

The Basics of Teams



by Alex Auerbach

Intro

Anything great is achieved in the context of a team.

Individual performers still have a team around them. The world's best executives have a team of people working alongside them to deliver outsized results. World championships in sports go to the collection of players that best functions as a unit, not to the best individual contributor in a given sport.

Teams play a big part in how we rise to the top.

To get the most out of ourselves, we need to understand how to build and get the most out of the team around us.

Because of what we see in the most public teams in professional sports, I think we mistakenly believe that good teams are built by simply selecting the best talent and hoping that they gel together. Of course, the talent level of individual team members does matter, but it doesn't matter nearly as much as the ability of team members to work together toward a common goal.

In the coming weeks, I'll present a series of articles on the science of high-performing teams paired with my own experience about what I've seen make teams successful, from the NBA to the military unit that defuses live bombs.

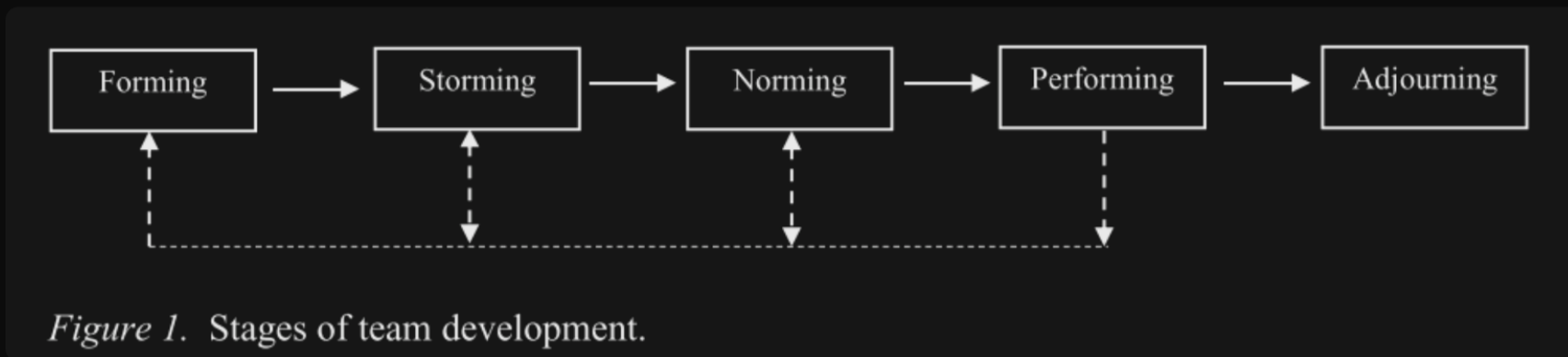
To begin, let's create a shared foundation for the basic structures and systems involved in teams.

Teams Form in Stages

The simplest model of team formation goes back to 1965.

Bruce Tuckman developed a catchy 5-step process that groups go through to rise to a place where they can perform effectively together.

It looks like this:



Each of these stages contributes to a team's ultimate ability to perform well under pressure and to deliver results.

Forming

Forming kind of looks like what you see in movies where they bring a group of people together for a random meeting and don't tell them why until the boss walks in. The forming stage is marked by confusion - about purpose, structure, and even who's in charge. In this context, members of the group start to clarify both the team's objectives (sometimes obvious, like winning a championship, and sometimes less obvious, like being the best defensive team in the league), people's roles, and who does what.

Storming

At this point, the team starts to settle in. There are disagreement about tasks, goals, roles, and occasionally leadership. Around this time, people start to do things like take sides to influence the direction of the team.

Handling this stage effectively is critical. Conflict can facilitate a much deeper connection and enhanced teamwork or it can completely destroy a team's ability to perform. Often during this stage, conflicts emerge that you wouldn't anticipate or expect, and there may be conflicts that seem unnecessary as people grapple with their role and how they best contribute.

Norming

As the team works through the conflict, enhanced collaboration and cooperation emerges. People are clearer on their roles and responsibilities and the team may start to become more cohesive. Members align around expectations and goals, and the sense that "we're a team" starts to become more palpable.

Performing

With the previous 3 stages successfully navigated, the team can emerge into a well-oiled machine. With roles and goals clarified, people are encouraged to take risks, members more actively back each other up, and people are focused more on accomplishing the tasks than establishing themselves as important on the team.

Adjourning

In cases where groups disband - whether its from graduation or reassignment - this phase simply involves debriefing and preparing to move onto the next team.

Of course, not all teams go through all 5 stages, and they don't always occur in the specific order. In fact, some teams may be in more than one stage simultaneously. It happens all the time in sports, as players jockey for status in the locker room and are also required to play 82 games.

When teams navigate these stages successfully, they perform better and sustain that performance in comparison to teams that don't (Bushe & Coetzer, 2007).

What Makes Teams Work

There's a whole field exploring the science of teamwork, much of which tends to revolve around the same core features: roles, cohesion, and norms of behavior.

Roles

You might be surprised at the number of professional athletes that don't feel they have clarity on their role. And, to make a team work, a set of roles is often necessary, which may or may not align with the role the members want to play. Football has 11 different positions - if you slot neatly in to one of those, your role is clear. If not, it can be more difficult to navigate.

Roles are more multidimensional than just the position you play. We tend to categorize roles into 3 themes: task-oriented roles, relationship-oriented roles, and self-oriented roles (Humphrey, Manor, & Morgeson, 2009).

Task-oriented roles are all about getting the work done. People with a task-oriented role tend to make things happen, by starting the progress toward the goal, seeking new information, and coordinating between members of the team. Often, people in task-oriented roles are seen as focused, intense, and occasionally aloof, because their role is really about driving performance via *getting stuff done*, rather than moving the team along together.

Relationship-oriented roles are the "glue" of the team. They offer encouragement, try to bridge the gap between team members, and often help clarify the objectives of those task-oriented team members. People in relationship-oriented roles tend to be more followers than leaders, and tend to be well-liked but not necessarily high performing (though you can have people that play both task- and -relationship-oriented roles).

And, try as we might, all teams have some self-oriented roles. These are the attitudes or behaviors that we call "selfish" when we see them, like blocking the team's progress by being negative, dominating, or avoiding conflict. These roles emerge because everyone has individual goals they're also trying to pursue in the context of the larger team performance. Our goal is to mitigate the risk of these roles by aligning incentives and helping people feel a sense of belonging.

Norms

Norms are the informal rules and expectations that regulate the behavior of a group (Ehrhart & Naumann, 2004).

One of the first things I do when working with a new team to improve teamwork and culture is explicitly address the norms the group wants to develop. The environment is a particularly influential factor in our behavior, and norms are a sort of latent environmental factor that regularly dictate how people think, feel, and act. By consciously shaping and articulating the norms the group wants, we can create an atmosphere that leads athletes to behave in a way we'd want and expect. The norms become "the way we do it around here."

Good teams need norms in a few key areas:

- Productivity and performance
- Commitment to the team
- Communication and conflict

Though not an exhaustive list, by naming what's expected around productivity and performance (and setting high standards in so doing), we can elevate the performance of the team by raising the expectation. By shaping the loyalty and degree of ownership team members feel about the outcome of their work, we can enhance their commitment to the team. By being clear about how the team should communicate and handle conflict, we can improve the way team members interact with each other and squash problems before they tear the team apart.

Status

Everyone on the team won't have the same social standing. In the NBA, some players are more valuable than others, and it's reflected in their paycheck and in the locker room. The same is true in business.

That doesn't mean they're more valuable as human beings, but in the context of a high-performing team, their presence has a different impact than others.

Status tends to form as a judgment of capability, knowledge, experience, and interpersonal skills, but can also be influenced by less important things, like physical appearance. All of this gets summarized into a judgment we tend to make about a team member's "credibility" or "value."

Research suggests status tends to come from 3 places (as cited in Robbins & Judge, 2014):

1. **Power over others.** These people have sway over team resources and as a result are perceived as higher status.
2. **Ability to contribute to the team's goals.** The more important someone's function is to the team's success, the more status they have. CEOs tend to be higher status than CFOs, because they drive the goals and how they'll be achieved in a business.
3. **Personal characteristics.** Positively valued personal characteristics, like knowledge and intelligence, raise status.

Of course, any individual can be higher or lower on any of these dimensions, influencing the overall perception of their status.

Cohesion

Cohesion refers to the degree of connection and commitment team members have to being part of the team. It's composed of two factors - task cohesion and relational cohesion (Tziner, 1982).

Relational cohesion is the sense of belonging and togetherness people feel from being a part of the team. Task cohesion is the emergence of mutually-dependent relationships that come about as a function of the team members needing each other to reach their shared goals.

Anyone who has been a part of team can attest to the differences in cohesion they experience as a function of several factors that make teams more or less sticky. How team members interact, how successful they are, how exclusive it is, and even who teams compete against can influence the degree of cohesiveness a team experiences. For example, when teams are as small as they can be to accomplish the task, or when there's a higher degree of exclusivity to join the team, the team tends to be more cohesive.

Teams also tend to be more cohesive the more time they spend together. This is one reason why it's important to try and keep teams together for a considerable amount of time - the team is unlikely to reach anything close to its full potential in the first 3-6 months, maybe more, of working together. This is one reason that the rotating door of coaches in college and professional sports more often than not leads to underperformance. The coach and team simply don't have enough time together to form a cohesive connection that can facilitate high performance.

As a bonus, more cohesive teams generally tend to perform better and are better for the organization (though not always). Cohesion predicts high levels of motivation and commitment to the team, and members of cohesive teams tend to participate more fully, show up more, have their basic needs met, and are more productive than members of less cohesive teams (Lunenburg & Lunenburg, 2015).

Conclusion

With this foundation in place, we're prepared to explore the deeper science behind what brings out the best in teams (and the individuals within them). In the coming weeks, we'll unpack the "Too-much-talent effect," some science behind high-performing military units, and the role that personality plays (or doesn't play) in helping teams reach their full potential.

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