**Team Basics: A Working Definition and Discipline**

Why define “team”? The primary reason is to clarify what we mean by team because the word conveys different things to different people. Some think entirely of sports, where coaching, “individual bests,” and practicing hard to win matter most. Some think about teamwork values like sharing, cooperating, and helping one another. Some think that any group that works together is a team; some believe any management grouping is a team; and some think primarily of two-person pairings like those found in marriage and partnership.

In addition, we encounter many views on the benefits and costs of teams. Like us, some believe teams are a powerful vehicle for performance. Some believe their main value is to support and build self-confidence in their members; or to promote involvement, empowerment, and broad-based teamwork. Some believe teams add value only to short-term project work. On the other hand, many people believe teams waste time, squander resources, and get in the way of decisive individual action and performance. Still others believe teams expose them to unpleasant personal risks like the loss of hierarchical control.

Because of these differences, we need to provide a clear definition for interpreting the stories and lessons in our book. We also want to clarify what we are not trying to do. We are not debating the
semantics of what “team” should mean to other people. The groups described in this book could be labeled in many ways. We could have called them “effective groups” or “performance cadres.” Or we might have invented a new term. We chose instead to call them teams (actually “real teams,” as you will see). Readers should feel free to use whatever terminology is most helpful. Our rationale for supplying a definition is to convey the meanings most relevant for this book, not to advocate particular labels. We want to focus on what teams do, not what they are called.

At the heart of our definition of team lies our fundamental premise, namely that teams and performance are inextricably connected. We believe that the truly committed team is the most productive performance unit management has at its disposal—provided there are specific results for which the team is collectively responsible, and provided the performance ethic of the company demands those results.

Yet most potential teams, as well as the companies they are part of, pay too little attention to either the company’s performance standards or the purpose and goals of individual teams. As a result, too many teams fall short of their potential. Within teams, there is nothing more important than each team member’s commitment to a common purpose and set of related performance goals for which the group holds itself jointly accountable. Each member must believe the team’s purpose is important to the success of the company, and collectively they must keep each other honest in assessing their results relative to that purpose. It is not just that “the monkey is on the back” of every individual member, but that the same monkey is on all their backs together. Without this internal team discipline, the team’s potential accomplishments will come up short.

Within an organization, no single factor is more critical to the generation of effective teams than the clarity and consistency of the company’s overall performance standards—or “performance ethic.” Companies with meaningful, strong performance standards encourage and support effective teams by helping them both tailor their own goals and understand how the achievement of those goals will contribute to the company’s overall aspirations. A company’s performance ethic provides essential direction and meaning to the team’s efforts.

The crucial link between performance and teams is not our invention. Rather, it is the most significant piece of wisdom we learned from the teams and nonteams who helped us with this book. In thinking about the subject of teams, we read dozens of excellent articles and books to find out what experts had to say on the topic. These were very helpful, and we have included them in the section “Selected Readings” at the end of the book. But it was really only by listening to people who are or have been part of teams and potential teams that we developed our definition that distinguishes a team from a mere group of people with a common assignment:

A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.

We will emphasize this definition throughout the book because it is all too easy for potential teams to overlook it. In fact, we think of it less as a definition than an essential discipline that, if applied, will produce both teams and performance.

SMALL NUMBER

Virtually all the teams we have met, read, heard about, or been members of have ranged between two and twenty-five people. The majority of them, like the Burlington Northern Intermodal Team, have numbered less than ten. Consequently, we have included “small number” in our team definition.

We admit size differs from meaningful purpose, specific performance goals, common approach, complementary skills, and mutual accountability. Those five aspects of teams are absolute necessities. “Small number” is more of a pragmatic guide. A larger number of people, say fifty or more, can theoretically become a team. But groups of such size more likely will break into subteams rather than function as a single team.

Why? Because large numbers of people—by virtue of their size—have trouble interacting constructively as a group, much less agreeing on actionable specifics. Ten people are far more likely than fifty to successfully work through their individual, functional, and
hierarchical differences toward a common plan and hold themselves jointly accountable for the results.

Large groups face logistical issues like finding enough physical space and time to meet together. They also confront more complex constraints, like crowd or herd behaviors, that prevent the intense sharing of viewpoints needed to build a team. As a result, large groups tend to settle on less clear statements of purpose that, typically, get set by the hierarchical leaders, and they look to teamwork values as their working approach. Then, when teamwork values break down, the groups revert to formal hierarchy, structure, policies, and procedures.

Even small groups of people fail to become teams on teamwork values alone. Listen, for example, to Sandy Charlap, a teacher at the Dutchess Day School in Millbrook, New York. Like other faculty and staff, Sandy went through team training in the hopes of improving her effectiveness as a teacher and counselor to the kids. For several months following the training, the teamwork values practiced among the teachers and administrators improved and positively influenced the school environment.

But when asked if she and others became a team, Sandy says, “No. We treat one another somewhat better. And we meet periodically to keep the team topic alive. But beyond some general notion of wanting ‘things to improve,’ we don’t really know why we’re doing this. In fact, I’ve noticed that our meetings lately have become a chore—something we do more because we think we have to than because we want to.”

When meetings become a chore, it is a sign that most of the people in the group are uncertain why they have gathered, beyond some notion of getting along together better. Most people consider this a waste of time. Large groups usually reach this breaking point much sooner than small numbers of people.

Thus, groups much bigger than twenty or twenty-five have difficulty becoming real teams. As the Burlington Northern story illustrates, however, sizable groups can function as extended teams whose performance is stimulated well beyond what one would expect in a hierarchy because of the influence of a real team in their midst. The most powerful extended teams occur when the real team operates at the top, as in Burlington Northern Intermodal. But other teams can have the same kind of effect. In the next chapter, for example, we tell the story of a frontline team called “ELITE” who stimulated many of their colleagues to behave as an extended team that, in turn, significantly enhanced the performance of their company.

Still, the distinctions here are critical because of the limits to the team concept. Extended teams, powerful as they are, are not real teams. For all the reasons discussed above, large numbers of people usually cannot develop the common purpose, goals, approach, and mutual accountability of a real team. And when they try to do so, they usually produce only superficial “missions” and well-meaning intentions. As a result, and perhaps countintuitively, extending the benefits of a team to a large group is better accomplished by challenging subsets of the group to tackle significant performance goals and then helping those subgroups to become real teams. One real team in the midst of a large group will influence overall group performance more effectively than any number of mission or teamwork statements.

**COMPLEMENTARY SKILLS**

Teams must develop the right mix of skills, that is, each of the complementary skills necessary to do the team’s job. These team skill requirements fall into three categories:

- **Technical or functional expertise.** It would make little sense for a group of doctors to litigate an employment discrimination case in a court of law. Yet teams of doctors and lawyers often try medical malpractice or personal injury cases. Similarly, product development groups that include only marketers or engineers are less likely to succeed than those with the complementary skills of both.

- **Problem-solving and decision-making skills.** Teams must be able to identify the problems and opportunities they face, evaluate the options they have for moving forward, and then make necessary trade-offs and decisions about how to proceed. Most teams need some members with these skills to begin with although many will develop them best on the job.
Interpersonal skills. Common understanding and purpose cannot arise without effective communication and constructive conflict that, in turn, depend on interpersonal skills. These include risk taking, helpful criticism, objectivity, active listening, giving the benefit of the doubt, support, and recognizing the interests and achievements of others.

Common sense tells us that it is a mistake to ignore skills when selecting a team. A team cannot get started without some minimum complement of skills, especially technical and functional ones. And no team can achieve its purpose without developing all the skill levels required. Still, it is surprising how many people assemble teams primarily on the basis of personal compatibility or formal position in the organization.

Interestingly, however, an equally common error is to overemphasize skills in team selection. Much of the popular literature on teams, for example, stresses skill mix as a prerequisite to selection, almost like recipes—particularly for interpersonal skills. Yet, in our research, we did not meet a single team that had all the needed skills at the outset. We did discover, however, the power of teams as vehicles for personal learning and development. Their performance focus helps teams quickly identify skill gaps and the specific development needs of team members to fill them. The shared commitment in teams encourages a healthy fear of failure as opposed to debilitating insecurity among those challenged to learn. Finally, each team member’s sense of individual accountability to the team promotes learning. Once harnessed to a common purpose and set of goals, natural individualism motivates learning within teams. Except for certain technical and functional skills, most of us have the potential to learn the skills needed in teams. And individualism drives the majority of us to find some way to make our own distinctive and individual contribution to the team. Accordingly, as long as the skill potential exists, the dynamics of a team cause that skill to develop.

Not a single person on Burlington Northern’s Intermodal Team, for example, had a specific marketing background for what, in some respects, was a classic marketing challenge. Yet, as that story illustrates, many of the advantages and rewards of a team come in the opportunities for personal growth after people join the team. Other teams have experienced similar growth. For example, a plant manager who was part of a team at Weyerhaeuser charged with developing a business strategy felt he was holding back the team because of his inexperience with computers. But he wanted to be part of the team so much that he spent hours on his own developing his computer skills. General Electric routinely trains new members in interpersonal and problem-solving skills as a foundation for what they will need to become effective team members. At Motorola, when a member of one self-managing team who could not read asked to be replaced so she would not slow down the rest of the team, the team insisted on teaching her to read and went on to achieve its goals. Thus, the challenge for any potential team lies in striking the right balance between selection and development as the means for building the full set of complementary skills needed to fulfill the team’s purpose over time.

COMMITTED TO A COMMON PURPOSE AND PERFORMANCE GOALS

A team’s purpose and performance goals go together. Indeed, we have yet to find a real team without both. The team’s near-term performance goals must always relate directly to its overall purpose; otherwise, team members become confused, pull apart, and revert to mediocre performance behaviors.

1. A common, meaningful purpose sets the tone and aspiration. Teams develop direction, momentum, and commitment by working to shape a meaningful purpose. Building ownership and commitment to team purpose, however, is not incompatible with taking initial direction from outside the team. The often-asserted assumption that a team cannot “own” its purpose unless management keeps completely away from the team actually confuses more potential teams than it helps. In fact, it is the exceptional case—for example, entrepreneurial situations—when a team actually creates a purpose entirely on its own.

Most teams shape their purposes in response to a demand or opportunity put in their path, usually by management. The team of
Xerox scientists who invented personal computing developed their purpose after the chairman of Xerox called for the creation of an “architecture of information.” The Rockingham Dri-Loc Team at Sealed Air Corporation began shaping its purpose with the instruction from management to cut waste and reduce downtime. The Deal-to-Steel Team at Enron Corporation created its purpose to vastly improve Enron’s pipeline construction deals in response to senior management’s expressed frustration over barriers and bureaucracy.

Direction from management helps teams get started by broadly framing the performance requirements of the company. This is what Bob Waterman and Tom Peters call “solution space”; that is, defining the boundaries and scope of authority clearly enough to indicate direction, but flexibly enough to allow the modification required for commitment to develop. Figure 3-1 is one of the best illustrations we found of a management guideline for teams. It was developed at Procter & Gamble during its impressive major change and performance turnaround between 1985 and 1991. It makes clear the charter, the rationale, and the performance challenge for the team, but leaves plenty of solution space for the team to set specific goals, timing, and approach.

The best teams invest a tremendous amount of time and effort exploring, shaping, and agreeing on a purpose that belongs to them both collectively and individually. In fact, real teams never stop this “purposing” activity because of its value in clarifying implications for members. With enough time and sincere attention, one or more broad, meaningful aspirations invariably arise that motivate teams and provide a fundamental reason for their extra effort.

Listen, for example, to how three people describe the purpose and implicit values of the Kodak “Zebra Team,” which manages fifteen hundred Kodak employees responsible for producing seven thousand different black and white film products:

“Black and white, black and white. Everybody’s a partner.”
“We’re so pleased with what we’re doing and the results we’re getting that we want the rest of the company to learn from us.”
“We’re crazy. We’ll do anything.”

FIGURE 3-1
Initiative Team Charter

| Mission: | Launch XYZ new product by March 5, 1993 |
| Basis for interest: | (Consumer, customer, competitive, cost, etc.) |
| Input targets: | (Product design and reliability, cost, product cube, pricing, capital, etc.) |
| Output targets: | (Revenue, volume, consumer preference, start-up time and cost, etc.) |
| Team members: |  |
| Team process: |  |
| Sponsors: |  |

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These comments, like those of most teams, have more meaning to the team than to a casual, first-time observer because of the time invested by the team in understanding what it is trying to do and why. If you ask the Zebra Team members to interpret, however, they will say they are describing their collective aspirations of leading broad-scale corporate change throughout Kodak, building values
of partnership and risk taking, and proving the worth of black and white film at Kodak, where color has been in the limelight.

Make no mistake—the Zebra Team set clear performance objectives aimed at increasing profits, reducing cycle-time along with work-in-progress inventory, cutting production costs, increasing customer satisfaction, and improving on-time deliveries. Without such goals, it would not have become or remained a team. Yet a few years into continual team discussions, decisions, actions, and more discussions, the three people quoted here are describing a mission that goes well beyond operational economics.

Groups that fail to become teams rarely develop a common purpose that they own and can translate into specific and actionable goals. For whatever reason—an insufficient focus on performance, lack of effort, poor leadership—they do not coalesce around a challenging aspiration. The Executive Committee of a leading financial services company provides a good example. After many years of industry leadership, this company’s competitive position began to erode in the late 1980s. As with most entrenched industry leaders, it took awhile before the Executive Committee ever talked about, much less recognized, the threat.

By 1991, however, the company had crafted a credible competitive strategy that, by any standard, Promised to put it back on course. Unfortunately, the Executive Committee did not convert the strategy into an effective team purpose. Its deep-seated habits of individualism, reinforced by strong, articulate personalities and, probably, ignorance about the need for a team purpose prevented it from developing a specific team purpose and, hence, from becoming a team. Without mutual commitment to a broader team purpose, groups like this Executive Committee are forced to operate without a sense of direction that they understand in common.

But what makes purposes like that of Kodak’s Zebra Team so powerful? First, a team purpose is a joint creation that exists only because of the team’s collaborative effort. As such, it inspires both pride and responsibility. The better teams often treat their purpose like an offspring in need of constant nurturing and care. Naturally, they spend relatively more time in the beginning shaping their purpose; but, even after the team is operative, the members periodically

revisit the purpose to clarify its implications for action. They continue such “purposing” activity indefinitely.

Next, because of the intense discussions that mold a team’s purpose, the purpose itself conveys a rich and varied set of meanings to guide what the team needs to do, particularly in meeting its goals. Scores of scenarios get painted about customer needs, competitor capabilities, governmental or other requirements, and external as well as internal constraints. Consequently, when challenges arise, team members can respond, confident that they have the trust and support of their teammates—so long as the actions taken make sense in light of the team purpose. In other words, risks that otherwise might not be taken get done as a matter of course.

Most important, team purposes give teams an identity that reaches beyond the sum of the individuals involved. This team identity keeps conflict—something both necessary and threatening to teams—constructive by providing a meaningful standard against which to resolve clashes between the interests of the individual and the interests of the team. Armed with team purpose, everyone on the team knows when an individual may be getting out of line and must put the team first or else risk breaking it apart.

2. Specific performance goals are an integral part of the purpose. Transforming broad directives into specific and measurable performance goals is the surest first step for a team trying to shape a common purpose meaningful to its members. Specific goals—like getting a new product to market in less than half the normal time, responding to all customers within twenty-four hours, or achieving a zero defect rate while simultaneously cutting costs by 40 percent—provide clear and tangible footholds for teams for several reasons.

First, they define a team work-product that is different from both an organizationwide mission and the summation of individual job objectives. To be effective, team work-products must require roughly equivalent contributions from all the people on the team to make something specific happen that, in and of itself, adds real value to company results.

Second, the specificity of the performance objectives facilitates clear communications and constructive conflict within the team. For
example, one of Sealed Air Corporation’s* plant-level teams set a
goal of averaging two hours for machine changeover. The clarity of
that goal forced the team to concentrate on what it would take to
achieve it—or, alternatively, to seriously reconsider whether the goal
should be changed. When such goals are clear, team discussions can
focus on how to pursue them or whether to change them; when
goals are ambiguous or nonexistent, such discussions are much less
productive.

Third, the attainability of specific performance goals helps teams
maintain their focus on getting results. A product development team
at Eli Lilly’s Peripheral Systems Group set definite yardsticks for the
market introduction of an ultrasonic probe to help doctors locate
deep veins and arteries in patients. The probe had to have an audible
signal through a specified depth of tissue, be manufacturable at a
rate of 100 per day, and have a unit cost less than a pre-established
amount. Moreover, the team committed itself to develop the product
in less than half the usual time frame for its division. Because each
of these objectives was attainable and measurable, the team knew
throughout the development process where it stood. Either it had
achieved its goals or it had not.

Fourth, as Outward Bound and other team-building programs
illustrate, specific objectives have a leveling effect conducive to
team behavior. When a small group of people challenge themselves
to get over a wall or up a mountain or through a desert—or to
reduce cycle time by 50 percent—their respective titles, perks,
and other “stripes” fade into the background. Instead, the teams
that succeed evaluate what and how each individual can best con-
tribute to the team’s goal and, more important, do so in terms of
the performance objective itself rather than a person’s status or
personality.

Fifth, specific goals should allow the team to achieve small wins
as it pursues its purpose. Small wins are invaluable to building mem-
bers’ commitment and overcoming the inevitable obstacles that get
in the way of achieving a meaningful long-term purpose.

*Sealed Air is a high-performing producer of packaging materials and systems. Its efforts to
develop world-class manufacturing skills through extensive use of teams is described in Chap-
ter 10.

Last, performance goals are compelling. They challenge the people
on the team to commit themselves, as a team, to make a difference.
Drama, urgency, and a healthy fear of failure combine to drive teams
who have their collective eye on an attainable goal. The Eli Lilly
medical probe team, for example, put its pride on the line when it
committed to getting the new product to the market in record time.
Nobody beyond the team could make it happen. It was their
challenge.

3. The combination is essential to performance. A team’s purpose
and specific performance goals have a symbiotic relationship; each
depends on the other to stay relevant and vital. The specific per-
formance goals help a team track progress and hold itself account-
able; the broader, even nobler aspirations in a team’s purpose supply
both meaning and emotional energy. For example, the combination
of the Zebra Team’s aspirations, such as “putting black and white
film back on Kodak’s map,” and specific goals, such as reducing
cycle-time and improving on-time delivery, provide a terrific exam-
ple of what it takes to sustain teams over time—namely, purposes
and performance goals that are both economic and social, rational
and emotional, performance-focused and meaningful.

Usually, a team’s aspirations and purpose will grow out of
a persistent pursuit of specific performance goals. The Tallahassee
Democrat’s ELITE Team described in the next chapter transformed
its initial goal of reducing advertising errors into the more mean-
ingful purpose of providing overall better customer service. Some-
times, however, a team starts with a compelling and noble
aspiration and works hard to translate it into specific and attain-
able performance objectives. For example, the PBS program
“Schools in America”* described four economically hard-pressed
schools whose faculty leadership teams were determined “to prove
that our youngsters could be as successful as affluent youngsters in
public education in America.” Only later did the teams shape mea-
surable goals having to do with test scores, attendance, and grad-
uation. Some teams begin with clear performance objectives, others

*More detail is given in Chapter 7.
only get there after stumbling around for awhile. Whatever the sequence, the directional intensity so necessary for successful team performance comes from the continuing integration of purpose and performance goals.

COMMITTED TO A COMMON APPROACH

Teams also need to develop a common approach—that is, how they will work together to accomplish their purpose. Indeed, they should invest just as much time and effort crafting their working approach as shaping their purpose. A team's approach must include both an economic and administrative aspect as well as a social aspect. To meet the economic and administrative challenge, every member of a team must do "equivalent" amounts of real work that goes beyond commenting, reviewing, and deciding. Team members must agree on who will do particular jobs, how schedules will be set and adhered to, what skills need to be developed, how continuing membership is to be earned, and how the group will make and modify decisions, including when and how to modify its approach to getting the job done. Agreeing on the specifics of work and how it fits together to integrate individual skills and advance team performance lies at the heart of shaping a common approach. It is perhaps self-evident that a working approach that delegates all the real work to a few members (or staff outsiders) and thus relies on review and discussion meetings for the only "work together" aspects of the approach cannot sustain a real team.

Often many teams treat the social aspect of work as unrelated to performance. But effective teams always have team members who, over time, assume important social as well as leadership roles such as challenging, interpreting, supporting, integrating, remembering, and summarizing. These roles help promote the mutual trust and constructive conflict necessary to the team's success. In the best teams, each member assumes different social roles, depending on the situation. As a result, teams develop their own unique processes for energizing and supporting one another and for keeping each other honest and on track. We emphasize, however, that such roles evolve over time to meet performance needs. People make a mistake if, upon reading a description of useful social roles, they think they must assemble a team at the beginning with "all the right parts."

The three-man team who led the Irvington Division of Garden State Brickface from last to first in terms of division performance never stopped discussing and improving its approach to becoming number one—just as it never stopped discussing the importance of being number one. Garden State is a small construction company specializing in applying decorative brickface and stucco for clients ranging from middle-class homeowners to world-famous architects. Each job is a custom effort in which hundreds of slip-ups ranging from cracking, to color or texture deficiency, to damaging the house or building can disappoint customers.

When Charlie Baum, Doug Jimmink, and John Patterson set their sights on turning around Irvington, the division had a history of poor performance. Projects ran too long, costs were out of control, and quality was spotty. Dissatisfied customers often refused to pay. Stealing, accidents, and drug and alcohol abuse were common. Sales blamed production for all the problems and vice versa.

Each man brought his own strengths and weaknesses to the team. Charlie, the general manager, was an Ivy League graduate and former consultant with strong process and analytic skills and a deep faith in the value of fairness and integrity. Charlie, however, neither looked like a brickface guy nor knew much about the complicated job of doing brickface work. Nor did he have much in common with Irvington's workers.

Doug, the vice president of sales, was a born salesman who knew all the con games. Though he had a fiery personality that inspired the sales force, he had little interest in the administrative details of his job.

John, the vice president of production, was an up-from-the-ranks leader who understood brickface work inside out and the lives of the men who did it. Unlike Charlie and Doug, he had no formal management experience, and lacked broad understanding of the business of brickface—that is, what really produced bottom-line results.

As these three men worked out their approach to make Irvington the number one division of Garden State, their job titles faded into the background as more relevant roles, skills, and practices emerged:
Charlie became the prime customer service contact, goal suggester, educator, arbitrator of fairness, and liaison with corporate headquarters. He was also Mr. Integrity.

Doug motivated, challenged, and inspired the team as well as his sales force. With John, he figured out how best to keep sales and production working constructively to meet the goals Charlie suggested.

John promoted Charlie’s belief in fairness with the men, kept Charlie practical, and became the prime challenger and supporter of the work force. He was also Charlie’s “lead student” in learning about the business economics of brickface, providing a critical role model to the division at large.

They used customer expectations, job-by-job “brickface” economics, and employee skill development as the yardsticks for planning and problem resolution.

All three men played games (e.g., basketball, softball, and darts) to provide a comfortable and open context for raising, discussing, and resolving team issues. Says Doug, “That dart board resolved more problems than you would ever believe.”

Obviously, these roles, skills, and practices did not exist the first day the three men met, nor were they dictated by Charlie (the boss). They took shape out of endless conversations about how the team could achieve its purpose in the face of the challenges it faced. The power here comes from perpetually adjusting the team approach with reference to purpose and goals. As the Garden State Brickface Team carved out ways to work best together, it developed the insight and courage required to tackle many knotty obstacles; for example:

Early on, John accepted an order from a salesman who had submitted such a low-ball bid that there was no way Garden State could make money. Previous production vice presidents had always rejected such jobs. John, however, knew the link between sales and production was more critical to Garden State’s approach than the profitability of a single job. Since the commission on the order was crucial to the salesman, he wanted to demonstrate that he and the production crews would do whatever they could to make the job work.

The team shaped new approaches to compensation, training, and information to emphasize the profitability of each job. It provided each new crew with the necessary information to influence job profitability, trained the crews in how to use the data to improve performance, and rewarded crews on the basis of job-by-job results.

The men developed a “Brickface University,” conducted during the cold, slow winter months, that was aimed at enriching everyone’s understanding of the whole business—an on-the-job educational effort that later won national recognition from Congress.

The team changed job assignments from a functional-specialty basis that mixed and matched different individuals on different days to a crew-based approach that kept crews intact. Then they conducted a crew draft along the lines of professional sports teams that put the job of forming crews in the hands of the frontline workers. As a consequence, Irvington was able to reduce its cost base significantly while simultaneously improving job quality.

Certainly, any of these men, acting as an individual in a hierarchy, might have done some of these same things. But we argue that such initiatives—both separately and cumulatively—are far more likely to emerge out of a commonly agreed on and continually updated team approach. When individuals approach a team situation, especially in a business setting, each has pre-existing job assignments as well as strengths and weaknesses reflecting a variety of backgrounds, talents, personalities, and prejudices. Only through the mutual discovery and understanding of how to apply all its human resources to a common purpose can a group really develop and agree on the best team approach to achieve its goal. At the heart of such long and, at times, difficult interactions lies a commitment-building process in which the whole team candidly explores who is best suited to each task as well as how all the individual roles will come together. In effect, it establishes a social contract among members that relates to their purpose, and guides and obligates how they must work together.
MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

No group ever becomes a team until it can hold itself accountable as a team. Like common purpose and approach, this is a stiff test. Think, for example, about the subtle but critical difference between “the boss holds me accountable” and “we hold ourselves accountable.” The first case can lead to the second; but, without the second, there can be no team.

At its core, team accountability is about the sincere promises we make to ourselves and others, promises that underpin two critical aspects of teams: commitment and trust. By promising to hold ourselves accountable to the team’s goals, we each earn the right to express our own views about all aspects of the team’s effort and to have our views receive a fair and constructive hearing. By following through on such a promise, we preserve and extend the trust upon which any team must be built.

Most of us enter a potential team situation cautiously; ingrained individualism discourages us from putting our fates in the hands of others. Teams do not succeed by ignoring or wishing away such behavior. Mutual promises and accountability cannot be coerced any more than people can be made to trust one another. Nevertheless, mutual accountability does tend to grow as a natural counterpart to the development of team purpose, performance goals, and approach. Accountability arises from and reinforces the time, energy, and action invested in figuring out what the team is trying to accomplish and how best to get it done. When people do real work together toward a common objective, trust and commitment follow. Consequently, teams enjoying a strong common purpose and approach inevitably hold themselves, both as individuals and as a team, responsible for the team’s performance.

The specific performance goals of teams also provide clear yardsticks for accountability: for example, the Sealed Air team that wanted to reduce machine changeover time by two hours or the Eli Lilly team that wanted to introduce its new medical device in record time. As such goals are discussed and the approaches to them developed, the people involved—over time—have a clearer and clearer choice: they can disagree with the goal and the path the team selects and, in effect, opt out of the team; or, they can pitch in and become jointly accountable with their teammates.

Accountability, then, provides a useful litmus test of the quality of a team’s purpose and approach. Groups that lack mutual accountability for performance have not shaped a common purpose and approach that can sustain them as a team. The Executive Committee at the financial services firm mentioned earlier illustrates this point. Each of the individuals on that committee is an experienced professional who has shown repeatedly the readiness to sign on and follow through on any assignment. Individual accountability is familiar to each of them. Throughout the crisis, however, the members of the Executive Committee failed to demonstrate that they held themselves mutually accountable, as a team, for any aspect of the company’s performance. They remained accountable as individuals only, a sure sign that they lacked a common team purpose, work-product goals, or mutual agreement on how best to proceed. By contrast, if you observe a group of people who are truly committed and accountable for joint results, you can be almost certain they have both a strong team purpose and an agreed-on approach.

CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that most of us are familiar with teams, we are imprecise in thinking about them. For that reason, gaining a clear understanding of what a team is and is not—and particularly how teams and performance depend on each other—can provide useful insights in how to strengthen the performance of your group. Imprecise thinking about teams, however, pales in comparison to the lack of discipline most of us bring to potential team situations. Teams do not spring up by magic. Nor does personal chemistry matter as much as most people believe. Rather, we believe that by persistently applying the definition offered here, most people can significantly enhance team performance. And focusing on performance—not chemistry or togetherness or good communications or good feelings—shapes teams more than anything else.

As a starting point, we urge you to think about each of the six
basic elements of teams when you assess your group’s current situation: 1) Are you small enough in number? 2) Do you have adequate levels of complementary skills and skill potential in all three categories necessary for team performance? 3) Do you have a broader, meaningful purpose that all members aspire to? 4) Do you have a specific set of performance goals agreed upon by all? 5) Is the working approach clearly understood and commonly agreed upon? and 6) Do you hold yourselves individually and mutually accountable for the group’s results?

While these questions are relatively straightforward, it is probably worthwhile to probe each one further to obtain practical and actionable insights for improvement. Specifically:

1. Small enough in number:
   a. Can you convene easily and frequently?
   b. Can you communicate with all members easily and frequently?
   c. Are your discussions open and interactive for all members?
   d. Does each member understand the others’ roles and skills?
   e. Do you need more people to achieve your ends?
   f. Are sub-teams possible or necessary?

2. Adequate levels of complementary skills:
   a. Are all three categories of skills either actually or potentially represented across the membership (functional/technical, problem-solving/decision-making, and interpersonal)?
   b. Does each member have the potential in all three categories to advance his or her skills to the level required by the team’s purpose and goals?
   c. Are any skill areas that are critical to team performance missing or underrepresented?
   d. Are the members, individually and collectively, willing to spend the time to help themselves and others learn and develop skills?
   e. Can you introduce new or supplemental skills as needed?

3. Truly meaningful purpose:
   a. Does it constitute a broader, deeper aspiration than just near-term goals?
   b. Is it a team purpose as opposed to a broader organizational purpose or just one individual’s purpose (e.g., the leader’s)?
   c. Do all members understand and articulate it the same way? And do they do so without relying on ambiguous abstractions?
   d. Do members define it vigorously in discussions with outsiders?
   e. Do members frequently refer to it and explore its implications?
   f. Does it contain themes that are particularly meaningful and memorable?
   g. Do members feel it is important, if not exciting?

4. Specific goal or goals:
   a. Are they team goals versus broader organizational goals or just one individual’s goals (e.g., the leader’s)?
   b. Are they clear, simple, and measurable? If not measurable, can their achievement be determined?
   c. Are they realistic as well as ambitious? Do they allow small wins along the way?
   d. Do they call for a concrete set of team work-products?
   e. Is their relative importance and priority clear to all members?
   f. Do all members agree with the goals, their relative importance, and the way in which their achievement will be measured?
   g. Do all members articulate the goals in the same way?

5. Clear working approach:
   a. Is the approach concrete, clear, and really understood and agreed to by everybody? Will it result in achievement of the objectives?
   b. Will it capitalize on and enhance the skills of all members? Is it consistent with other demands on the members?
   c. Does it require all members to contribute equivalent amounts of real work?
   d. Does it provide for open interaction, fact-based problem solving, and results-based evaluation?
   e. Do all members articulate the approach in the same way?
f. Does it provide for modification and improvement over time?
g. Are fresh input and perspectives systematically sought and added, for example, through information and analysis, new members, and senior sponsors?

6. Sense of mutual accountability:
   a. Are you individually and jointly accountable for the team’s purpose, goals, approach, and work-products?
   b. Can you and do you measure progress against specific goals?
   c. Do all members feel responsible for all measures?
   d. Are the members clear on what they are individually responsible for and what they are jointly responsible for?
   e. Is there a sense that “only the team can fail”?

Answering the preceding questions can establish the degree to which your group functions as a real team, as well as help pinpoint how you can strengthen your efforts to increase performance. They set tough standards, and answering them candidly may reveal a harder challenge than you may have expected. At the same time, facing up to the answers can accelerate your progress in achieving the full potential of your team. In Part II, we will describe in more detail how potential teams actually go about improving their “scores” on these questions and, more important, their performance.