THE "team performance curve" (Figure II-1) illustrates that how well any small group of people performs depends on the basic approach it takes and how effectively it implements that approach. Unlike teams, working groups rely on the sum of "individual bests" for their performance. They pursue no collective work products requiring joint effort. By choosing the team path instead of the working group, people commit to take the risks of conflict, joint work-products, and collective action necessary to build a common purpose, set of goals, approach, and mutual accountability. People who call themselves teams but take no such risks are at best pseudo-teams.

Potential teams that take the risks to climb the curve inevitably confront obstacles. Some teams overcome them; others get stuck. The worst thing a stuck team can do, however, is to abandon the discipline of the team basics described in Part I. Performance, not team building, can save potential teams or pseudo-teams, no matter how stuck.

All teams come to an end. Endings, however, do not need to sacrifice continued performance. The handoff of recommendations to others, arrival of new members, departure of old ones, and changes in team leaders—if seen as transitions calling for a renewal of team basics—enable most teams to exploit the performance potential even further, whether or not the team itself comes to an end.

Most team leaders must develop skills after they take the job. Those who succeed have an attitude that they do not need to make all key decisions nor assign all key jobs.
Effective team leaders realize they neither know all the answers, nor can they succeed without the other members of the team. The wisdom of teams lies in recognizing that any person, whether previously an autocrat or a democrat, who genuinely believes in the purpose of the team and the team itself can lead the team toward higher performance.

Those kinds of comments are pretty hard to ignore. Obviously, the people in this company don't think we're a very cohesive team. I guess we don't work together as well as we might. But I didn't realize it was of that much concern to the rest of the organization. What should we do about it?

The president of Cosmo Products Inc. was talking informally with his top executive group. They had just finished listening to excerpts of taped interviews with more than one hundred employees who had been asked for their views about the progress of the company's recently launched change effort. It was a major effort aimed at changing the behavior of literally thousands of people throughout the company.

Many of the comments were to be expected. The employees understood that Cosmo Products' strategy and performance had declined significantly over the previous five years. The company no longer consistently beat the competition to the market with the right products at the right time. Nor did its sales force perform as well as it once had. The employee responses offered many explanations, including product proliferation, quality problems, shifting consumer preferences, more aggressive competitors, and demographic changes in the sales force. They also understood the consequences: the overall
market had leveled, sales and share were down, and so were profits—so much so that analysts and the business press openly criticized the company. Morale and confidence were clearly shaken, and everyone knew that a great deal of change was required.

So, it was painful though not surprising to the executives, to hear the employees recount earlier failures to correct the situation. Those interviewed were saying that the current effort to change had better be different. Yes, they understood and agreed with the company's new vision. Yes, they expressed a sense of urgency. And yes, they were ready to participate in the various change strategies being developed in the company's key functions and operating units. "But," the taped comments insisted, "something had better be different this time!"

What most startled the president and other top executives was the repeated admonition: "You guys are all pulling in different directions; you are not a team! If you don't get your act together, nothing will change." After listening to this message, the executive group knew that Cosmo Products' problems would require more than a team at the top. But they also realized that a real team effort on their part could help a great deal.

THE CRITICAL CHOICE

The Cosmo executives faced a critical choice: Should they concentrate on improving their effectiveness as a working group, or should they try to become a team? Though phrased in the language of "team," the comments of Cosmo's employees really argued that the top executives were working at cross purposes. Clarifying the direction and roles of a group, however, does not require a team. In fact, in many situations, particularly at the top of multibusiness companies, the structured working group option can make more sense. Too often, however, the choice between working group and team is neither recognized nor consciously made.

The basic distinction here turns on performance. A working group relies primarily on the individual contributions of its members for group performance, whereas a team strives for a magnified impact that is incremental to what its members could achieve in their individual roles. The choice depends largely on whether individual achievements can deliver the group's performance aspirations, or whether collective work-products*, skills, and mutual accountability are needed.

Working groups are both prevalent and effective in large organizations. They thrive in hierarchical structures where individual accountability counts the most. The best working groups come together to share information, perspectives, and insights, to make decisions that help each person do his or her own job better, and to reinforce each other's individual performance standards. But the focus is always on individual performance goals and accountabilities.

An effective working group, like a team, benefits from a clear purpose and common understanding of how performance will be evaluated. The Cosmo executives, as we will see, failed in part because they never clarified their purpose even with a view to being a more effective working group. Unlike teams, a working group uses its purpose solely to delineate individual roles, tasks, and responsibilities. Those roles typically match formal organizational positions. To get their assigned tasks done, working group members, especially at senior levels, usually delegate the real work to others beyond the group. Working groups pay attention to individual outcomes and results. Members of effective working groups constructively compete with one another in their pursuit of individual performance targets. They also provide counsel and insights to each other and become concerned when any among them falters. But working group members do not take responsibility for results other than their own. Nor do they try to develop incremental performance contributions requiring the combined, real work of two or more group members.

Teams differ from working groups. They require both individual and mutual accountability. Teams rely on more than group discussion, debate, and decision; on more than sharing information and best practice perspectives; on more than a mutual reinforcing of

*We use the phrase "collective work-products" to call to mind the need for any team to produce something of incremental performance value that is more than the sum of each member’s individual efforts—and that requires a real work contribution from each. It is the basic idea of everyone rolling up their sleeves and working together to get something tangible accomplished.
performance standards. Without discrete team work-products produced through the joint, real contributions of team members, the promise of incremental or magnified performance impact goes untapped.

The team option promises greater performance than the working group. But it also brings more risk. Because of deep-seated values of individualism and a natural reluctance to trust one's fate to the performance of others, the team choice demands a leap of faith. Rugged individualists—and there are many, especially at the top—cannot contribute to real team performance without taking responsibility for their peers and letting their peers assume responsibility for them. Yet they instinctively believe that “if you want a job done right, do it yourself.” It is against their nature to rely on others for the really important tasks in life.

Moreover, the price of “faking” this leap of faith is also high. When the team approach fails, members do get diverted from their individual goals, work-products do not add significant value, costs do outweigh benefits, and people do resent the imposition on their time and priorities.

Working groups present fewer risks. Effective working groups need waste little time in shaping their purpose, objectives, and approach since the leader usually establishes them. Meetings are run against well-prioritized agendas. They are efficient in the use of members' time. And decisions are implemented through specific individual assignments and accountabilities. Most of the time, therefore, if performance aspirations can be met through individuals doing their respective jobs well, the working group approach is more comfortable, less risky, and less disruptive than trying for more elusive team performance levels. Indeed, if there is no performance need for the team approach, efforts spent to improve the effectiveness of the working group make much more sense than floundering around trying to become a team.

THE TEAM PERFORMANCE CURVE

To help understand the choice confronting groups like the top managers of Cosmo Products as well as the risks and performance potential involved, we find it useful to apply a simple framework we call the “team performance curve” (see Figure II-1). On it are five key points, each of which uses the definition of a team described in Chapter 3 as the primary reference. To avoid confusion, we call this a “real team” on the curve.

1. Working group: This is a group for which there is no significant incremental performance need or opportunity that would require it to become a team. The members interact primarily to share information, best practices, or perspectives and to make decisions to help each individual perform within his or her area of responsibility. Beyond that, there is no realistic or truly desired “small group” common purpose, incremental performance goals, or joint work-products that call for either a team approach or mutual accountability.

2. Pseudo-team: This is a group for which there could be a significant, incremental performance need or opportunity, but it has not focused on collective performance and is not really trying to achieve it. It has no interest in shaping a common purpose or set of performance goals, even though it may call itself a team. Pseudo-teams are the weakest of all groups in terms of performance impact. They almost always contribute less to company performance needs than working groups because their interactions detract from each member’s individual performance without delivering any joint benefit. In pseudo-teams, the sum of the whole is less than the potential of the individual parts.

3. Potential team: This is a group for which there is a significant, incremental performance need, and that really is trying to improve its performance impact. Typically, however, it requires more clarity about purpose, goals, or work-products and more discipline in hammering out a common working approach. It has not yet established collective accountability. Potential teams abound in organizations. As our performance curve illustrates, when a team approach makes sense, the performance impact can be high. We believe the steepest performance gain comes between a potential team and a real team; but any movement up the slope is worth pursuing.
4. **Real team**: This is a small number of people with complementary skills who are equally committed to a common purpose, goals, and working approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable. Real teams are a basic unit of performance, and were defined in detail in Chapter 3.

5. **High-performance team**: This is a group that meets all the conditions of real teams, and has members who are also deeply committed to one another's personal growth and success. That commitment usually transcends the team. The high-performance team significantly outperforms all other like teams, and outperforms all reasonable expectations given its membership. It is a powerful possibility and an excellent model for all real and potential teams. It was described in detail in Chapter 4.

The curve in Figure II-1 illustrates important relationships and options with regard to these five points. First, it shows that working groups have a wide range of potential performance outcomes, and suggests the working group option remains sensible in many situations. The curve also shows that, for most groups, the largest performance gain occurs between the potential team and the real team, and that the possible performance impact for the real team is significantly higher than for the working group. The dotted line between real team and high-performance team indicates the exceptional personal commitment required for high performance. Finally, the dotted line connecting the working group and the potential team symbolizes the leap of faith involved in making that choice. Beneath that line lie the risks and disappointments of pseudo-team performance. One hopes to avoid them at all costs since the performance impact of pseudo-teams is lowest, and overcoming pseudo-team dynamics can be very difficult, as we will illustrate with the conclusion of the Cosmo Products story.

Cosmo’s senior managers certainly had the reason and potential to become the team their employees hoped for. First, the performance challenge they faced called for a team: multiple negative forces at work, no clear-cut answer for dealing with them, repeated failure of hierarchical approaches to achieve performance aspirations, and a crying need for leadership to pull together in a unified way. In addition, they were a small number of people with the right skill mix. Given the challenge facing Cosmo Products, we believe they could have established a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they could have held themselves mutually accountable as a team. Moreover, the incremental performance promise of a team was badly needed.

Prior to listening to the tapes that the president described as “pretty hard to ignore,” however, the senior managers were not even a good working group. They were a pseudo-team; that is, they referred to themselves as a team but made no serious effort to establish a team purpose, meet performance goals, or define their team approach. Political concerns almost always overshadowed performance considerations. In fact, they were even denying themselves the chance to get better as a working group by improving their individual performance standards, clarifying and coordinating individual activities, and making sure individual results added up to the necessary corporate performance results.

The employee feedback session spurred the Cosmo senior group to want to move from pseudo-team to potential team to real team. The top executives decided that becoming a team was important if they were to have any chance of leading a transformation at Cosmo. Interestingly, and all too typically for such groups, however, they gave little serious consideration to a more rigorous working group option before leaping to the team performance curve. Also, when they met, they did so with the express purpose of becoming a team, not attacking a specific performance challenge.

Most of their meetings were marked by the candor necessary to team building. They worked hard raising and grappling with many issues critical to managing broad-based change at Cosmo, including:

- “The vision is too abstract. We've got to be clearer on what we want the vision to mean to employees and customers.”
- “Everything has become a priority around here. We have to find a way to get things into better focus before we create a system overload.”
- “Leadership at the holding company doesn’t understand our problem here. We need them to buy into the change program we are trying to implement.”
“Our people don’t really understand what is expected of them. We need to communicate specifically what and how we want them to change, and then get them working on it.”

“We still don’t really trust one another. We need to keep having these meetings, maybe even a special retreat, to work on that issue.”

Discussions like these went on sporadically for a few months following the employee feedback session. Out of them, the group emerged with a stronger sense of the vision and purpose for the company—but not for the group itself. It also developed a better understanding of how to set company priorities, an intention to try to communicate more clearly with employees, and a firmer basis for trust among the members. They began to work more collaboratively than before; and, for a while, their effectiveness as a management group improved.

Regrettably, however, the group never agreed on any specific performance goals to pursue as a team. Such objectives were possible. For example, as both the employees and executives knew, Cosmo Products was introducing far too many products of varying quality every year. The senior executive group might have taken on the challenge as an ad hoc team, to cut the number of new offerings by 50 percent while simultaneously designing a process to get to the market on time and within established quality standards. Or, in light of the well-understood demographic changes wreaking havoc on the sales force, the group might have committed itself as a team to shape and lead initiatives aimed at strengthening the account relationship skills of the traditionally part-time sales force.

Had the group defined such goals, it would have had something concrete to do as a team, that is, something specific to advance its aspirations to turn around the company. This would have given it the chance to advance from potential team to real team based on concrete accomplishments. Without any agreed-on performance objectives, however, the Cosmo Products executive group found no way to engage as a team in pursuit of its nobler aspirations. It did discuss and debate at length the urgency of the situation as well as its failure to move ahead with a disciplined eye on performance, left the group and its employees, customers, and shareholders well short of the performance they were entitled to expect.

When this happened, instead of confronting the need to establish a specific team performance objective, the team became frustrated. Once again, it fell back into the weak performance pattern of a pseudo-team.

Three years after the launch of the major change program, Cosmo Products still had not developed the fundamentally different skills, values, and behaviors required for competitive success. Instead, the company endured continuing financial disappointments, major takeover battles, key business divestitures, disturbing top management changes, and wrenching cost-cutting drives, all of which overwhelmed everyone in the company, including the senior executives.

The employee warnings had been right: the performance potential in the top managers becoming a team was as enormous as its ultimate failure was disastrous. More subtly, the executive group’s failure to choose consciously between the working group and team options, like its failure to move ahead with a disciplined eye on performance, left the group and its employees, customers, and shareholders well short of the performance they were entitled to expect.

Most of us have belonged to pseudo-teams like the Cosmo Products executives; they exist in many parts and levels of most organizations. Many behaviors characterize such groups, including confusion over purpose, an inability to focus, unbridled personal animosity or ambition, ignorance of the benefits of a team approach, and hierarchical rituals used to avoid instead of engaging one another. The net result is always the same: the group makes no serious effort to find a common path for moving ahead together.

The pseudo-team is a sad paradox. It refers to itself publicly as a “team” even though privately its members will admit otherwise. People throughout the organization recognize these self-proclaimed labels for the sham that they are. The Cosmo Products executive group, for example, often spoke about itself as a team before the taped employees emphatically contradicted them.

Often, when individuals on pseudo-teams lament their failure to act like a team, they describe yet another irony. Each person faults the other people on the pseudo-team, especially the leader. The remedy prescribed inevitably sounds like “we would do much better as a team if only the rest of them would work as a team in the way I think makes the most sense.”
COMTECH CELLULAR

A group of nine regional general managers from “ComTech Cellular” helps to demonstrate the distinction between working group and potential team. ComTech Cellular is a division of ComTech, a large, regulated telecommunications company. In the 1980s, ComTech created Cellular to go after opportunities presented when cellular telephones burst into the marketplace. The division quickly entered four key markets through wholly owned subsidiaries and five others through joint ventures with nonregulated cellular companies. One of the complexities of the cellular business is that some of ComTech’s joint venture partners in certain markets actually compete with ComTech subsidiaries in other markets.

ComTech’s cellular division has both the advantages and disadvantages of being part of a large, regulated company. On the plus side, it has marketplace clout, name recognition, and significant organizational, technological, and economic resources. On the negative side, ComTech is hamstrung by its link to the still-regulated basic telephone business. ComTech’s competitors can act far more quickly and aggressively because they are neither regulated by government nor slowed by the bureaucratic constraints that victimize most large organizations.

The nine general managers all report to Cameron Daly, a seasoned executive known for his people management skills and orientation toward team building. Daly puts a high priority on the nine becoming a team—believing that if they were a team, they would bring multiple skills and perspectives to bear on some of the division’s more vexing problems. But the image of a team held by Daly and the nine general managers is of a group that communicates well, gets along together, and shares ideas. It does not extend to doing real work together in pursuit of joint goals.

Even if they had more of a performance focus, however, the team approach is probably unrealistic and counter-productive for them. Indeed, for a number of reasons, the nine general managers represent a classic working group instead of a potential team. First, ComTech has joint venture partners in some markets that compete with ComTech in other markets. This makes the mutual trust required in teams even more difficult than usual to build. As the New York general manager of ComTech’s largest market put it, “I’m not going to give my time, attention, and other resources to help our Chicago operation come up with some innovation that their joint venture partner will then use to bite me in the behind back here in New York!”

Second, the unique competitive circumstances of each of the nine markets demand individual insight and responsibility. “When the head of Chicago comes forward with some idea,” says Dave Mars of Cleveland, “my thought process is how is that going to affect my world in Cleveland because I’m not convinced he’s spent any time thinking about it. That’s not his job. His job is to think about Chicago.” While the general managers all see value in sharing information and best practices that will not create indirect problems like the New York–Chicago example, they do not have the capacity or incentive to produce joint work-products in real time. None of them sees any credible reasons why he should commit valuable resources to solving anything other than problems in his own market areas.

Third, the disproportionate size of New York makes it practically impossible for the group to identify a common purpose, set of performance goals, and approach. Objectives that center on New York alienate the other general managers; but New York’s general manager as well as others recognize that ignoring New York is unrealistic. There is little or no common interest being served here.

In creating a distinction between a working group and a potential team, we are not making a “good” or “bad” value judgment. We are simply arguing for a conscious choice that considers the alternatives and trade-offs in a disciplined manner. The ComTech general managers are not somehow deficient as executives because their circumstances preclude the team option. Clearly, for example, they can help one another, their customers, their employees, and their company by adopting and practicing teamwork values and sharing best practices. But, as we have argued before, teamwork and sharing are not synonymous with teams.

In theory, all groups have the potential to find some common team purpose and approach to fill an important performance need; and, in theory, the ComTech general managers might do so. In practice, however, people like Cameron Daly and the ComTech general
managers must ask whether any common performance goals and collective work-products credibly demand their mutual attention, active and equal participation, extra effort, and shared accountability. When the practical answer is no, then asking or expecting such a working group to become a team simply creates confusion and unproductive activity. It also diverts the individuals from moving up the performance range as a working group.

RAPID RESPONSE TEAM: MOVING UP TO A HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAM

The Rapid Response Team at McKinsey & Company provides an example of a team that moved up the performance curve from potential team to real team to high-performance team. We should note that Rapid Response is atypical within McKinsey because it is not a client project team. Rather, it is a support function, and in that sense, the challenges it faced resemble those of potential teams in many other companies.

Rapid Response emerged out of McKinsey's organization practice, which, like other practice and industry groups within McKinsey, faced a dilemma at the end of the 1980s: how to share knowledge and experience across an increasingly global professional firm. In earlier times, a consultant could seek out the best current thinking and practice by relying on personal knowledge of what other people were doing plus word of mouth. By 1989, however, McKinsey's two thousand-plus professionals who worked in more than fifty offices spread across five continents no longer could depend on informal personal networks for knowledge sharing.

This problem particularly vexed the organization practice because the demand for organization knowledge and experience cuts across nearly every important client relationship regardless of industry. As one partner put it, "While only 20 percent of our work starts out as an 'organization' project, over 70 percent of it ends up that way." In view of this, when the leaders of the practice gathered in September 1989, they resolved to find a more effective approach to sharing and managing the firm's cumulative knowledge. After much discussion they agreed on an ambitious aspiration: to respond to all requests for best current thinking and practice by providing access to both documents and experienced consultants within twenty-four hours of the request.

A Potential Team Is Launched

The practice leaders then looked for volunteers to make it happen. Six people signed up, including Jennifer Futernick, a practice librarian, and Joe Miles, an organization specialist, both from San Francisco; Lynn Heilig, a practice specialist, and Ed Michaels, a partner, both from Atlanta; Paul David, a senior associate from Chicago; and Doug Smith, a partner from New York.

These six were now a potential team; that is, they had the potential and desire to shape a common purpose, performance goals, and working approach for which they could hold themselves mutually accountable. By the time they first got together several weeks later, however, the picture had changed. Joe Miles had decided to leave McKinsey for another job, and Paul David could not make it to the meeting because of a client scheduling conflict. The other four met anyway. After much debate, they replaced the virtually impossible twenty-four hour turnaround standard with a more realistic commitment to get requestors what they needed as "rapidly" as possible. They christened the new hot-line service the "Rapid Response Network," and they agreed to a more specific near-term performance objective: to have a Rapid Response system designed and launched by July 1, 1990. This was aggressive because each of them could work on the project only in his or her spare time.

Two central design challenges stood in the way of the target date. First, Rapid Response needed a new computer system to manage the library of documents and experience profiles of consultants as well as be user-friendly to both Lynn and Jennifer, who would answer the phone requests. Second, to provide personal contact with experts in addition to relevant documents, the group had to ensure that busy McKinsey professionals would call back requestors in a "rapid" manner...This latter task is similar to getting your teenage son to answer the telephone during the Super Bowl.

Like all potential teams, the members also faced a number of subtler challenges. For example, Lynn, who had recently made the
transmission from general consultant to practice specialist, believed Rapid Response provided her the rare opportunity to enhance her own job. However, she was worried because the July launch commitment coincided with her baby’s due date.

Meanwhile, Jennifer was apprehensive about the changes implied for her job. For nearly a decade, she had relied on her extensive knowledge of the practice as well as her extraordinary service orientation to provide what was universally acknowledged as excellent help. Jennifer seemed to focus many of her concerns on the prospective computer system. She had never used computers and admitted she did not like them. Lynn, Doug, and Ed, however, suspected that computers only symbolized her uneasiness about the unknown changes that lay ahead.

In addition, the leadership of the core team was unclear. While Ed remained supportive, other demands on his time would allow him to act only as a sounding board and senior sponsor. That left Doug and Paul David to handle the supervision of the project itself, and Paul was in a difficult situation because of heavy client demands. Not surprisingly, all these issues raised anxieties in the group.

Nevertheless, the discussions, decisions, and identified next steps helped the group move up the performance curve, although it was still more of a potential team than a real team. It had agreed on a purpose and set of goals; and Lynn, Jennifer, and Doug were all prepared to do real work. Moreover, the subtler obstacles had been at least brought to the surface and discussed.

The Potential Team Becomes “Real”

The group started resolving its uncertainties over the next few months as it carved out its working approach. Doug and Lynn agreed to focus on gaining the commitment of consultants to support the network. Meanwhile, Lynn, Jennifer, and, hopefully, Paul David were supposed to work on the computer system, with Jennifer thinking mostly about the topical organization of the data base as opposed to the actual computerization aspects. But Paul continued to miss meetings. When he and the others realized he could not contribute—that is, do the real work required of all team members—there was some awkwardness. But the team instinctively had the good sense to let Paul withdraw without making it a big deal.

Lynn and Jennifer engaged Scott Ehmen, a computer professional in the Atlanta office, as well as an outside computer design firm to help work on the system.

By spring, Lynn, Jennifer, Doug, and Scott had the complementary skills, agreed-on purpose and approach, and shared sense of accountability that characterizes a real team. They were confident the computer support system would be ready to meet the July launch date. Their most difficult challenge had become how best to use a worldwide meeting of organization practice consultants in April to gain active support for the Rapid Response Network.

That support was essential to the design of the network. In theory, someone wanting the best current thinking and practice on organization issues would call Rapid Response and reach either Lynn or Jennifer, who would help identify the most pertinent documents and the best experts. If Lynn or Jennifer felt the requestor’s issues went beyond her own expertise, she could put that person in touch with an “on-call consultant,” a member of the organization practice group who was supposed to respond rapidly to the requestor—on the same day if possible.

Getting documents and experts’ names to requestors was straightforward enough. But getting the experts and the on-call consultants to actually make or receive follow-up phone calls was no small task. Good intentions were not the problem; it was the logistical and other difficulties of busy people, multiple time zones, and the very newness of Rapid Response’s promise and approach that stood in the way. The toughest task by far would be to convince enough experienced consultants to add one more “to do” to already overloaded priority lists.

The team knew they had to use the April meeting to build understanding, enthusiasm, and support for Rapid Response. They decided on a combination of fun and hard selling. At every opportunity, the team provided promotional give-aways (e.g., coffee mugs, stickers, T-shirts) embossed with the Rapid Response logo and telephone number. By the end of the second day, the sixty-plus people at the conference had begun to enjoy and look forward to these “interruptions.”

Rapid Response made its final pitch to the group following dinner on the last night. Lynn, Doug, and Jennifer had asked everyone to wear Rapid Response T-shirts to the dinner, and by ten o’clock,
when they made their presentation, Lynn and Doug faced a black-and-silver clad audience filled with wine and ready for a good time. They explained the design of the network, stressed the important role of the experts and on-call consultants, and poked fun at themselves for the folly of launching a new system when one of the key people was about to have a baby. To laughter and applause, Doug asked random individuals to stand up, close their eyes, and try to repeat the Rapid Response telephone number seen and heard so often over the previous two days. The next morning nearly everyone signed up to be an expert or an on-call consultant, putting in place the critical missing piece for the July launch.

The team then turned their attention to the thorny issues of what to do during Lynn's pregnancy leave and Jennifer's anxieties over computers and change. Fortunately, a new team member emerged to help. Nancy Taubenslag, a former associate and part-time organization consultant in New York, was intrigued enough by the April meeting to volunteer as a back-up while Lynn was on pregnancy leave. Nancy, however, soon learned she had underestimated the amount of work involved. When she and Jennifer joined Lynn in Atlanta in early June to get trained on the new computer system, all three discovered it still required a lot of debugging. With Lynn's baby and the official launch of Rapid Response imminent, Nancy and Jennifer had to quickly figure out how they would work together to make the system do what was promised.

By this time, a real affection and commitment to one another began to develop within the team. In particular, Lynn and Nancy were determined to help Jennifer overcome her concerns. They liked working with her and had tremendous regard for her knowledge about organization. Jennifer also knew that, with the arrival of Lynn's baby, much of the success of the project depended on her. Furthermore, she understood that Lynn hoped Rapid Response would be her main job when she returned from pregnancy leave, and she did not want to let Lynn down.

Nancy took on the computer debugging job and spent extensive time on the phone with Jennifer nearly every day to help her enter data and otherwise become more familiar and comfortable with the system. Prior to her baby's arrival, Lynn led the effort to respond to requests; afterward, she pitched in from home whenever she could. Finally, Doug agreed to act as an on-call consultant of last resort to ensure that all requestors received a timely response. And, to relieve some of the pressure, the whole team agreed to postpone any active promotion of the Rapid Response service until after the computer problems had been resolved and Lynn was back full time. They hoped that word of mouth would generate enough requests to keep the service alive, but not overwhelm it in its infancy.

For most of July and August, Jennifer continued to work in her traditional way, albeit consulting Nancy and Lynn for help. Then, late in the summer, Jennifer received a particularly complex request over the phone and decided to try the system out on her own. To her surprise, it not only supplied answers she expected but also yielded ideas she would not have identified otherwise. Jennifer immediately phoned Lynn and Nancy to express her delight and gratitude for their unceasing help and confidence—and to announce that, finally, she was a full-fledged convert!

When Lynn returned to work full time in November, the three women had developed an intensely collaborative approach to Rapid Response, the unexpected rewards of which were both exciting and fulfilling to each of them. They enjoyed tremendously providing requestors with the best possible response, learning from one another on a daily basis, and sharing a lot of personal experiences and challenges. A strong ethic developed within the team that equated each person's own success with the success of Rapid Response. "We really believe," says Nancy, "in the 'if you look good, I look good' approach."

**A High-Performance Team Emerges**

By the end of 1990, the team's commitments went well beyond their common purpose and approach to include a deep concern for one another's growth and success. The system was debugged, the on-call consultants and experts had followed through, and all three women had mastered the librarian, consulting, and computer skills required by their jobs. The team agreed to put itself and the Rapid Response Network to a major test by mounting an extensive marketing campaign throughout the firm. In January 1991, it sent out
advertising flyers, phone stickers, and coffee mugs to consultants around the world, arranged for an internal magazine to do a feature article, and asked organization practice consultants to talk about Rapid Response in their respective offices around the world. Then the members sat back to see if the phone would start ringing.

And ring it did! The next month’s demand was triple any previous month’s. Requests came from every office around the world and from professionals of every level. By the end of the year, Rapid Response had answered more than a thousand requests and assisted nearly a quarter of the firm’s consultants and clients throughout the entire world. Users who at first were skeptical about receiving timely help from on-call consultants and experts soon learned that the Rapid Response promise was dead serious. The system elicited positive comments ranging from thanking the team for quickly answering questions to praising Rapid Response for fundamentally redirecting the approach to meeting client needs. Unsolicited testimonials kept coming in. In addition, other practices began to take notice; several contacted Rapid Response to see what they could learn.

Interestingly, and quite unusually for a team situation, this team rarely could get together in person because of the expense and geography involved. But the unpredictable, busy, and difficult job of helping McKinsey professionals across the globe pulled its members together by phone and fax every day. In fact, the more difficult the assignment, the more fun they had figuring out how best to respond.

The quality of the team’s efforts as well as the members’ commitment to each other continued to grow throughout the year until, by the end of 1991, they were promising each other and their customers to treat every request for help as though the future of the specific client involved and McKinsey itself entirely depended on the effectiveness and speed of the response. To outsiders, such an all-encompassing sense of importance might seem farfetched or overblown. For the high-performing Rapid Response Team members, however, this deep personal commitment to one another and their shared mission keeps them operating at the upper reaches of the team performance curve.

CONCLUSION

“What will it take for us to achieve significant performance results?”

This is the most important question members of a group assigned to work together can ask themselves. The answer depends on the specific nature of the performance challenge at hand. For example, if we were among the ComTech general managers asking ourselves, “What will it take for us to build a cellular business in nine different markets around North America?,” we would answer, “It will require us to do our individual jobs the very best we can, including sharing best practices, insights, and other relevant information with each other.” In the terminology of this chapter, this means becoming an effective working group. If, on the other hand, we were part of a group like ELITE (Chapter 4) and asked ourselves, “What will it take for us to eliminate all advertising errors in the newspaper?,” we would answer, “It will require us to work together as a team to deliver joint work-products in addition to individual contributions. It may also require us to increase customer service values across the entire paper.” In short, “We need to work as a team.”

If people pursue the team option, how can they evaluate where they stand on the team performance curve? We believe two different sets of indicators, or “vital signs,” can help them. The indicators of the first set relate to the elements in our team definition—the team basics. By asking the series of questions at the end of Chapter 3 about small number, complementary skills, common purpose, performance goals, working approach, and mutual accountability, most groups can figure out whether they are operating like working groups, pseudo-teams, potential teams, or real teams.

In addition, however, we have observed a second set of five vital signs that are helpful to monitor. These include:

1. Themes and identity: Teams inevitably rally around a favorite set of themes that convey meaning about their basic purpose and identity. The map of the interstate highway system, for example, symbolized the Burlington Northern Intermodal Team’s commitment to building a fundamentally different approach to
intermodal, one that cooperated with instead of antagonized truckers. The Kodak Zebra Team mentioned in Chapter 3 adopted a variety of black and white logos, apparel, and songs to communicate their aspirations to raise the performance and status of black and white film. Even the dart board in the Garden State Brickface example in Chapter 3 became a theme as well as a meeting place that took on special meaning for how that team approached its job.

The key to these themes lies in the richness of their meaning to the team. Like a special language or code words, team themes reflect shorthand ways to communicate what is important and why it is important inside the team. Such critical and deeply shared meaning, however, cannot be manufactured; T-shirts and coffee mugs do not make teams. But where there is meaning behind the logos, you will find teams.

2. Enthusiasm and energy level: Teams work hard and enthusiastically. They also play hard and enthusiastically. No one has to ask them to put in extra time; they just do it. No one has to remind them not to delegate jobs to others; again, they just do the work themselves. To outsiders, the energy and enthusiasm levels inside teams are unmistakable and even seductive. When you enter the team room you instantly feel the difference. For example, once the Burlington Northern Intermodal Team got going, even though they were controversial, many people from other parts of the railroad surreptitiously called to enlist. The energy and enthusiasm that characterizes a team, however, cannot be mandated from on high—it must derive from the interactions of the members.

3. Event-driven histories: As teams evolve, their stories often progress through a series of galvanizing events—often unplanned and sometimes “failures”—that propel team performance. The professional sports draft of frontline workers in Garden State, the approval of the two horrible hubs in Burlington Northern, the response to the “rat tracks fax” advertisement by the ELITE Team, Global’s rejection of the Dallas Mafia’s pay proposal, and the after-dinner sales pitch by Rapid Response each served to mobilize and advance the teams involved.

4. Personal commitment: As illustrated in the Intermodal, ELITE, Dallas, and Rapid Response stories, members’ strong personal commitment to one another’s growth and success is what distinguishes a high-performance team. When this commitment exists, it always enriches the team’s sense of purpose, stretches its performance aspirations, and makes its members’ approach to working with one another more powerful. Once again, however, this vital sign is either present or absent—people cannot be ordered to care about one another.

5. Performance results: In the final analysis, performance is both the cause and effect of teams. Real teams almost always outperform similarly situated and challenged individuals acting as individuals. High-performance teams, in addition, outperform all reasonable expectations for the group, including those of the team members themselves. Without specific, tangible performance results, in fact, little else matters. Groups like the Cosmo Products executives that fail to focus on specific performance objectives and the collective team work-products to produce them cannot become teams. If you want to know whether any particular group is a real team, look first at its performance results.

To summarize, we think two sets of vital signs indicate whether any specific group of people is a real team. The first set of signs includes the elements in the definition of a team—the team basics. Whenever any are missing or not quite right, the group can and should confront them directly, and work on getting them right. The second set of vital signs—themes and identity, energy and enthusiasm, event-driven histories, personal commitments, and performance results—includes equally powerful indicators of whether any particular group is a team. With the exception of performance results, however, groups usually cannot advance against these indicators by working directly on them. The rich meaning in team themes does not necessarily spring forth from the creation of a team logo; the energy or enthusiasm characteristic of a team and the level of personal commitment found in high-performance teams cannot be mandated through edict or decision.
Significantly, if a review of either set of vital signs suggests a group is not a team, there may be reasons to try improving performance as a working group instead of pursuing the team option. The upside potential gain in performance may not be worth the risk, or the group may not be ready to make the leap from working group to team. Evaluating these trade-offs carefully can prevent a premature decision one way or the other. In any case, the important thing is to rigorously consider both options and then be disciplined about pursuing whichever choice is made.

Assuming, however, that unlike ComTech Cellular, a team approach makes sense, and that unlike Cosmo Products, the people involved are willing to try for team performance, then they should periodically continue to consult both sets of vital signs to track their progress up the team performance curve. Each time they do so, hopefully they will develop new insights about what stands between them and their team performance opportunity as well as deepen their commitment to the common purpose, performance goals, and approach necessary to moving ahead.

**CHAPTER SIX**

**Moving up the Curve: From Individual to Team Performance**

What do potential teams need to do to move up the team performance curve? There is no best answer to this question. Each of the scores of teams we have researched, read about, or been a part of has applied a unique blend of actions, events, and decisions to achieve higher performance. Among them all, however, we have observed an underlying pattern: real teams do not emerge unless the individuals on them take risks involving conflict, trust, interdependence, and hard work.

Of the risks required, the most formidable involve building the trust and interdependence necessary to move from individual accountability to mutual accountability. People on real teams must trust and depend on one another—not totally or forever—but certainly with respect to the team's purpose, performance goals, and approach. For most of us such trust and interdependence do not come easily; it must be earned and demonstrated repeatedly if it is to change behavior. Our natural instincts, family upbringing, formal education, and employment experience all stress the primary importance of individual responsibility as measured by our own standards and those to whom we report. We are more comfortable doing our own jobs and having our performance measured by our boss than we are working and being assessed jointly as peers.

Consequently, team performance demands that most of us adjust