipment, either. All they had in their minds was a clear picture of the destination. What happened to the Romeo team? Right from the beginning, their focus was entirely on operational matters. But, instead of creating a meaningful sense of urgency for themselves as a team, they got bogged down in operational details.

the foot of a glacier that could be seen from our base camp. Their purpose was to reach the point identified before the sunset and set up a camp so as to manage their overnight survival, in conditions where climatic circumstances and supplies could be a major problem.

Romeo Team was also given a mandate to reach the same



point, but without being physically pointed out to them. Instead the spot was identified on a map and the team was handed in path-finding equipment with detailed directions about the location and its route.

Guess what? Who reached the destination in time? Well, it was the Bravo team who made it. As for the Romeos, it is a different story, thrilling and thought provoking.

From the very beginning, the Bravos had a handicap and an advantage at the same time. The handicap was the lack of detailed instructions about the route. They didn't have any path-finding equipment, either, to guide them through a thick jungle of trees and bushes, on an uneven terrain without a well-trodden path leading to the spot of their choice. All they had in their minds was a clear picture of the destination, which, though from a distance, had been physically shown to each one of them.

What actually welded them all into a well-knit unit was a unified sensibility – it was also clear to each one of them that if they did not make it to the destination, they would be lost and face trouble. Thanks to the heightened sense of



responsibility in each individual, the leadership role in Bravo team became 'diluted' and was reduced to keeping the team together and motivated. The task ahead was much simple and no complications were anticipated. All the team members were committed to reaching their destination. And they emerged successful.

What happened to the Romeo team? Right from the beginning, their focus – and understandably so – was entirely on operational matters (not to say that operational details, as such, are not important!). But, instead of creating a meaningful sense of urgency for themselves as a team, they got bogged down in operational details. As a result, they lost focus on the



unified purpose. When the project was handed over to them, the emphasis shifted to logistics – reading the map, handling the path-finding equipment and identifying the detailed route. Neither the leader nor any of the team

members had asked this question: What is our final destination? So their vision of the unified purpose remained hazy.

Following from this confusion, their abortive journey to the destination was full of conflicts, delays, frustrations and disappointments. In the

Of all the ingredients, unified focus on the purpose is the most vital. This is precisely what knits a random assortment into a high performance team and, broadly, also applies to other facets of life – a family value system, a community's collective vision and even the political will of an entire nation. The higher is the level of unification, the more effective the team will be.

event, the Bravo team members, who had made it to the destination, had to launch an operation to locate 'the missing Romeos' and rescued them. When they were

escorted to the destination, tired and drained, the sun had already set. It had started to drizzle with temperature threatening to fall to zero.

This case study, or rather a real life experience, leads one

to the inescapable conclusion that even a relatively ill-equipped team, with a clear vision of its unified purpose and imbued with a sense of commitment can work wonders whereas a well-equipped group of individuals lacking a unified focus are more likely to falter and fail.

Of all the ingredients that turn a group of people into a real team, unified focus on the purpose is the most vital. This is precisely what knits a random assortment into a high performance team and, broadly, also applies to other facets of life – a family value system, a community's collective vision and even the political will of an entire nation. The higher is the level of unification, the more effective the team will be. Best results are, however, achieved when this key factor is allowed to function in an atmosphere of trust, open communication and mutual accountability.

Going back to the Team Performance Curve, our 3rd rating has been taken on retrospective basis at the end of the program. The factors mentioned above have now become the new parameters of assessment after going

through the program. The teams have assessed their past 'teamness' but on the new parameters; hence the lowest rating so far.

The 4th and final rating – according to the new parameters – is an outcome of the experience gained by the participants through the program, usually over a period of 2-3 days. This experience poses extremely challenging goals, which the participant meet equipped with a unified sense of purpose and realize that their survival in a wild and demanding environment depends on giving their best



to the team and asking for the best of every team member. They also realize that standing up to what they believe is right brings dividends to team in terms of success.

At the end of the day, the ultimate accomplishment should be the newly-discovered correlation between the program experience and its application at the workplace with a resolve to perform and succeed in every aspect of life.



For the next issue of Impact Partner – autumn edition, October 2011 – contributions are gratefully solicited in the form of empirical research, case studies, review of literature, correspondents' comments, and reports on corporate training activities with a real educative value.

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