

TEAM Leadership: Leading High Performing Teams

Michael Jordan, the most celebrated and decorated basketball player in the NBA, with six championship rings, shares what it takes to win, “There are plenty of teams in every sport that have great players and never win. Most of the time, those players aren't willing to sacrifice for the greatest good of the team. The funny thing is, in the end, their unwillingness to sacrifice only makes individual goals more difficult to achieve...I'd rather have five guys with less talent who are willing to come together as a team than five guys who consider themselves stars and aren't willing to sacrifice.”

In my work with many organizations, I have begun to realize that leading high performing teams effectively takes more than skills. It starts with the heart and soul of the leader: his perspectives, values and motives.

Some TEAM Perspectives

1. Talent itself is not the chief criterion of an effective team

“Talents without a willingness to work for the team will not win championships.” Michael Jordan

Talented individuals don't win championships. The fastest runners in a relay team do not always win the race for the team. Winning a relay takes more than talents. Relay runners need coordination. They need to know when and how to pass the baton well.

Michael Jordan writes most poignantly, “I have seen many talented individuals who don't win championships. Talents without a willingness to work for the team will not win championships. I learnt it the hard way.” He had to drastically change his approach and to involve his team members more before he started to win his first NBA Championship with the Chicago Bulls, after three consecutive losses to the Detroit Piston.

“Of all the things I've done, the most vital is coordinating the talents of those who work for us and pointing them to a certain goal” said Walter Elias Disney, Founder of Walt Disney Company, who shared the same approach when leading creative artistes of incredible talents.

Many leaders are frustrated with team members who are obviously bright and intelligent, yet can't seem to use their ability in positive and useful ways. People like this are usually characterized as “difficult” or “under-achievers.” What's so maddening is that they have masses of talent, but seem bent on **not** using it in ways that the organization-or the leader deems purposeful and productive.

2. Smart people do not necessarily make great team players

“Members of outstanding teams are not smarter, they have more emotional intelligence.” Warren Bennis

How true! A leading college president once remarked, “We often hire for competence but we fire for personality.” Emotional intelligence involves four aspects:

First, **self-awareness**. We need team members who understand themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, what they can and cannot do. They don't try to do everything. They understand their own personalities, prejudices and human tendencies.

Second, **self-management**. Self-awareness will not necessarily lead to self-management. There are leaders who are conscious of their nasty temperament but cannot control it. High performing team members learn to have self-control.

Third, **other-awareness**. Leaders must make effort and time to understand the people they lead: their potentials and foibles, their fears and dreams, their needs and aspirations. They think of other people's interests.

Fourth, **other-management**. By understanding the team members' diverse personalities, they are then able to harness them and align them appropriately to achieve organizational goals. Leaders who manage others well are kinder, better listeners, and know how to motivate their team members using a variety of persuasion skills.

These four points summarize how we can become better leaders and team players and have the ability to develop other team members.

3. **Breaking up a team is easier than building one.**

"A team is bound to fail right from the start, unless we apply time and effort to build it."

John Ng

Having had more than three decades of working with organizations, I have become more aware that it is easier to break a team than to build one. In fact, I believe that any team is bound to fail right from the beginning.

Why? This is because we are all different, and individuals tend to be self-centered. We have different personalities, values, styles, and idiosyncrasies. Our differences can tear us apart. To top it all, we have to deal with the tendency of self-interest. According to Peter Chao, who did a landmark study on leadership trust, self-orientation breaks trust.ⁱ

Another lesson I have learnt about breaking up is that it usually begins from within. On the other hand, external threats do not merely expose a team's existing weaknesses, they can also strengthen the team's inner resolve to overcome them.

The point is that externals reveal the internal workings of a team: its cohesion and structural processes. When these internal workings are weak, any external threat may hasten its break-up. But if a team is strong, the external threat may galvanize it to overcome the odds. So we need to strengthen a team from within.

What are some factors that will break a team? We will consider these factors in our next article.

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ⁱ Peter Chao (2004). Leadership Trust. An unpublished paper at the Drucker School of Management.