

Notes from *The Wisdom of Teams* by Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith

Key Lessons About Teams (pp. 12-14)

- Significant performance challenges energize teams regardless of where they are in an organization. Performance, not team-building, can save potential teams or pseudo-teams, no matter how stuck.
- Organizational leaders can foster team performance best by building a strong performance ethic rather than by establishing a team-promoting environment.
- Biases toward individualism exist but need not get in the way of team performance.
- Discipline--both within the team and across the organization--creates the conditions for team performance.

The Need for Teams (pp. 15-19)

Teams can help concentrate the direction and quality of top-down leadership, foster new behaviors, and facilitate cross-functional activities. When teams work, they represent the best proven way to convert embryonic visions and values into consistent action patterns because they rely on people working together. Teams can make hierarchy responsive without weakening it, energize processes across organizational boundaries, and bring multiple capabilities to bear on difficult issues.

Resistance to Teams (pp. 20-24)

- Lack of conviction that teams really do perform better than individuals.
 - Entire organizations can believe in and practice teamwork, but teamwork and teams differ. Teamwork encourages and helps teams succeed; but teamwork alone never makes a team.
 - Teams are discrete units of performance, not a positive set of values.
- Personal discomfort and risk.
- Weak organizational performance ethic.

Definition of "Team" (pp. 45-62)

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

- **Small Number**--A larger number of people, say 50 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. Large numbers of people have trouble interacting as a group, much less agreeing on actionable specifics. They face logistical issues, like finding time and space to meet together, and are more prone to herd behaviors. The majority of real teams average between 10-12, occasionally 15-25, members

- **Complimentary Skills**--Teams need the right mix of technical or functional expertise, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and interpersonal skills.

- **Committed to a Common Purpose and Performance Goals**

A common, meaningful purpose sets the tone and aspiration.

Specific performance goals are an integral part of the purpose. 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.

The combination is essential to performance.

- **Committed to a Common Approach**

A working approach is a set of rules and commitments plus roles and responsibilities by which the team optimizes its individual and collective skills to achieve its purpose and goals.

- **Mutual Accountability**

Most of us enter a potential team situation cautiously; ingrained individualism discourages us from putting our fate 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. When people do real work together toward a common objective, trust and commitment follow.

Team Performance Curve (pp. 91-92)

1. **Working Group:** 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.
2. **Pseudo-Team:** 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. In pseudo-teams, the sum of the whole is less than the potential of the individual parts.
3. **Potential Team:** A group for which there could be a significant, incremental performance need, and *that really is trying to improve its performance impact.* Typically, 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.
4. **Real Team:** A small number of people with complimentary 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.
5. **High-Performance Team:** A group that meets all the conditions of a real team, and *has members who are also deeply committed to one another's personal growth and success.* The high-performance team usually outperforms all other like teams, and outperforms all reasonable expectations, given its membership.

Team Leaders (pp. 130-135)

Their role: To clarify purpose and goals, to build commitment and self-confidence, strengthen the team's collective skills and approach, remove externally imposed obstacles, and create opportunities for others. Most important, *team leaders do real work themselves.*

Team performance almost always depends on how well team leaders strike a critical balance between doing things themselves and letting other people do them.

Team leaders genuinely believe they do *not* have all the answers--so they do not insist on providing them. They believe they *cannot* succeed without the combined contributions of all the other team members to a common end--and so they avoid any action that might constrain input or intimidate anyone on the team. Ego is *not* their predominant concern. They believe in their people and their purpose.

Most people can be effective team leaders. Organizational leaders should worry much less about picking the ideal team leaders than about helping them to succeed afterwards--which means paying a lot of attention to whether *specific* team leaders are in fact doing and not doing whatever *their* teams need to function.

6 Things Necessary to Team Leadership (pp. 139-145)

- Keep the purpose, goals, and approach relevant and meaningful.
- Build commitment and confidence.
- Strengthen the mix and level of skills.
- Manage relationships with outsiders, including removing obstacles.
- Create opportunities for others.
- Do real work.

Getting A Team Unstuck (pp. 159-162)

Assuming the team approach really is the best option, the key to getting unstuck lies in addressing the particular obstacles confronting the team with a strong performance focus. Each of these lies within the team's own grasp to try; or, each can also be introduced by higher management:

1. Revisit the basics.
2. Go for small wins.
3. Inject new information and approaches.

4. Take advantage of facilitators or training.
5. Change the team's membership, including the team leader.

Top Management's Role (pp. 239-250)

The primary role of top management is to lead the organization toward performance, *not to create teams*. Effective top managers will increasingly *worry about both performance and the teams that will help deliver it*.

To identify where teams matter most as well as the issues unique to different kinds of teams, it is useful for management to distinguish among *teams that run things, teams that do things, and teams that recommend things*.

Teams and the High-Performance Organization (pp. 250-254)

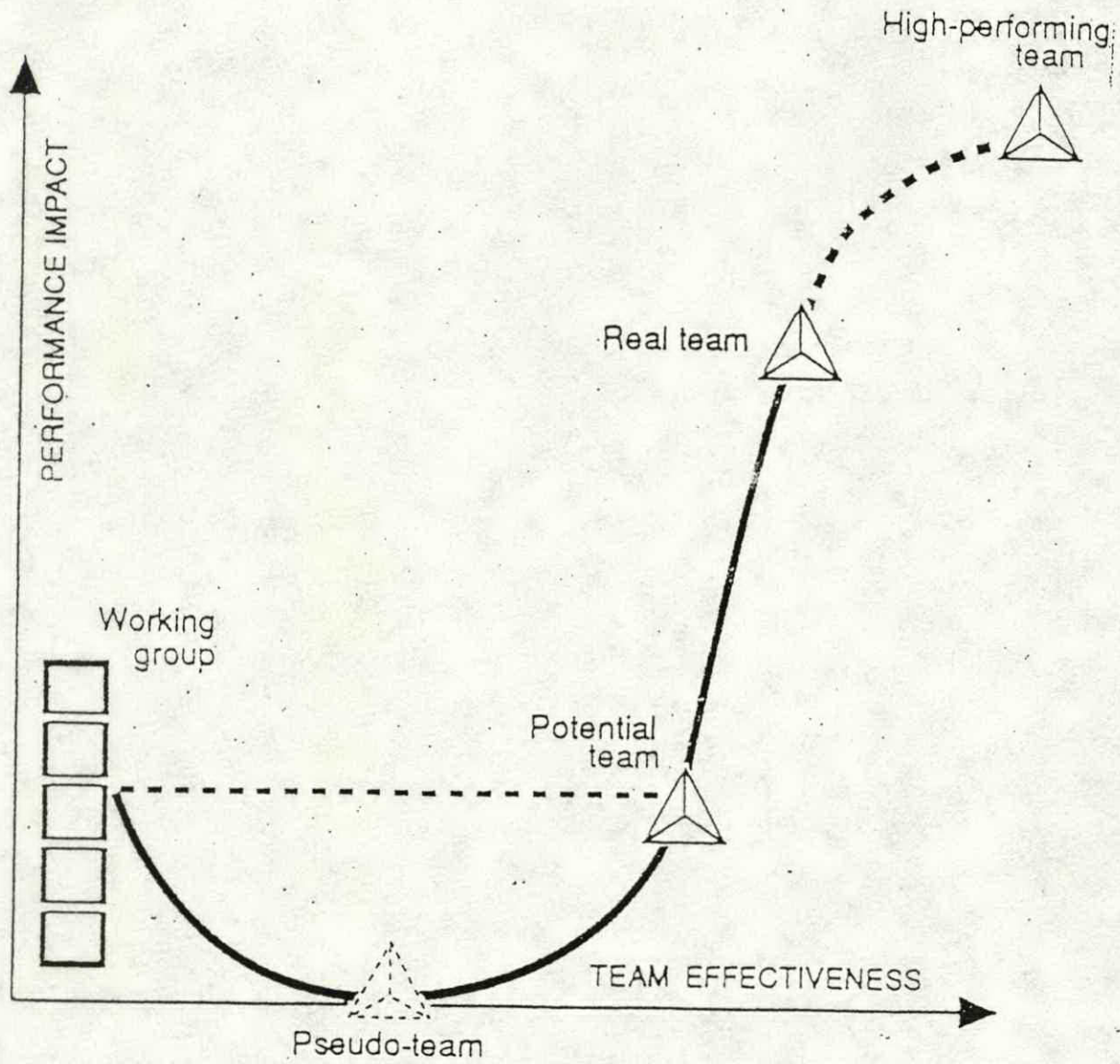
We [the authors] believe that focusing on both performance and the teams that deliver it will materially increase top management's prospects of leading their companies to become high-performance organizations. We do *not* contend that teams are the only answer to this aspiration. They are, however, a very important piece of the puzzle--because the dynamics that drive teams mirror the behaviors and values necessary to the high-performance organization.

6 Characteristics of the High-Performance Organization

- Balanced performance results.
- Clear, challenging aspirations.
- Committed and focused leadership.
- An energized workforce dedicated to productivity and learning.
- Skill-based sources of competitive advantage.
- Open communications and knowledge management.

Figure II-1

THE TEAM PERFORMANCE CURVE



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.

Copied from Wisdom of Teams, Jon R. Katzenbach
and Douglas K. Smith.