Vantage Point
The Components for Team Success

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Essentially every organization struggles to optimize teams, especially senior teams. A senior executive we've worked with for several years called recently to ask for a summary of what we believe to be the key characteristics of great, effective, high-performance teams. He was looking for a formula for creating and sustaining successful teams, team building and successful team meetings.

After much reflection, we have summarized what we have seen demonstrated time and time again in working with senior teams and their leaders. This is the basis for the team philosophy and context for Vantage Associates' consulting with senior leadership teams and senior leaders.

Generally we have found that team-building for team-building's sake rarely works. Unless such endeavors are built around a goal, a specific initiative, a project, an operational plan or a strategic plan for a business unit or major project team, team-building exercises tend to have a half-life benefit as brief as the length of the event itself. Alternatively, during twenty-plus years of executive consulting, Vantage Associates has surfaced and categorized salient points concerning the behaviors of effective teams – evaluating their successes as well as their struggles. While no hard and fast formula exists for creating successful teams, there are shared characteristics among most high performing teams.

Three qualities have proven to shape the optimal senior team.

1. High-functioning teams embrace innovation and depend on individual performance.

Effective teams are not, at their core, about "the team." Effective individuals comprise effective teams. Team performance is not collectively optimal or sub-optimal "as a team." Teams achieve their best when each individual, first, and **then** the members, as a team:

- Are respectful and respected
- Do what they say they will do
- Share viewpoints and beliefs openly and candidly
- Keep confidences

Within effective teams, members approach one another constructively but firmly, especially when a team member fails to deliver on a commitment or a directive. They then reach a resolution. Team members freely offer their thoughts, ideas, and opinions – and at all times honor everyone else's shared feelings and viewpoints.

During team meetings, members willingly challenge each other's ideas, concepts, and plans. They expect one another to do their best at all times. Leaders set stretch goals for themselves as

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individuals or as operational team leaders. These goals evolve into stretch goals for the team or organization. Team goals, in turn, often evolve into individual goals.

Moreover, during meetings, the team will often rotate leadership based on SME (subject matter expertise) or competencies. The team leader remains the final authority, providing whatever resources the team requires to reach consensus on decisions – time, debate, research, opinions, positions, etc.

If the team stalls or is not able to make a timely decision, the leader personally takes responsibility for the decision and the team moves on willingly. Self-directed teams seldom succeed; if they do, such success is short-lived (and extraordinarily expensive). Team leaders and team members alike are to be leaders who produce results – as individuals and consequently as a team.

2. The effective senior team has a cohesive team culture.

A successful team exhibits a collective ethos based on the consistent behaviors of its members. The team reputation establishes itself in the organizational community through the individual behaviors of its members. A philosophy pervades the essence of effective teams; individual integrity, honesty, trust, respect, and character are consistently reflected by individual behavior. This stance carries through both in meetings and in the workplace environment as a whole. Physically together or not, the team considers itself a team.

3. Form follows function in high-performing teams.

All else is derivative from #1 and #2. The first issue to be addressed is always: "Is a team or a meeting (or series of meetings) the best method to achieve a specific deliverable?" If the answer is "yes" then incorporate team essentials – including selection, meetings, and objectives. Additionally, the following issues are critical:

- What will the team deliver as outcomes, and how will doing so create value for customers (external and/or internal) and other stakeholders?
- Who are the proper and appropriate team members for the roles they will be required to fulfill?
- Are the people involved only those who are absolutely necessary and are likely to make important contributions?

Further, team meetings must start and end on time. The agenda of each meeting must precisely define what is to be achieved. Agendas can be flexible: the team may decide to follow the agenda closely or deviate from the agenda when the flow of ideas dictates. Occasionally, the team may determine it best to throw out the agenda completely and start anew.

Another component of successful team meetings is the journey – from inception to conclusion. An effective team assigns value-based, results-oriented, time-sensitive responsibilities and holds itself accountable for achieving all objectives. The successful team also keeps a coherent and well-documented history of its path of accomplishment and any off-route detours along the way. The team takes minutes at meetings and distributes these notes to the appropriate parties, especially those who need to be informed of the outcomes but don't need to attend the meeting itself.

Summary

The model of the effective team holds fast as the framework for people associating in a joint action to attain specific objectives/outcomes. Great teams consist of dedicated colleagues who are fully accountable to themselves, to each other, to their individual and team purposes, and to appropriate actions and results. Teams are built around a goal, a specific initiative, a project, an operational plan, or a strategic plan for a business unit or major project. All team experiences are optimized when the members understand that significant, constructive team results are, at the core, very personal. With no apologies to the misguided *Author Unknown*, there is indeed an "I" in team – as many "I"s as there are team members, in fact.

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