A Guide to Building High Performing Teams

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 Three hundred miles south of New Zealand are the Auckland Islands. They are isolated, forbidding, and 150 years ago, they brought almost certain death to ships that got too close. The howling sub-Antarctic winds drove ships onto the shallow reefs, and most sailors quickly drowned. Those who made it to shore soon died of exposure and starvation. Those few who survived did so in dreadful conditions. In *Island of the Lost*, Joan Druett (2007) recounts the story of two parties who were shipwrecked in 1864 on opposite sides of the island, and it is a story of leadership and teamwork.

 The first, a party of five led by Captain Thomas Musgrave of England, behaved like Shackleton's crew stranded in the Weddell Sea. Encouraged by Musgrave, the men banded together in a common quest for survival. Over a period of 20 months, using material salvaged from their ship, they built a cabin, found food, rotated cooking duties, nursed one another, made tools, tanned seal hides for shoes, built a bellows and a furnace, made bolts and nails, and then built a boat which they used to sail to safety.

 Meanwhile, 20 miles away, a Scottish ship led by Captain George Dalgarno went aground and 19 men made it safely to shore. Delgarno became depressed, went "mad", and the rest of the crew fell into despair, anarchy, and then cannibalism. A sailor named Robert Holding tried to encourage the others to act together to build shelter and find food, but other members of the crew threatened to kill and eat him. After three months, only three men were alive and subsequently rescued.

 Although this story takes place almost 150 years ago, it has strong parallels to modern teams. How a group of people works together determines whether a team succeeds of fails, yet personal experience and in-depth research tells us that most teams have problems with morale, innovation, efficiency, or effectiveness. Virtually everyone has spent part his or her working career working on a dysfunctional team, and people can vividly recall their worst team experiences. The purpose of this article is to describe what people need to do in order to build high performing teams.

Rocket Model© of Team Performance

 Although most people would readily acknowledge the importance of teamwork, these same individuals often have no idea how to go about making teamwork happen. People fondly remember what it was like to work on high performing teams, but they have a much harder time describing what made the team so cohesive and effective. It turns out that there is nothing magical about building high performing teams. What people need is a model or framework for understanding team dynamics and performance. The Rocket Model© provides a framework for understanding the critical components of and actions needed to improve team functioning and performance. The Rocket Model© is both descriptive and prescriptive, as it can be used to describe what is going well or poorly on a team and prescribe what teams need to do and the order by which the actions should be taken in order to improve morale or effectiveness.

Context: What are our critical assumptions?

 Teams do not operate in a vacuum, and a critical first step to building high performing teams is gaining alignment on team context. All too often team members have different assumptions about customers, suppliers, or competitors; and their well-

The Rocket Model©
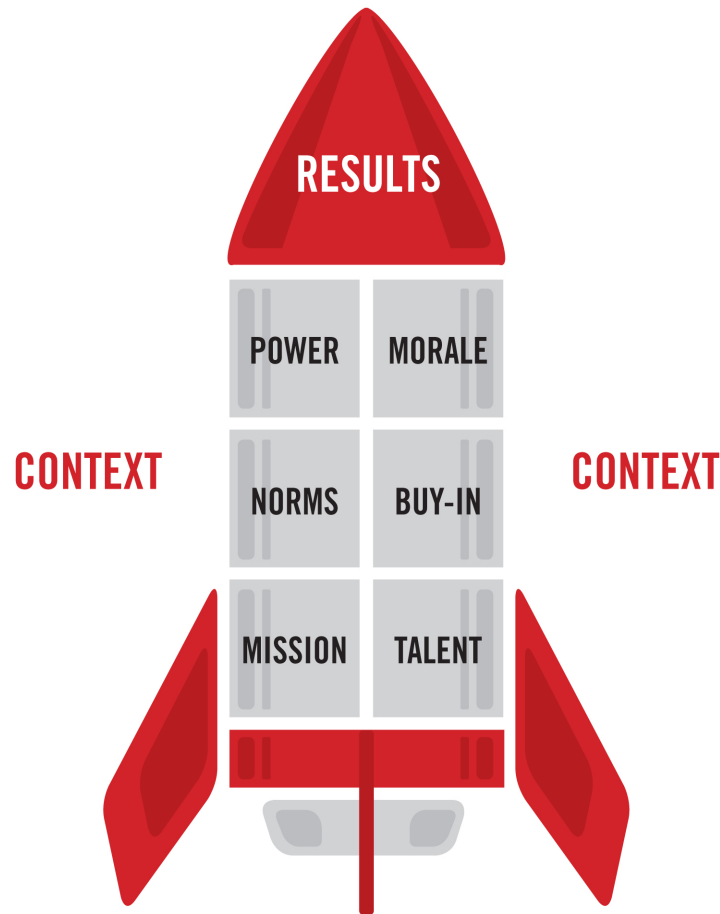
intended but misaligned actions can inadvertently destroy team morale and sub-optimize team efficiency and effectiveness. One noteworthy aspect of team context is the implicit nature of team member assumptions—team members rarely if ever articulate their assumptions about key stakeholders. In order to make the implicit more explicit, team members should work together to identify the key stakeholders or entities that affect the team. These entities might include key customers, competitors, other teams, regulatory agencies, vendors, the parent organization, etc. Team members should then discuss and agree on the top three to five assumptions they have for each entity. Gaining alignment on team context makes it much easier to determine the purpose and key goals for the team; and reviewing team assumptions about key stakeholders can also accelerate the on-boarding of new team members.

Mission: Why are we here?

Teams that do not have a clear purpose or goals are destined to fail, and people report that these teams are among the worst they have ever been on. Sharing common

assumptions about the entities affecting a team can be a good start in determining how a team can add the most value. But high performing teams set SMART-B goals—goals that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Resourced, Time Bound, and Benchmarked. Specific and Measurable goals include clearly defined metrics and targets for each key outcome. Team goals should have high bars for performance but be achievable, and the team should have the resources it needs to achieve its goals. Team goals should have specific due dates and internal and external benchmarks should be set for below, meets, and exceeds expectations. High performing teams create scorecards that list all the key team goals, benchmarks, and progress to date.

Mission is the most important component in the Rocket Model© of team performance. The goals and purpose of the team should determine who is on the team (Talent), the rules by which the team operates (Norms), the level of commitment and equipment needed (Buy-In and Power), and the level of team cohesiveness (Morale). As such, Mission drives all the other components of the Rocket Model©.

Two common mistakes teams make concerning Mission is not having SMART-B team goals and spending too much time building team mission statements. As described earlier, teams without clear goals are like rockets that are all thrust and no vector. It is not as if members of these teams are not working hard; it is just that they confuse activity with productivity and consequently spend a lot of time doing things that do not contribute to team effectiveness. The second mistake is to define the team's purpose before creating a set of SMART-B goals. Because most team members enjoy building team mission statements about as much as they like unnecessary root canals, teams should first define their SMART-B goals before worrying about building purpose or mission statements. The concrete actions associated with setting goals are usually much more energizing than editing mission statements, so why lose momentum by spending a lot of time doing something that depletes rather then energizes the team? Once the team goals are clearly defined, a subgroup of team members can be assigned to work on a mission statement that can be shared with and edited by the rest of the team.

Talent: Who is on the bus?

Many times people find themselves on teams with clear goals, but the teams do not have the people they need to succeed. The Talent component of the Rocket Model© is concerned with having the right number of people with the skills needed to accomplish team goals. The number and types of people needed varies with team goals, and as team goals change, so do the skills needed by team members. Teams have two choices when they face a shortfall in talent—they can either hire people from the outside or develop team member skills to fill talent gaps. This build or buy decision will depend on the availability and time needed to develop proficiency.

Five common causes of team failure involving Talent include: (1) not having the right number of people (too many people can be just as problematic as not having enough people); (2) not have the people with the right skills; (3) having team members with ill-defined roles; (4) poor followership; and (5) having an expert who is not a team player. One would think that getting the right number of people on the teams with the right skills would be relatively easy, but unfortunately most organizations assign staff to teams based more on availability or politics than talent. The poor followership and "team killer" problems can be tougher nuts to crack. Because dysfunctional followers and team killers sap team cohesiveness and morale, they either need to be convinced to get along with others or be replaced. The sooner team leaders deal with this issue, the better off the team will be.

Norms: What are the rules?

Team norms are the unwritten rules that team members follow as part of their day-to-day work activities. An obvious team norm involves seating arrangements. How often do people sit in the same seats at team meetings? Although seating arrangements are not formally assigned, teams adopt informal rules about where people sit. The power of these rules becomes evident as soon as someone sits in another person's seat. It turns out that these implicit, informal rules have a strong influence on team member behavior.

Seating arrangements are a simple example of a team norm; more powerful norms evolve when people get together on a regular basis. For example, groups quickly develop norms for greeting, meeting, seating, communicating, deciding, and executing, even though team members may not have formally discussed any of these topics. And because norms influence team member behavior, they can profoundly impact team cohesiveness and performance. A key question is whether a team's current set of norms helps or hinders team success. In other words, are team meetings, team communication and decision-making processes, and the unwritten rules regarding work hand-offs and accountability eroding morale and reducing team effectiveness? If so, then one way to fix this problem is to identify what norms are currently in place and work with the team to set new norms. High performing teams run meetings efficiently and adhere to agreed upon norms for communicating, making decisions, executing tasks, and handing off work to team members.

Buy-In: Are we all committed to succeed?

Buy-In can be defined as the level of team member commitment and engagement. Some teams have high levels of engagement, where all the team members are playing hard, adhering to team norms, and contributing to team success. Other teams have mixed engagement, where some team members are carrying the load and others are merely along for the ride. One way to determine team commitment is to examine whether individual team members execute team decisions. If everyone in a team meeting agrees to a decision, but only some of the team members actually change their behavior after the meeting, then team commitment is not particularly strong.

Team leaders can foster team member commitment and engagement in three ways. One is to paint a compelling team mission that is aligned with team member values. Team members are likely to exert considerable effort when their team's goals are directly related to their personal wants and needs. Another way to foster engagement is to get team members involved with the creation of team goals, roles, and norms. The more involved team members are with the setting the team's direction and the rules governing team member behavior, the more engaged they will be. Because nothing kills buy-in more quickly than perceptions of favoritism, a third way to foster commitment is to treat people fairly and ensure everyone contributes equally to team success and adheres to team norms.

Power: What resources do we need?

Teams often have material needs, such as funding, office space, hardware and software systems, specialized equipment, transportation, tech support, etc. These needed resources will be driven by team composition and goals--a football team requires

different resources than a pharmaceutical research and development team. Teams will need to specify their resource needs and leaders may need to lobby key stakeholders in order to acquire needed resources.

One resource that can be an area of contention for many teams concerns decision-making authority. Some teams are chartered to make decisions that will affect the larger organization, yet one or two key stakeholders with veto power must first vet all their decisions. In some situations these teams become nothing more than vehicles to "legitimize" the opinions of the stakeholders. In essence, the team's explicit goals are in conflict with their stakeholder's implicit goals, and the odds of team success in these situations are very low.

Morale: Can't we all get along?

It is relatively easy to see team members that work in harmony or engage in backstabbing and in fighting. As such, Morale is one of the more visible components of the Rocket Model©. Polite teams often get polite results, and high performing teams have their fair share of conflict. But high performing teams get their conflicts on the table and develop effective ways to work through team member disagreements. Dysfunctional teams either pretend conflict does not exist or deal with it by having team members participate in some team building activity, such as a golf outing or ropes course. Unfortunately, these team building events have only a temporary morale boosting effect, as they fail to address the root causes of conflict. It turns out that most team conflict can be tied back to misunderstandings or disagreements about team assumptions, goals or metrics (Mission), team member roles or skill gaps (Talent), the rules governing how the team operates (Norms), commitment levels (Buy-In), or needed resources (Power). Identifying and addressing these underlying issues will not only improve team functioning, they will also have a positive effect on team performance.

Results: Are we moving the needle?

The Results component is the dependent variable in the Rocket Model©. In other words, team results depend on team members having shared assumptions, exerting effort towards and being committed to team goals, having clear roles and the right skills, adhering to agreed upon norms, having the right resources, and effectively managing conflict. Problems in one or more of the first seven components of Rocket Model© will have a detrimental impact on team results.

People typically look at an athletic team's regular season and playoff win-loss records to determine team success, but assessing business team success is sometimes not as obvious. The key to effective team evaluation is to compare team performance against team goals. Teams that are making good progress towards or have accomplished their team goals are deemed successful; those that are not making progress are usually judged as unsuccessful. As stated earlier, it is critically important that teams set SMART-B goals that are both aligned with important organizational outcomes and benchmarked in such a way that goal accomplishment results in truly superior performance.

One critical leader behavior is teaching teams how to win. Athletic coaches and leaders of combat units are constantly strategizing on how to win, but many private and public sector leaders pay scant attention to this concept. Leaders failing to teach their teams how to win are apt to achieve disappointing results.

Concluding Comments

Humans evolved as social animals because of the profound advantages of working in groups. But as illustrated in the lead story of article, just because people are in a group does not mean they will work effectively together. Although most groups do not face life-or-death situations faced by the sailors on the Auckland Islands, organizations waste vast sums of time, money, and resources on dysfunctional teams. The Rocket Model$^©$ of team performance may not be the be- or end-all of teams, but it has helped hundreds of diverse teams work more effectively together. The model has helped jump start new teams as well as help existing teams determine what actions to take in order to improve team cohesiveness, efficiency, or effectiveness. Team leaders need road maps for building high performing teams, and the Rocket Model$^©$ can guide their paths to team success.