

Moving Beyond Team Myths

BY JOHN BECK AND NEIL YEAGER

*Here's some unconventional team wisdom that blows away
the myths about what makes a team successful.*

THE DIRECTOR OF organization development for a medium-sized electronics company had been working overtime to eliminate some barriers that existed between divisions. In his determination to unleash the organization's full potential, he established cross-functional teams designed to create a new kind of organization that would thrive on consensus. So far, the all-out effort has produced endless meetings but few results. The managers involved are praying that "this too shall pass" so they can get back to their "real" jobs.

In another case, a partner of a large accounting firm has encouraged her managers to improve teamwork by empowering the staff. "How can we empower anyone when we have no real power ourselves?" asks one manager. "We're merely the conduit for pushing work down the organization. Teamwork here means getting him to do this and her to do that."

The president of a major chemical company wants his senior vice-presidents to facilitate team meetings that involve employees in transforming the company. Why, he wonders, are they so unwilling to take the leap of faith?

"We're too busy putting out fires," says one.

These are common scenarios across organizations. Executives, in their attempts to keep up with the dramatic changes of the past decade, have grasped for new ways to manage their organizations. Teamwork has become essential in this brave new world, but the conventional wisdom fails to deal with the complexities of creating and sustaining a high-performing team.

Myths versus realities

Conventional wisdom about teamwork is based on several assumptions that can prevent a team from reaching its full potential. The common myths are as follows:

- ▶ The importance of working together as a team has replaced the importance of individual contributors.
- ▶ Putting high-performing individuals together in a group automatically creates a high-performing team.
- ▶ It takes a team a long time to be up and running.
- ▶ A team has to work through conflicts before it can be productive.
- ▶ Decision making by consensus is the best way to make a team work effectively.
- ▶ Team accountability means that everyone is responsible for everything.
- ▶ There are no leaders or followers on teams; everyone is equal.

To replace these myths, managers need a new reality-based understanding of what it takes to make teams work. One reality is that teams need leaders. Another is that leaders must know how to be effective in today's team-based environments. The Leader's Window is a model that guides leaders to accomplish those two realities.

Before examining the Leader's Window, it's important to understand the four leadership styles used by many managers, shown in figure 1. These styles aren't new. They've been part of every leadership theory since people started writing about the subject. But the way the styles are applied using the Leader's Window provides a new approach to successful teamwork.

Each leadership style offers a potential blessing and curse: It's a blessing when the style matches the conditions; it's a curse when there's a mismatch between the leader's actions and what followers need in a given situation. The labels in figure 2, "Applying the Leadership Styles," show how each leadership style can be effective if used at the appropriate times, or ineffective if used at the inappropriate times.

Our research in talking with people about what makes a "best" leader has taught us that to be effective, team leaders require some unconventional wisdom. First, they must recognize that a team is made up of individuals and the group dynamics that arise when individuals come together. Leaders must also realize that individual assignments and group efforts are not polar opposites, even though conventional wisdom says that one is either an individual contributor or a team player. Many trainers are fond of saying that there's no "i" or "u" in the word "team." The implication is that teamwork is a "we" exercise.

The result of that kind of thinking is the mistaken notion that teamwork happens only when all team members are together in a room. The reality: Not every team requires a carefully orchestrated group effort—like a basketball or football team. Some teams—such as golf, tennis, and track—call for individual excellence

Figure 1: Common Leadership Styles

Here's a snapshot of the leadership styles many managers use:

<p>Style 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ supporting people with their responsibilities by helping them think through problems ▶ asking questions to help others analyze and solve problems ▶ giving people recognition for seeking or accepting support 	<p>Style 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ involving people in your responsibilities; making decisions based on their input ▶ seeking information for analyzing and solving problems ▶ giving people recognition for making contributions to problem solving
<p>Style 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ giving people responsibility; letting them make decisions on their own ▶ maintaining limited communication through briefings and updates ▶ giving people recognition for accepting responsibilities 	<p>Style 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ taking responsibility; making decisions on your own ▶ giving information about what, how, and why to do something ▶ giving people recognition for following directions

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Figure 2: Applying the Leadership Styles

Effective		Ineffective	
Developing S3	Problem solving S2	Over accommodating S3	Over involving S2
Delegating S4	Directing S1	Abdicating S4	Dominating S1

and limited group interaction. Most business teams require both.

To lead a successful team, a manager must know how to orchestrate effective group dynamics and how to translate a group effort into individual accountabilities. We offer new ideas for leading groups and individuals,

and the Leader's Window—a new way to integrate individual and group leadership.

Leading groups

Leaders of groups must understand the predictable stages of team development: forming, storming, norming, and

performing—a model developed by Bruce Tuckman in 1965, based on T-groups and other leaderless groups.

It may be comforting to believe that storming is natural, that storms will turn into productive norms, and that the endpoint will be performance. But Tuckman's model provides a distorted view of the realities of teamwork.

Most people think that forming means just meeting your teammates. Team orientation requires a lot more. It includes clarifying the team's mission, defining goals and roles, and establishing procedures for getting the work done. At the outset, a team has to form around a clear purpose and then focus on the best ways to accomplish that purpose.

Another distortion is that storming is inevitable. Actually, many teams are able to focus and become productive without storms. They come together, clarify what they have to do, and get on with the job of doing it. Storming can or might occur, but it doesn't have

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to. Of course, if you believe it's supposed to happen, it probably will.

It's also a distortion that storming automatically turns into norming. Some team leaders still think that dwelling on conflicts is the best way to prepare a team to perform. In reality, storms occur when a team isn't focused: the mission and goals are ambiguous, roles are confusing, and operating procedures are dysfunctional. These problems don't go away by themselves or resolve through arguing. They require that team members answer these questions: What are we expected to do? How are we going to coordinate our efforts to get it done?

A final distortion is that performing is the endpoint of group development. In our experience, teams often move beyond performing and level off. They become complacent, burnt out, or defensive. Such symptoms arise when a team goes on autopilot once it hits the performing stage. If leaders don't assume that performing is the endpoint, they can counter any leveling-off by refocusing and revitalizing the group.

To overcome these distortions, we've created a new business-oriented, reality-based model of group development: forming, focusing, performing, and leveling. We've also identified the leadership styles for effective group dynamics. It's as simple as 1-2-3.

A full team orientation requires both forming and focusing. In forming, team members need style 1, directing, from their leader to find out why they're on the team and where they're going. They need to know their mission, goals, and management's expectations. In focusing, a leader should use style 2, problem solving, to involve the team in "owning" the mission and in determining how it will achieve it. Team members need to know their roles and responsibilities, norms for communicating, decision-making procedures, and coordinating mechanisms.

If a team is formed and focused properly, it can move on to the performing stage without conflicts or power struggles. If a team doesn't form around a clear purpose and focus on how to accomplish it, storms are likely to occur. But it's important to view storms as a symptom of being out of focus, not as an inevitable stage

of development. If conflicts do arise, a leader should use style 2 (which involves making decisions based on team input) to clarify what the team is expected to do and to organize ways to get it done.

When a team moves on to the performing stage, the members are ready for action. That involves distributing responsibilities among team members so that each one knows what he or she must do. The most important part of performing doesn't happen in a meeting room; it happens in the workplace where individuals have to deliver on commitments to the team. For that to occur, a leader should shift to style 3 (developing) to give team members the level of responsibility they can handle and to ensure that they receive the support they need from other members.

To keep the team in the performing mode, a leader should use style 3 (which involves listening and sup-

■ *Avoid bogging down in "groupthink" or "consensus-run-amok" ■*

porting team members' decisions) when the team comes together as a whole. The members should meet to share progress reports, update changes, identify and solve problems, and capitalize on opportunities. Without such meetings, team members may redirect their focus back to day-to-day assignments, and team productivity may level off.

To make team meetings effective, a leader should avoid the trap of over-accommodating—trying to get the group to make all of the decisions. The way to avoid that trap is to distribute responsibility so that individual team members are empowered to make decisions, with the team's input. This is very different from group decision making. The result is shared leadership with a strong bias toward action.

When a decision must be made, a leader can use style 2 (problem solving) to get the team's input to his or her decision, or style 3 (developing) to guide the team member who has

agreed to make the decision. The designated decision-maker should listen to other team members and then decide. If there's consensus, the decision is easy. If not, the decision-maker should be empowered to make the decision. If every decision has to wait for total buy-in, a team will get bogged down in "groupthink" or in what one of our clients calls "consensus-run-amok."

To summarize, a leader should use style 1 (directing) and style 2 (problem solving) to take charge of the forming and focusing stages that launch a group. When a team reaches the performing stage, the leader should shift to style 3 (developing) to empower team members to take action with team support. To keep a team in the performing mode and avoid leveling, a leader should bring the members together at regular intervals, using style 3 to help them make decisions and style 2 when the leader must decide.

Leading individuals

Another myth about teamwork is that it diminishes the importance of individual contributions. This couldn't be more untrue. Individual members must be empowered in order for the team as a whole to take action. So, team leaders need to know what it means to empower people.

If a leader just lets go, the result isn't empowerment but abdication. Leaders are guilty of abdication when they don't communicate clear expectations, when they leave team members alone too much, when they don't provide support when team members need it, and when they waffle when it's their turn to make tough decisions. Unfortunately, that's what is happening in many organizations under the banner of empowerment. You can't just let go and pray. Real empowerment means providing clear directions, delegating responsibility, being available to give support when it's needed, and being prepared to make timely decisions when necessary.

In terms of the four leadership styles, the sequence is 1-4-3-2: style 1 (directing) to clarify expectations, style 4 (delegating) to hand off meaningful assignments, style 3 (developing) to stay in touch and help team members make their own decisions, and—if necessary—style 2 (problem solving)

Effective Team Building

Some organizations view teams as a management panacea. They form teams even when the work doesn't require it. Other organizations give lip service to the team concept yet don't really support it with the training programs and operational autonomy necessary to make the teams effective.

In searching for ways to properly use and manage teams, the first questions should be, "What is the problem?" and "What is the work to be done?" Then, "What is the best way to solve it?" If a team is needed to solve the problems or get the work done, then create one. If not, don't. Some kinds of work are still best left to individuals.

Typical problems that may be successfully addressed by teams include staff apathy, a lack of cohesiveness in work groups, conflicts among the members of work groups and confusion about assignments and/or work relationships. Teams also can take on issues such as production losses, the need to improve quality or productivity, ineffective meetings and the need to create a more participative work climate.

BUILDING A TEAM

The first step in building a team is to select and train the managers. They will need training in listening, communication and reinforcement skills, as well as the goal setting and facilitative techniques needed to run meetings.

The second step is to ask the team members to define how an effective team works and get them to collaborate on that definition, with little or no direction from the leader. By most definitions, an effective team has the following elements:

- ▶ An elevated goal.
- ▶ Respect for its leader, who is principled.

- ▶ Group goals that take precedence over individual goals.

- ▶ Candid communications and a collaborative climate.

- ▶ Competent members who give each other feedback and reinforce individual progress.

- ▶ A results-oriented milieu.

- ▶ A unified commitment.

- ▶ A standard of excellence.

- ▶ External support.

Your employees will probably come up with a longer list. Hold on to that list and have them agree on how they will deal with potential teamwork problems, including conflicts between members, a slacking team member, an individualist who doesn't listen to the opinions of others and a non-contributing or dominating member.

Then have them go back to their description of an effective team and

ask each member to rate the team's performance in all of the areas listed. You will then come up with a consensus number for each item. Discuss extremely high or low deviants and then attack the low areas, listing what can be done to improve in each one. Be sure to establish specific plans of action and time frames for completing them. The manager's job is to help the team members agree on who will do what by when and to support their program.

Since the team's focus is on tasks and relationships, the next steps, assuming they have been working together for at least three to six months, are as follows:

- ▶ On a large flip chart sheet of paper, have each member list his four greatest strengths as a team member *and* one area in which he needs to improve to be a more effective team member.

- ▶ Rotate all the team members and ask each to add to the list of the others or concur with the comments.

- ▶ Have members report the consensus of their feedback to the group. Each member should commit to working on the areas of improvements, and all should agree to reinforce others as they improve.

- ▶ Have them meet within 60 days to discuss the improvements.

To measure a team's effectiveness, have them meet again in six months. How do they feel they're doing against the agreed upon points and compared to the evaluation of their manager?

In summary, use teams where they can be effective and they will be effective for you.

THE MANAGER'S ROLE

Managers can take these steps to help create a participative environment for teams:

- ◆ Provide initial direction.
- ◆ Clarify assignments.
- ◆ Give performance feedback.
- ◆ Trust the members.
- ◆ Strive for commitment.
- ◆ Share company information.
- ◆ Take charge where appropriate.
- ◆ Reinforce decision-making, creative solutions and cooperation.

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to make tough decisions based on team members' recommendations.

According to our research, the most effective leaders practice this 1-4-3-2 empowerment sequence. Yet, that approach is counter to conventional wisdom. In the past, most managers were trained to pick the right leadership style for a given situation. But in most situations, all four styles are needed.

Conventional wisdom also holds that the best way to develop employees is to move from style 1 to style 2 to style 3 to style 4, gradually letting out the kite string of responsibility. That approach has worked only on occasion, even when the business world was slower and more predictable. In this age of rapid change, it doesn't stand a chance. In today's downsized organizations, leaders have to delegate more than ever. The best leaders use the 1-4-3-2 sequence. That doesn't mean that they treat everyone the same.

When team members take on new assignments, the most effective leaders emphasize the beginning and the end (styles 1 and 2) of the 1-4-3-2 sequence:

- 1: clear and complete directions to team members
- 4: limited time for team members to work alone
- 3: rare occasions for team members to make decisions with support
- 2: a lot of identifying and correcting problems.

When team members are handling familiar assignments, the most effective leaders emphasize the middle (styles 4 and 3) of the 1-4-3-2 sequence:

- 1: limited directions to team members
- 4: a lot of time for team members to work alone
- 3: numerous opportunities for team members to make decisions with support
- 2: rare occasions when problem solving is necessary.

Many teams break down because their decisions aren't translated into individual accountabilities. Each team member needs clear expectations. When team members can't get the support they need or timely decision making, they get stuck and aren't likely to accomplish their goals. The

FROM MYTHS TO MUSTS

To move beyond the myths of teamwork and achieve team success, hold to these truisms:

- Teams need leaders.
- Though teamwork is important, it doesn't end the need for individual contributions.
- With proper leadership, teams can be up and running quickly.
- Focused teams avoid conflicts that can slow them down.
- Teams work best when it's clear who's empowered to make which decisions.
- Accountability resides with individual team members, not the team.
- Effective team leaders enable all team members to lead and support each other.

1-4-3-2 leadership approach is a team leader's guide for getting team members to take action.

Making teamwork work

Now, how do you put all of this together? Remember: A team is made up of individual team members plus the group dynamics that occur when they come together. The key to successful teamwork is using the power of the group to focus and coordinate individual actions. Team meetings are useful at the outset for forming and focusing the group on actions. Meetings also provide an efficient structure for the communication needed to sustain the performing stage and to avoid leveling off into complacency. But in between these meetings, the work has to be done by individuals who are accountable for their own responsibilities and supported in their efforts.

To accomplish that, leaders must intergrate the 1-2-3 sequence for leading groups with the 1-4-3-2 sequence for leading individuals. The result is the Leader's Window—a simple four-phase template for getting teams to perform.

Phase 1: Team orientation. A leader can manage a team's forming stage by using style 1 (directing) to explain the team's mission and goals. Using style

2 (problem solving), a leader can focus the team by involving members in determining the best ways to accomplish the mission and goals. Everyone must be clear about his or her roles.

Phase 2: Individual assignments. Using style 1 and style 4 (delegating), a leader can ensure that each team member knows what he or she is empowered to do. What are the deliverables? When are they due? How do team members plan to accomplish their tasks? What do they need from the leader, other team members, and people outside the team to get their work done?

Phase 3: The work. A leader can use style 4 to give team members the freedom to accomplish their assignments. Using style 3, a leader can check in from time to time, offer encouragement, and be responsive when the team needs support.

Phase 4: Team problem solving. A leader should bring together team members at regular intervals to keep them informed of the team's progress, to identify and solve problems, and to coordinate each member's efforts. When it's necessary to make decisions, a leader can use style 2 to obtain the team's input to his or her decision, or style 3 to help team members receive support for decisions they've agreed to make. A leader should always encourage his or her team to seek ways to work smarter.

Tapping the power of the group to focus individuals can help your organization's teams perform better, struggle less, and produce the results you always thought they could. ■

John Beck and Neil Yeager are members of the Charter Oak Consulting Group, an OD firm based in East Berlin, Connecticut. This article is based on their book, *The Leader's Window: Mastering the Four Styles of Leadership To Build High-Performing Teams* (John Wiley and Sons, 1994.) Reach them at 1224 Mill Street, East Berlin, CT 06023. Beck: phone 860/633-7497; e-mail: JD-WB4@aol.com. Yeager: phone 413/256-0039; e-mail: NEILYEA@aol.com.

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