



Managing team development

Accelerating the transition from a group of individuals to a real team



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Many companies attempt to break down organizational silos as they realize that performance depends largely on the quality of coordination and consistency of efforts made by the various players involved. To maximize responsiveness, companies encourage managers to connect with their colleagues in other departments. Indeed, it is now widely recognized that local efforts and day-to-day interactions are just as important as formal initiatives to organize processes.

- **Recognize that getting the right skills to the table is not sufficient to solve a problem effectively.**
- **Be aware that teams must go through several phases before they are able to work efficiently together.**
- **Discover the key drivers available to team leaders to accelerate team development.**

Our sources

This synopsis is based on the publications presented below and on the back page.

With this realization, the need to create effective cross-functional teams has grown substantially. Yet, developing such teams requires more than just gathering a diverse group of individuals representing various domains of expertise on a given issue. Rather, it involves a process by which the team gradually reaches a point where its respective members can confront and combine their different points of view effectively. The publications that we have analyzed underline the following messages:

In this synopsis...

- 1 A managed development process
- 2 Challenges at each phase

1 A managed development process

The advantages of teamwork no longer need to be proven. It is now widely known that the ability to capitalize on a variety of complementary perspectives produces better solutions.

However, it is less well known that getting the right expertise to the table is not nearly enough to ensure that an effective solution will be found. Indeed, confronting different points of view is not sufficient. These perspectives must be combined to find a completely new solution that is superior to what each

Teams must generally go through four phases before achieving high performance.

of the participants could have imagined individually. For this to occur, participants must be willing to present their ideas despite the reactions of the other team members, talk through issues until they develop a common understanding, then be willing to challenge their initial stance in order to arrive at a shared solution. Newly formed teams are rarely able to accomplish this feat spontaneously.

Many researchers and consultants have demonstrated that the leaders of such teams play an essential role in transforming a group of individuals into a high-performance work unit. They highlight the fact that efficient cooperation can be obtained only after passing through a number of phases, first described in the sixties by the psychologist Bruce Tuckman (**Figure A**). The quality of facilitation has a decisive impact on the team's ability to get through these phases more or less rapidly. We shall now rapidly present these phases and describe the drivers available to managers to accelerate team development:

Phase 1: Forming

When participants meet for the first few times, they tend to take stock of the situation, and ask themselves what the team is supposed to accomplish and what their likely role will be in the new team. People are generally cautious and watchful at this stage, and have very polite exchanges with one another. They try to establish reassuring relationships in this unfamiliar context, and generally listen attentively to each other. So, the team is generally fairly rapid in reaching the stage where everyone seems to understand the objectives at hand and how to get there. Yet, this apparent consensus is often superficial.

Phase 2: Storming

This is when the team hits most difficult stage in its development. Participants become aware that they are far from sharing the same points of view and the same approach to the subject. This leads to conflicts that shatter the illusion that everyone shares the same understanding of the issues. The team then goes through a period of conflict and doubt, during which participants often have the feeling that the group is going astray.

Phase 3: Norming

When discussions are managed properly during the storming phase, a shared understanding of the issues generally emerges. This time, however, the agreement is much more solid, contrary to the superficial consensus reached during the forming phase. Participants really understand and accept the team's objectives, roles, and methods. They recognize the legitimacy of the points of view of other team members, as well as their individual strengths and weaknesses. On this basis, the team can start working in a relatively efficient and more relaxed frame of mind.

Phase 4: Performing

The most productive teams are those that manage to get through the preceding phase to enter into a phase of productive confrontation. This highly efficient operating mode is characterized by a close-knit team focused on attaining its objectives. The participants feel accountable and do not hesitate to take initiative or vigorously discuss disagreements if they feel that this is needed to get results. A high level of enthusiasm is then observed, as well as great pride in belonging to the team. Teams often achieve remarkable things when they manage to instill this momentum.

Naturally, these four phases are a simplified representation of a more complex reality. However, being aware of the existence of the path to high performance and understanding how to move along this path is valuable to anyone who may one day find him or herself faced with the job of facilitating a cross-functional team.

2 Challenges at each phase

Each of the phases in the team development process has particular characteristics, requiring the team leader to play a specific role. The following key points and objectives should help facilitators reach the performing phase as quickly as possible.

► Phase 1: Forming

Team members need energy to confront and combine their respective points of view. It is much more comfortable for an individual simply to present his or her viewpoint and let the other participants make an “informed” decision. Likewise, team leaders often

find it much easier to ask team members for their opinions, and simply make decisions on their own after taking this information into account. However, working in this way deprives the team of the real value of working collaboratively, which involves building a solution jointly based on diverse viewpoints.

The team leader's first objective is therefore to inspire participants to engage actively in a collaborative effort – rather than just to attend meetings

Begin by setting the stage to motivate people to engage in a collaborative effort.

politely. To do this, a context must be created in which team members feel that they have a personal interest in the outcome, that the team needs their contribution, and that the goals of the team are worth the effort. This type of engagement can be fostered in different ways:

Create a feeling of belonging

Most team members initially adopt a wait-and-see attitude, e.g. “What do people expect of me?” “Am I really right for this team?”. It is therefore important

to clarify why each participant was chosen. The contributions expected of the various members their experience, their expertise, the resources they can mobilize, etc. must be identified in order to help individuals understand how the team is counting on them. Similarly, teams planning on working together over a relatively long period of time should be especially careful to clarify the rules that will govern membership in the group. For example, will participants be replaced if they change jobs, or will they be allowed to stay on the team for their specific experience? Such rules are designed to eliminate the doubts of members about the legitimacy and sustainability of their role on the team.

Underline the right reasons to get involved

Participants must understand how they will benefit from the team's success. It is therefore critical to define the team's assigned mission and demonstrate its legitimacy. Initial discussions must thus concentrate on clarifying objectives and establishing the general manner in which teamwork will be organized to attain these objectives. However, the members must also each be reminded how the success of the

assignment will affect them personally, e.g. a decision that will affect their area of responsibility, a chance to be more visible to senior management, or other forms of reward, such as a financial interest in the outcome, opportunities for promotion, greater responsibility, etc.

Establish a common framework

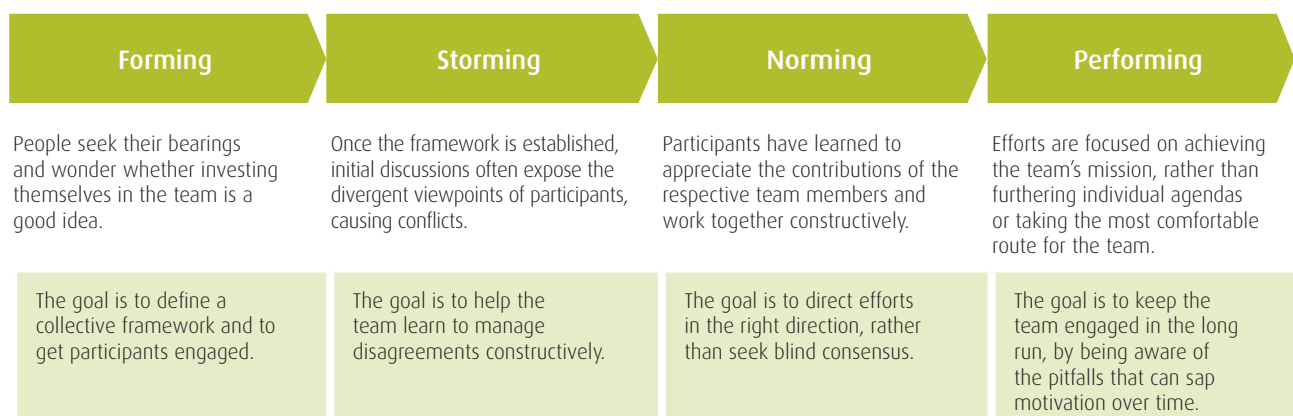
Specifying the rules governing team operations, e.g. punctuality, decision-making methods, etc., will help members feel more comfortable in an unfamiliar context. In particular, citing the basic rules for conducting discussions can be very helpful, e.g. no personal attacks, no interrupting, etc. If a participant subsequently steps over the line, these rules will help manage the situation in order to keep other members from permanently withdrawing.

Encourage participants to get to know one another

Participants are more reserved when they don't know each other well. As they are unsure how the other participants might react, they tend to keep their distance. The quality of discussion

FIGURE A Four phases of development

A newly-formed team generally goes through four phases as it moves along the path to high performance:



suffers as a result. However, this phenomenon can be minimized by giving participants a chance to become more familiar with the other members of the team. A classic approach is to organize off-site activities, such as team-building exercises, visits to facilities, informal dinners, etc. Assigning initial tasks to two-man teams or small sub-groups can also be helpful in helping participants get to know each other better.

Trigger initial discussions

A team becomes truly productive only when participants are willing to take the risk of sharing what is really on their minds with the other members. The leader must therefore actively initiate debate. A number of topics can be used as a springboard, such as the team mission, the way work should be organized, operating principles etc. As he or she encourages members to debate these issues, the team leader should beware of the tendency of some participants to mask or repress their disagreement, and actively encourage them to bring their ideas into the open. **Figure B** provides several ideas on how to do this.

► Phase 2: Storming

Up to this point, the objective was to get the team moving forward. Once

the team gets going, and objectives have been established through initial discussions, there is likely to be a brief period of smooth sailing as everyone starts to pitch in.

However, this is when the going starts to get rough. The initial consensus that seemed to be reached on objectives and methods is suddenly challenged as concrete problems emerge and create friction. Inexperienced participants often feel betrayed by the other members of the team when this happens. What is actually occurring, however,

The way that initial crises are managed is key to establishing a climate of collaboration.

is that disagreements that had been hidden during initial discussions are simply coming to the surface. This is because although participants had initially agreed to the team's objectives, they didn't realize that each participant had developed his or her own interpretation of these objectives.

This type of conflict is healthy. Like the pains of adolescence, such crises give the team a chance to learn to manage internal differences and disagreements. Yet, this phase is also extremely risky, because the resulting tension can create lasting damage if it is not properly managed. Indeed, such situations may create lasting anger and

polarize discussions by encouraging members to take sides, or cause some individuals to pull away from the group. If this occurs, managing team development then becomes difficult.

The following tips are helpful in getting through this difficult period:

Beware of the temptation to take control of the situation

The outbreak of the first conflicts may shock team members – and especially the team leader – who thought the team was on the right track. It is important to avoid panicking at this point. Authoritative expressions of frustration are likely to backfire. At worst, people may openly rebel against direct orders from the leader. At best, they may passively resist while appear to agree on the surface. Likewise, team leaders should avoid using their authority to force participants to put an end to discussions, for the team would then be deprived of a precious learning experience on how to surmount interpersonal conflict. This approach also may encourage a passive attitude in which participants merely rubber-stamp the decisions made by the leader, thus preventing the team from capitalizing on the different points of view of its members.

FIGURE B Include everyone in discussions

During initial discussions, there is a risk that participants will agree superficially or stay politely silent, because people prefer to get their bearings before they say what they really think.

There are many techniques to get people to express themselves and thus initiate real discussion faster. For example:

- Encourage quiet participants to express their views on what has been said.
- Ask each participant to list and present the pros and cons of a considered option.
- Organize an exercise in which each participant must express his or her reservations or doubts about the team's mission and the way it is organized.
- Ask each participant to analyze one aspect of the topic at hand and share their respective conclusions with the group at the next meeting.

Help the team resolve conflicts

The way the team resolves initial conflicts will have a lasting influence on performance. The team is unlikely to establish productive working relationships if discussions become hostile, if people begin to take sides and refuse to listen to one another, or if decisions are left up to those who scream the loudest. Conversely, the stage is set for the emergence of effective collaboration if participants learn to listen to one another, appreciate what the others have to offer and learn to build on the ideas of their colleagues.

So, although the team must learn to resolve its own disagreements, the team leader still has an essential role to play in establishing the right conditions for such learning to happen. In particular, this requires establishing behavioral rules and operating practices and insisting that participants follow these rules, in order to ensure high-quality discussions and decisions (Figure C).

Don't leave anyone behind

When disagreements first start to emerge, it is extremely important to strike the right balance between allowing participants to express their

opinions freely and maintaining tension at a bearable level. However, the level of tension that team members find “bearable” may vary significantly depending on the group and the individuals concerned. A good team leader must therefore be able to regulate the discussion if some participants are observed to withdraw into their shells. Of course, conflict often makes people feel uncomfortable. Yet, there is a point when discussions become so intense that some individuals stop sharing their views. These same individuals are likely to show passive-aggressive behavior down the road, for example, by seizing every opportunity to point out the failings of the team members who initially dominated discussions. The leader's role thus consists in identifying participants who are least comfortable with debate and helping them to express themselves.

Manage the potential formation of factions

When problems first start to crop up, team members often try to position themselves to exercise influence over the following phases of the work. This generates power struggles. The group then tends to split into factions in which members offer unconditional

support in hopes of receiving such support in return.

This phenomenon is not particularly destructive if it is merely transitory. For this reason, the team leader must ensure that things stay within reason. For example, entrusting a preparatory task to a sub-group including people from the different factions may reduce the feeling of distance between these factions.

Exercise authority if opponents block progress

Sometimes, the storming phase continues indefinitely because of a few recalcitrant team members. Such individuals need to be faced with their responsibilities and be told that they must either agree to comply with the rules established by the rest of the team, or leave the group. In the latter case, it is usually best to explain the reasons for their departure to the rest of the team. Although the team leader may be tempted to hide the real reasons, and say that an individual decided to leave for personal reasons or due to unforeseen circumstances, this is likely to backfire and demoralize the team.

FIGURE C Guide the team in resolving conflicts

The way initial disagreements are managed has a lasting influence on team performance, because it sets a precedent in terms of the behavioral standards that will be used in managing future conflicts.

In particular, leaders have two key drivers to guide the team in this critical phase:

Set a personal example with your behavior

- Emphasize points of agreement between different opinions.
- Invite people to take account of the different facets of a subject.
- Actively listen and ask all team members to do likewise.
- Show that you appreciate when others make an effort to be receptive to your ideas.

Establish rules and insist that they are followed

- Behavioral rules
For example:
 - Prohibit personal attacks and value judgments.
 - Ask each member to share the data supporting his or her views.
- Decision-making rules
For example:
 - Make complex and important decisions by consensus.
 - Entrust some technical decisions to participants with the requisite expertise.

► Phase 3: Norming

When the storming phase is managed properly, virulent discussions gradually give way to a peaceful and constructive work environment. Indeed, by coping with conflicts, participants develop a shared understanding of the team objectives and work methods. Above all, everyone has learned to recognize the value of the perspectives

After things calm down, try to focus the energy of the group on optimizing performance.

contributed by the other members. Discussions then become calmer and of higher quality. Participants are more willing to listen to one another and feel at greater liberty to express their opinions. At this point, the team can start working productively, provided the team leader is careful to act in two ways:

Channel the energy of the team in the right direction

If the storming phase is negotiated well, a close-knit team will emerge. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that the resulting cohesion serves the mission with which the team is entrusted. Teams sometimes emerge from initial debates with strong and shared convictions... against company leaders or policies! Such teams subsequently tend to spend meetings complaining or

making ironic comments, rather than moving forward.

The team leader must therefore make sure that the team arrives at a consensus in line with the team's assigned mission (Figure D). Otherwise, it is important to rekindle discussion around why the team needs to accomplish the mission, and what each member will gain if the objectives are attained.

Push the team outside of its comfort zone

A second risk at this stage is that participants may be tempted to push problems under the rug in order to avoid rocking the boat. Most team members are relieved when the preceding period of uncertainty and confrontation is behind them. Although disagreements can be discussed more calmly following the storming phase, many fear that the old tension could rear its ugly head at any time. Yet, team performance could suffer if members choose to ignore their doubts and avoid challenging prevailing assumptions.

The team leader must pay careful attention to this risk and push the team outside of its comfort zone. Figure E provides several tips on how to do this.

► Phase 4: Performing

If team members channel their energy in the right direction and are pushed outside of their comfort

zone, the team will gradually reach the performing stage. This stage is attained when the team is able not only to collaborate efficiently, but also to focus all its energy on achieving the mission successfully. Concretely, this means that the members of the team are sufficiently unified to place performance objectives before other considerations such as furthering their own agendas or maintaining hassle-free relationships. When people reach this point, they don't hesitate to raise sensitive issues, because they trust one another not to hold grudges. Indeed, performing team members know that such confrontations are motivated only by the desire to produce the best possible outcome for the whole group.

Once the team has reached this stage, the team leader can focus entirely on moving the work forward and managing external relations. However, the team must still be supervised with a watchful eye to make sure it continues to function smoothly. In particular, it is important to beware of three common pitfalls at this point:

Manage the risks of complacency

Out of pride for its initial wins and performance achievements, the team may set itself up for subsequent failure by becoming too arrogant toward external players and ceasing to make efforts in line with its ambitions. To avoid this risk, performance should be

FIGURE D Channel the team's energy in the right direction

As soon as the team emerges from initial conflicts, energy must be channeled in the right direction. This requires creating the right conditions to focus people's energy on moving things forward, in particular:

- Translate the mission into specific performance objectives or goals.
- Define intermediary results expected in the short term.
- Ensure that tasks are allocated clearly.
- Establish regular updates and a formal feedback system on how individual and collective work is progressing.
- Have the team hear external feedback on how the work is progressing.

assessed in a highly disciplined manner. In particular, a formal and regular process for evaluating progress must be established. If some tasks seem to be slipping, the problem should not be pushed under the rug in order to maintain the appearance of a trouble-free atmosphere, but open discussion should be initiated on the possible causes and how to resolve the problem. Likewise, individual shortcomings or interpersonal difficulties must not be hidden. To the contrary, when progress reports are made, people should be invited to comment on what is working or not working in the team and what they do or do not appreciate in their colleagues. The team spirit established at this stage will ensure that this type of feedback is extremely productive. At the same time, successes should be celebrated! This is also a valuable way to keep people motivated and working hard toward the established goals.

Manage the risks of disappointment following excessive enthusiasm

In its enthusiasm, the team could lose sight of the constraints or limitations that prevent its recommendations from being implemented. A team rarely controls all of the resources needed to

achieve its goals. Resources are limited, of course, and the team is likely to be faced sooner or later with tradeoffs contrary to its objectives. Participants may take this as a real shock, and the team may feel that it has been abandoned by senior management. The team leader must therefore be careful to manage

Once the performing stage has been reached, it is important to keep people motivated.

member expectations in order to avoid this type of phenomenon. He or she must in particular actively communicate what resources and leeway are available to the team, as well as the constraints that it must take into account. With such an understanding, the team can prepare for unforeseen events and will be careful to develop its project within the limits of its authority and available resources.

Manage the impact of failure

Even performing teams sometimes come up against unexpected obstacles or experience failure. Here again, the striking contrast with the enthusiasm generated by good team momentum can completely and suddenly sap the

motivation of the group. Suddenly, the members may find themselves in a context similar to that of a newly-formed team, in which the participants ask themselves why they are there and what they are supposed to do. When this happens, an excellent way to get the team back on track is to aim for quick wins, which have a powerful psychological impact in terms of re-motivating people. Another effective approach is to guide the team in analyzing setbacks in order to draw relevant lessons. Such setbacks can then become learning experiences which help people feel they are making progress and better prepared to bounce back.



Breaking down organizational silos is often critical to achieve high performance. Yet, it would be naïve to think that simply bringing together people from different functions is sufficient to develop an effective cross-company vision of problems. To take full advantage of complementary points of view, companies need capable leaders who know how to manage team development.

FIGURE E Fight against “groupthink”

When a team has surmounted the storming phase and found a way to work harmoniously based on shared assumptions, members are relieved and may try too hard not to rock the boat. Although participants may be willing to share their viewpoints, they may be tempted to hide those that appear to contradict the dominant opinion.

The following recommendations can help fight against this phenomenon, which has a destructive impact on performance:

- Set high standards in terms of expected performance.
- Remind people that disagreements are healthy and that the ability to learn from them is a specific quality of high-performance teams.
- Remind people that decisions should never be made by default, out of a desire to go along with the majority opinion or to avoid rocking the boat.
- Ask destabilizing questions.
- Encourage the expression of minority opinions.
- When you sense troubled waters beneath the surface, alert people by asking, “Do you think we may be glossing over what may be a serious point of disagreement?”

Our selection

To find the best ideas on this subject, we recommend the following publications:

- **The ESOP Committee Guide**, Stephen Clifford, Loren Rodgers and Christopher Mackin, published by The National Center for Employee Ownership, 2003.
This book is devoted to the committees in charge of managing Employee Stock Ownership Plans. The chapter on optimizing team effectiveness is particularly valuable. The book is on sale at www.nceo.org.
- **Team Players and Teamwork**, Glen M. Parker, Jossey-Bass, 1996.
A book devoted to different behavioral styles and roles of team members.
- **Tools for Team Leadership**, Gregory Huszco, Davies-Black Publishing, 2004.
Practical team leadership advice.
- **Managing for Excellence**, David L. Bradford and Allan R. Cohen, John Wiley & Sons, 1997.
How to instill shared team leadership.
- **Stages of Team Development**, Allan Mackintosh, 2003.
(Available at www.manageris-executive.com)
Practical recommendations on managing the four main stages of team development.
- **Accelerating Team Development**, Catalyst Consulting Team.
(Available at www.manageris-executive.com)
An overview of key points to understand about the four main stages of team development.

And also...

We also relied on the following publications:

- **Coordinating cross-functional teams.**
(Manageris synopsis 135b)
The performance drivers of cross-functional teams.
- **Power Up**
David L. Bradford and Allan R. Cohen, John Wiley & Sons, 1998. (Book)
Instilling shared leadership in top management teams.

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