

Eight Interlocking Building Blocks for Highly Successful Teams



Richard P. Fontanie

Table of Contents

Introduction

1

Building Block #1: FOCUS AND ALIGNMENT

2

Building Block #2: SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES

7

Building Block #3: DECISION-MAKING & ENGAGEMENT

10

Building Block #4: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

13

Building Block #5: COMMUNICATIONS - The process

17

Building Block #5.1: COMMUNICATIONS - Behaviours

21

Building Block #5.2: COMMUNICATIONS - Leadership

25

Building Block #6: STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS

28

Building Block #: TEAMS LEARN TOGETHER

31

Building Block #8: TEAMS CELEBRATE TOGETHER

34

Resources

36

Personal Use Only

This e-book is for information purposes and **Personal Use** only. As Personal Use only no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of printing for personal use and brief quotations embodied in reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Disclaimer

Every effort has been made to make it as complete and accurate as possible. However, there may be mistakes in typography or content. The information provided in the e-book is current to the date published and should be used as a guide.

The purpose of this e-book is to educate. The author and publisher do not warrant that the information contained in this e-book is fully complete and shall not be responsible for any errors or omissions. The author and publisher shall have neither liability nor responsibility to any person or entity with respect to any loss or damage caused or alleged to be caused directly or indirectly by this e-book.

Readers should also be aware that Internet Web sites offered as citations and/or sources for further information may have changed or disappeared between the time this was written and when it is read.

Introduction

My sincere appreciation to the numerous teams I have had the pleasure to work with over my career. Without them this practical guide wouldn't have found the light of day. A special thank to my associates and colleagues who had continually inspired me in our own team pursuits.

All the organizations I worked with grouped work around teams. Some of those teams had two members, others had six or more. Many teams worked well, some of them operated at peak performance. Others didn't fare well at all.

For many years I had a print hanging on my office wall that depicted a jazz combo with the caption "Synergy". Good jazz has synergy so too has good teamwork. Jazz players know when to take the lead and when to recede. They don't overwhelm each other, they complement each other. When team members work together like jazz musicians weaving in and out of the movements and swinging back and forth in syncopation and synergy then we have good teamwork.

In addition, jazz music also has structure and form. The structure is made up of the repeating forms that make up the music, such as notes, phrases and bars. This structure along with form brings life to jazz and allows it to have its beautiful elasticity, movement and swing.

Like cool jazz, a successful team also requires structure and form. Over the years I have found that a team's structure is made up of eight building blocks (in music terms the forms that make up the structure), each propelling it to higher levels of team performance.

Are these the only building blocks that lead to highly successful teamwork? Not necessarily. Jazz composers write several excellent jazz pieces, each one with different sounds and movements, but the overall structure remains the same - it's what allows us to call the music jazz. So too, we can add another movement or building block to our piece, or we can substitute one building block for another, for example we could add "Clarifying Team Processes" instead of "Systematizing Processes;" or, "Managing Meetings" instead of "Making effective team decisions." The eight blocks I have chosen as foundational to successful teamwork is not a definitive number. However, if team leaders engage team members in cementing these eight blocks together, they will find that the members of the team will work with greater focus, synergy, collaboration and trust.

By the way only you and your team can reach a higher level of success. What I have attempted to do in this e-book is provide you with best practices, information, tools and techniques to help you along your journey towards working effectively together.

Thank you for taking the time to read the "Eight Building Blocks for Highly Successful Teams".

Richard P. Fontanie



Building Block #1: FOCUS AND ALIGNMENT



Have you noticed the disconnect some teams have with their overall purpose? Try this experiment: walk around different floors within private corporations and government departments and note if team members on one floor work well together while those from another team on the next floor (or sometimes just down the hall) don't.

When confusion reigns within a team it's time to conduct a team assessment. An assessment will give you a clear understanding about the workings of the team and also the members' strengths and skill gaps. You can refer to *A Simple Formula for Assessing Teamwork* (at the end of this booklet) for a general overview of what you may want to include in an assessment.

The first two elements of the assessment relate to strategic intent and purpose. Often dysfunctional teams are not connected with the overall strategy of their organization and lack a sense of their own purpose. Alarm bells should go off when you find teams faltering because they are unclear about how they fit within the organization itself. The alarm bells usually signal that the organization either doesn't have a clear strategic direction or its employees were not engaged in crafting its vision, mission and values.

When an organization lacks strategic direction, consider these two approaches:

1. If the team leader has a trusting relationship with the senior leadership team, or is a member of that team, then coach him/her on how to discuss the matter with their colleagues;
2. If the team leader isn't a strong leader or relationships are strained with the senior leadership team, then discuss the matter with the primary decision-maker of the organization, which usually means the CEO or owner. The intent of these discussions is to help the decision-maker understand the importance of setting a strategic direction for their business and the positive effect it would have on employees and customers.

When team members learn to focus, and achieve higher ends they develop strategic leadership skills, support and encourage one another, and become one in adding value to the company and service to customers.

It is difficult for a lower level team to find its own purpose and to act in the best interest of the organization if it doesn't have a clear understanding about the organization's overall strategy. This poses a difficult situation but not an impossible one. Here's why. You will rarely find an organization that is so dysfunctional that people don't know its most fundamental purpose. They know:

- Why they were hired, for example, to sell vehicles, water, janitorial equipment or provide health, education or consulting services. This gave them a rudimentary understanding of their purpose and the goals of the organization.
- They work in a culture that implicitly carries out certain positive values even though they are not explicitly stated. Whether values are stated or not, the team and the culture of the organization does exhibit values. These values are expressed in the behavior of individuals and the relationship they have with each other and their customers.
- They serve customers. Customers come to organizations in several ways,
 - they have heard about the organization, know the organization sells a certain product,
 - have been approached by a salesperson from the organization, have seen advertisements about the organization or,
 - they have been referred to the organization from another source.



- Team members know enough about the product or company that they can develop a relationship with the customer, in the case of a relational sale, or in the case of a transactional sale, they can steer them to a product or service that meets their need,
- Their team plays a role within the organization. Team members know that they have some role to play within the organization because they have been given a certain mandate. The role may be somewhat bewildering to them, but it is there and what they know is that their contribution plays some part in the outcome of the organization.

The most rudimentary and basic elements of a purpose and lived values exist. What is often missing is a clear understanding of why, what and how. They either don't know or are unclear about the organization's higher purpose, goals, and stated values.

So, what is a team to do when they find themselves in a situation where the overall strategic direction isn't clear?

This is when a strong team leader steps up. The team leader can:

1. Encourage the team members to concentrate on *what is in the team's best interest and control*, and clarify what isn't; and, work with his or her direct report to influence the senior leadership team or employer to work on their end of things.
2. Engage team members to clarify the team's own purpose and how they can work together to achieve specific goals and priorities.
3. Involve team members in a process of helping them understand that teamwork is "we" work and not "I" work - that it is unselfish work.
4. Set the standard for teamwork within the organization; show through the efforts of the team the impact of continuous learning and strong teamwork; and, perhaps in the end, spur the company on to work at clarifying its own purpose, values and strategies.

When team leaders take the initiative to build strong teams, even as they work within companies where higher purpose, goals and values are not articulated, they can make a difference. This is one of the reasons why one team can function at a higher level than another in the same organization. Surely it is much easier and more effective if everyone moves in the same direction, and all teams are in line with the business's overall strategic framework. That's when the business exhibits high energy, synergy and profit.

When a breakdown in teamwork is due to causes other than organizational strategic clarity, then you need to intervene relative to those causes.

One cause could relate to a lack of skills and competencies of the team leader. If this is the case, then here are two strategies you may wish to employ:

- Assess the team leader's potential for growth, the relationship between the team leader and team members, and the relationship between the team leader and his/her direct report; if all these factors are more on the positive side than the negative side take a developmental approach to strengthen his/her leadership skills and competencies.
- If, after the assessment, the potential for growth or the relationships can't be salvaged then there is no recourse other than to replace the team leader.

There is one more element to consider in the focus category; the alignment of personal vision, mission and values with those of the organization or team.

The language of alignment

Now it's time to clarify some of the language we use. What do the terms vision, mission, purpose, values, goals and objectives mean?

Vision Statements

A vision statement is nothing other than what we see far into the future. It is a statement of potential possibilities, designed to answer the question "why" the organization, team or person exists. Usually it is short and concise, other times it is expressed in more philosophical terms.

Vision Examples

Organizational vision: To be known within our community for service with compassion.

Team vision: To be known in our community for service with compassion.

Personal vision: To be the best that I can be in all that I do.

Mission Statements

A mission is what drives the organization, team or person to fulfill the vision. It is also a short statement. It explains the "big what" of the organization and team. The "big what" describes what is being done, where, and with whom. In government, the mission is often found in a department's or ministry's legislative mandate. A Team mission may be referred to as a mandate or purpose and has its genesis in the leadership team or found in the description of the corporate structure. On a personal level, mission is often viewed as purpose – the reason for a person's existence, or for which the person does something in life.

Mission Examples

Organizational Mission: To deliver protection insurance products to existing and potential customers within the surrounding Regina marketplace with compassionate service.

Team Mission: To provide quality information technology and data services to our internal customers.

Personal Purpose: To provide, to the best of my ability, quality information and data services to my internal customers.

Values

Values are the principles through which the organization or team exhibits its culture. Team values usually incorporate organizational values. Personal values are those principles by which people live. Organizational, team and personal values are prized and not easily given up. People are offended and react defensively when values are trampled upon, diminished or in some way are removed.

I recommend organizations and teams identify up to a maximum of eight values with the understanding that everyone will ascribe to their fulfillment. There is nothing more disheartening than an organization promoting eight values but not living them. Values to be worth their salt must be lived. So, if the organization has three values that they live and everyone within the organization identifies with them, that will go a long way towards building a healthy culture.

Examples

Organizational value: We value being a corporate citizen and contributing to the less fortunate in our community without fanfare.

Team values: We value communicating openly and honestly with each other and the people we serve.

Personal value: I value humble compassionate outreach to those in need.

Goal Statements

Goals are general statements about what the organization or team intends to do to meet its vision and mission. They describe desired ends which are to be achieved over an unspecified period. They are macro in statement, relatively stable over time and easily understood.

Examples

Organizational Goal: To promote affordable insurance products.

Team Goal: To give our customers a choice of affordable insurance products that meet their need.

Personal Goal: To know and understand all the affordable insurance products offered within our company.

Objectives

Finally, we come to the term “objectives”. Objectives are written statements designed to achieve the goals and resolve issues or take advantage of opportunities found within the organization or team. They are Specific Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Trackable (SMART). They outline achievements in the short and medium term, are results focused and easily understood and meaningful. The holders of the objectives are responsible, accountable and own them and must be able to influence the outcome.

Examples

Organizational Objective: To expand our insurance clientele by 25%, by the end of 20xx while maintaining compassionate service.

Team Objective: Year 1: To evaluate our information infra structure to determine if it has the capacity to meet the requirements of a 25% increase in clientele within our assigned budget.

Personal Objective: To complete assigned tasks regarding the evaluation of our information infra structure in a timely manner, meeting all quality standards while working effectively with the members of my team.

When corporate vision, mission goals, values and objectives align a high degree of synergy and energy are produced by everyone within the business. Corporations become stable and profitable, teams work well together, and individuals find joy in their work.

Lessons learned

- For teams to function at a high level they need to work within organizations that have clearly stated vision, mission, goals and values.
- Strong teams need strong leaders who can engage team members to clarify purpose, goals and values in line with their organizational vision, mission and values.
- The team’s priorities are derived from team goals.

- Team leaders can engage team members to set team standards and measurements that go beyond the standard.
- A team leader’s primary task is to bring team members to a level of focus and alignment that propels the team to a sense of oneness. A sense of oneness is that magical ingredient which allows team members to rise above the “I” and capture the unselfish “we”.
- Personal alignment with organizational and team, vision, values and goals increase job satisfaction and personal performance.