

**IS TEAM
DEVELOPMENT
THE RIGHT TOOL
FOR THE JOB?**

Organizations compete in an environment characterized by a relentless pace of technological change, more and faster flow of information, and intense global competition. Many problems are now more complex than any one person can solve. Consequently, teams are playing a larger role in contemporary business, and team development has become a priority activity for companies.

But not every group of people working together is a team. So before undertaking a team-development effort that will require a substantial investment of time, energy, and money, it is essential to make sure that it is the right thing to do—or whether some other kind of development activity would be a better investment, with a better payoff.

To make these judgments, you need to answer four questions: (1) Is your group a real team that (2) has the right members and (3) a clear direction, and (4) does the organization provide a supportive context for effective teamwork to flourish?¹ Overfield Leadership Group (OLG) can help the group leader and members go through these issues, using various tools to surface crucial information.

A REAL TEAM

First, it is important to consider whether the unit in question is a “real team” or merely a group of people who report to the same manager. This is really two questions. To begin with, is it clear who is a member and who is not? Admittedly, this may appear self-evident, but it is common for members to believe that the group has established precise boundaries. When asked to identify who is on their teams, however, members frequently do not agree.

In addition, is the work accomplished by members *interdependent* in nature or are responsibilities largely *independent*, perhaps divided along functional lines? Often leaders attempt to build a team to accomplish tasks better completed by individuals or small groups working largely independently but with frequent interactions. If a

team, with members working interdependently, is the best way to achieve an objective, bridging the gap between the leader's vision for the team and how members currently work together can constitute a strong basis for a useful team-development intervention. Conversely, after examining the situation more closely, managers may find that there is little need for their direct reports to function as a team. In such instances, there is value in helping members of an organization learn to communicate more effectively, make better decisions, and address conflict more constructively. This type of training can lead to better performance and higher morale.

THE RIGHT MEMBERS

Second, if the group is a team, does it have the right members, people who possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities (both technically and interpersonally) to fulfill its purpose? Moreover, it is important to evaluate whether there are any members who are bad apples or, indeed, team killers.² This can be a particularly difficult question to answer up front. It may be that ineffectual structural elements or processes (for example, ambiguous roles and responsibilities) create the false impression that a person is the problem. If so, team development may be helpful in identifying important situational changes that can improve both individual and team functioning. On the other hand, a more prudent course of action may be to spend additional time ensuring that the right people are on the team and the wrong people aren't. Does the team have "the right number of people? With the *right* skills? In the *right* roles? At the *right* time? For the *right* reasons?"³

A CLEAR DIRECTION

Third, does the team have a clear direction? In other words, is this a group of people with a shared view of the future, or is it loose federation of managers with disparate expectations? A recent Harris Poll⁴ highlights the impact of not articulating a shared

purpose. In a survey of 1,072 employed adults in the United States, 84% indicated that working on teams was difficult. When questioned specifically about why team efforts fail, 59% stated that people were primarily motivated to be individually successful. Without a compelling sense of direction that is clearly articulated, and without sufficient buy-in from team members, people are likely to maximize individual utility rather than focus on collective success.

ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

The fourth question in deciding if team development is appropriate is whether the organization can provide the level of support required for effective teamwork. As the covers of popular business periodicals attest, the prevailing mindset (particularly in the West) is that a company's success primarily derives from the actions of a Great Man or Great Woman—an individual leader—rather than from the collective efforts of a Great Team.⁵ Most organizations perpetuate this view by allocating salaries, bonuses, and other scarce resources based primarily—if not exclusively—on individual achievements. This leads to a paradoxical situation in modern organizational life: On one hand, today's business challenges require effective collaboration, leaders extol the virtues of teamwork and team-based structures, and followers believe in teamwork and aspire to be team players. On the other hand, companies reinforce individual rather than collective behavior through their behavioral norms and compensation structures. The result is that many organizations desperately need high-performing teams in order to meet many of their objectives but diminish the prospects of success by rewarding behaviors that impede collaboration.

Other important sources of organizational support include unfettered access to internal and external information to guide decision-making, as well as time, office space, and administrative resources. These types of support may seem obvious, but busy leaders may overlook seemingly small ways to catalyze the effectiveness of their teams.

DECIDING TO GO AHEAD

It is not necessary that all four questions be answered affirmatively at the start of team development, but it is important that there be a sufficient foundation for addressing the issues in a timely manner. Also, it should be noted that organizational leaders may view team-building as the solution to problems that are better addressed with other interventions, such as working with a leader to formulate and articulate a clear purpose, selecting appropriate team members (and removing inappropriate ones), or coaching a leader on how to effectively hold direct reports accountable for results. In some cases, by first addressing deficiencies, a team-development intervention may be a logical (and warranted) next step to improve organizational effectiveness. In other instances, the best course of action is to assist the client with reframing the problem to be solved and the most appropriate steps to remediate it. It is important to recognize that, in most organizations, there are forces that conspire against developing effective teams.

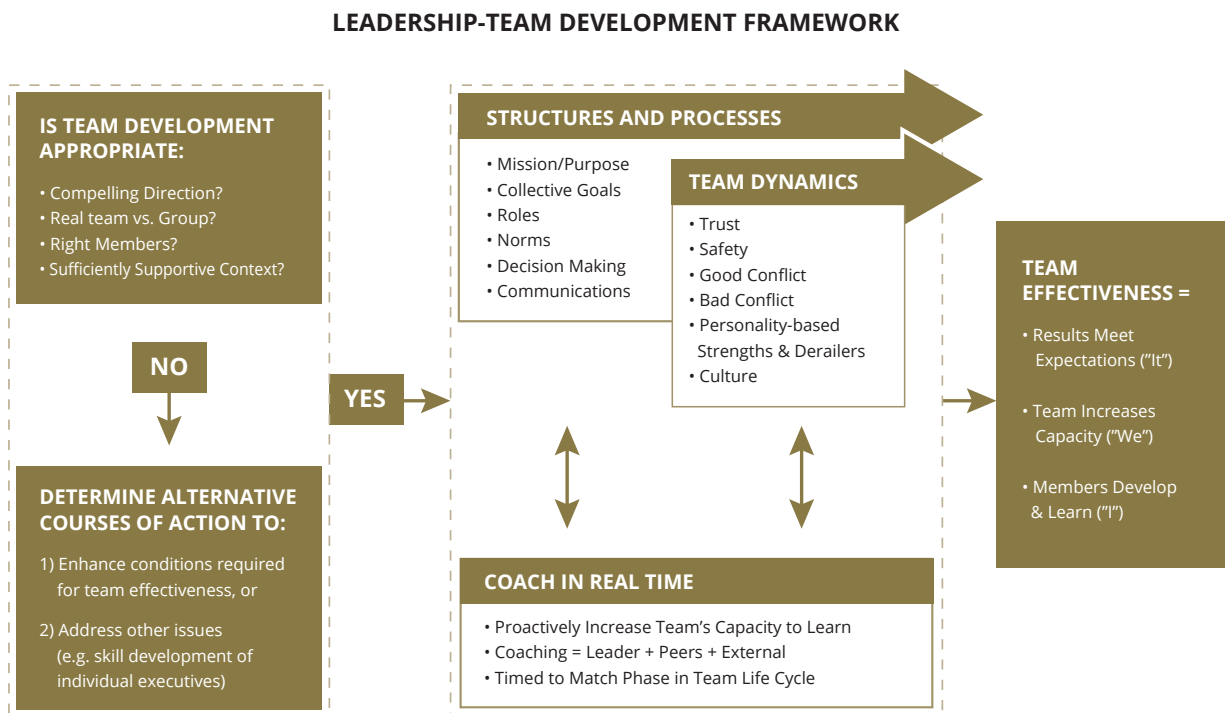
But it is essential that a detailed effort be made to answer these four questions. This effort will determine whether the foundation is sufficient to engage in a team-development intervention or if an alternative course of action is indicated. And if it is clear that an adequate basis exists to proceed with team development, the process of answering the four questions helps shape the specific features of this intervention. Oftentimes, the data required to answer the questions are best collected through interviews with the group leader and key stakeholders.

Additional information (for example, conducting a survey) may be necessary before the questions can be adequately answered. Therefore, even before proceeding with a team-development intervention, OLG engages a (prospective) client in an iterative process: (1) collecting, analyzing, and discussing implications from assessment data and (2) proposing possible intervention designs, which may include alternatives to team development (for example, individual coaching for the leader). In some cases, two or three cycles through this process may be necessary to determine whether to proceed and how best to do it.

When conditions are sufficiently in place to proceed with a team-development intervention, it will help to take a final look at which specific aspects of team functioning are most pressing to address, which activities and events should constitute the intervention, how to align with the team leader on the staging and sequencing of the intervention, how to measure its effectiveness, and the best way to kick-off this work with the entire team.

MOVING ON TO TEAM DEVELOPMENT

The team-development intervention itself may be challenging, but OLG has created a guide to it. The Leadership-team Development Framework (LTDF) defines a structured yet flexible process that integrates a range of practices to improve the effectiveness of teams, especially leadership teams.⁶



Source: "A Comprehensive and Integrated Framework for Developing Leadership Teams," by Darren Overfield, in *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, volume 68 (2016), number 1, pages 1-20.

Drawing on lessons learned from the research literature and hands-on experience consulting with leadership teams, the LTDF process targets the team as a unit rather than the individual members. It must be emphasized that this process is not a replacement for executive coaching of individual team members. On the contrary, coaching a leader may be a prerequisite intervention for starting team development, and frequently executive coaching with team members can occur simultaneously. But optimal team development cannot be achieved by merely helping individuals become more effective team players. It requires that the team as a whole be coached, and the coaching needs to occur as the team is actually carrying out its collaborative work.

The process guided by the LTDF occurs in three phases: (1) qualifying, during which it is determined if team development is appropriate; (2) intervention, during which the development takes place; and (3) evaluation, during which the outcomes of development—in terms of team effectiveness—are analyzed. We have addressed the first phase above. See our whitepaper, “How to Develop a High-Performing Leadership Team,” for a description of the second and third phases.

Notes

¹ Page 14 in Ruth Wageman, Debra A. Nunes, James A. Burruss, and J. Richard Hackman, *Senior Leadership Teams: What it Takes to Make Them Great* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2008).

² See the 2006 article “How, When, and Why Bad Apples Spoil the Barrel: Negative Group Members and Dysfunctional Groups,” by Will Felps, Terence R. Mitchell, and Eliza Byington, in *Research in Organizational Behavior*, volume 27, pages 175–222.

³ Page 58 in Gordon Curphy and Robert Hogan, *The Rocket Model: Practical Advice for Building High Performing Teams* (Tulsa, OK: Hogan Press, 2012).

⁴ Harris Poll on teamwork. Retrieved from:
<http://www.talentmgt.com/articles/most-working-adults-find-team-based-work-difficult>

⁵ Pages 29-33 in Warren Bennis, “The Secrets of Great Groups,” *Leader to Leader*, issue 3.

⁶ For more on the LTDF, see the 2016 article by Darren Overfield, “A Comprehensive and Integrated Framework for Developing Leadership Teams” in *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, volume 68, number 1, pages 1-20.



BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

We build relationships based on trust and integrity. We don't cut corners, operating with transparency, ensuring confidentiality, and delivering on promises. Candor is only possible in a completely confidential environment.



KEEP SCORE

As Peter Drucker stated, "Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked; leadership is defined by results not attributes." With this spirit in mind, two types of metrics are a critical component of each development initiative: Process metrics monitor progress along the way, and outcome metrics evaluate end results to help deliver on the promise of becoming a more effective leader. We begin by clearly defining with a client what would constitute a "win" and then collaborate to deliver this outcome.



APPLY SCIENCE

There are three areas of applying evidenced-based best practices. First, there is the science of goal setting and behavior change. Thirty years of research has identified what is effective (and what is not) when it comes to making the behavioral changes required for a person to grow and develop as a leader. We tap into this vast literature and provide practical ways for clients to benefit from its findings without getting lost in the minutiae. Second, there is the commitment to learn how to learn. As Eric Hoffer said, "In a time of drastic change it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists." Consistent with this message, we help clients apply research-based insights from the burgeoning fields of learning agility and growth (in contrast to relying on fixed mindsets). Third, there is the awareness that one must manage paradox in order to become a versatile leader. As F. Scott Fitzgerald observed, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." In a similar vein, the literature on developing mental complexity provides useful approaches for growing as a leader in the midst of an increasingly turbulent environment.



KEEP IT SIMPLE (BUT NEVER SIMPLISTIC)

Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." In this spirit, we help clients crystalize the key messages in their assessment results and clearly articulate compelling development goals.



MAKE IT PERSONAL AND PRACTICAL

We offer truly custom-built solutions, rather than an off-the-shelf, one-size-fits-all approach to development.



PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

We are concerned with our own growth, requiring of ourselves the same level of learning, risk, and vulnerability that we ask of clients.