

Active 08 Conference – John Langoulant

Many thanks

Have been asked to discuss ...How leading organizations work as high performing teams from a business perspective. I have also been asked to draw similarities with how sporting teams operate.

Now the latter part of this assignment is tough as the closest I got to a high performing sporting team was the University Football Club and while I can't speak about today's standards but if any of you had experience with that level of football in the 1970s you will know that our best performances were often in the pub after (and sometimes before!) a game.

But I will do my best to draw these comparisons and you can correct some of my misunderstandings in the panel discussion.

I must say that the requirement for strong teamwork in high performing teams is an obvious one and there logically will be many similarities between organizations which perform well whether they are in the sporting or business (commercial or not for profit) or other sectors.

I have always found that organizations which work well have strong elements of teamwork.

Much of my experience has been around politicians and political parties which probably are good case studies in the negative. I'm sure Ric Charlesworth will support me on that. I have seen several governments which have become quite dysfunctional quickly but almost inevitably they reach that point towards the end of the second term. That is when they are thoroughly sick of each other and the baggage of office kills of any semblance of teamwork. They are incapable of reinvigorating themselves and their values have become disparate

It's an old cliché that a team of champions will never outdo a champion team. This also applies in the corporate sector.

In the abstract, organisations which don't have strong team work but have a number of quality individuals can do well. Monopoly market situations certainly help in this regard and certain work practices (such as legal practices) can enjoy such success. But monopolies as with other corporates which exhibit such tendencies often leave something on the park in the form of sub optimal returns.

Not for profits also stand similar risks even though they have harder to identify performance criteria. Usually you find turnover is higher and morale lower in these organizations.

I have had experience in both and while such cases are uncomfortable when you start tweaking the conditions which bring out the teamwork genie the place can really take off.

It is easy of course to say that teamwork is a key to success. But it is usually many other things which enable teamwork to be a feature of enterprise culture which make an organization perform.

I would like to run through some of the key factors which are critical to the development of strong teamwork in any organization...and I will probably mix my language between business, sport and and other organization terminology as we proceed.

I might say that the structure of these points are framed in terms of importance when seeking to change an organization, both culturally and in terms of its performance.

First there must be a clear goal or set of goals that the organization is seeking. Call it the mission statement in corporate parlance if you like.

Without it the organization will struggle to maintain coherence. Decision making will be complicated and inconsistent and the team will not be singing from the same sheet.

The simpler that set of goals or mission statement the better and in business the more easily it can be measured the better as it will enhance the monitoring of individual performance.

Supporting those goals with a strategic plan with timelines is also important. You will be surprised as to how many businesses don't bother to make it through these two steps on the grounds that time doesn't allow for such navel gazing. The better strategic planning process will flow plans through the business units in a coherent way so that all members of the team can identify how they can contribute to the goals. On this basis role statements and performance measures can be developed in a meaningful way.

Having a set of corporate values is also critical. These values will define behavior, set standards and act as accountability benchmarks. They must be owned by all, and enforced when not observed. Any chink in the consistency of their application will render them useless and breakdown any sense of consistent behavior or observing the rules culture in the business. The commitment to team values is often in the news these days and is identical to the principle of corporate values.

In business the next priority is to ensure you have structure fit for purpose. The structure must provide the best chance for the organization to meet its mission. If the structure is not optimal inefficiency will prevail in the workplace with duplication and overlaps in roles and authorities. Conflict resolution will be common which leaves many sitting on the sidelines. I have found that some resetting of structure is necessary on the path to getting it right and while some find that unsettling it is essential if you are to maximize goal achievement

Once these things are in place then the people issues get important. Actually the people issues pervade everything. It is imperative that you have the “right” people who are engaged and competent.

Of course that is rare and while good teams generally get very close to the perfect people set almost inevitably there are some who are less than best fit. Many of us inherit teams which are dysfunctional for one reason or another. In these cases people management often is the focus but at times that masks structural problems of poor values or confused goals or bad structure. It takes wise leaders to identify those issues

Leadership is critical in any organization. However leadership needs to be seen as more than the Captain or the CEO or the Chairman or the coach.

As important as each are they are less so on their own. In both sporting and corporate life the leadership role is far broader than these peak positions. In corporate life there are many leaders and they extend through organizational structures and processes. Managerial leadership is critically important as a component of teamwork. These leaders are information sharers for their teams, they deal with interpersonal issues and enforce values at the small team level and they provide feedback to their team members on their performance. The leadership group of teams have similar roles I'm sure.

Leadership these days still has its role in inspiring and directing and motivating. In terms of corporate goals leadership can be essential if there is the need for roadblocks to be cleared in the form of deciding between different views or approaches but the leader should not in my view be regularly required to act independently. If it is then there are real pressures on teamwork and is usually a sign that something else is amiss in the team.

I often shudder when people say to me that I must resolve a problem in the organization. I generally look to see what isn't working in terms of the clarity of our business goals, or in our values or structure.

There are many approaches to leadership and vast amounts of literature on the subject. A quote from a 6th century Chinese

philosopher (Lao-Tzu) captures my perspective of what is good leadership and that is:

A leader is best
When people barely knows he exists,
Not so good when people obey and acclaim him,
Worse when they despise him,
But of a good leader, who talks little,
When his work is done , his aim fulfilled,
They will say:
We did it ourselves.

So broad is the field in this area that I was interested in reading a clip from Magic Johnson the former NBA star who said about corporate leadership...A leader is a leader no matter what. In my company, I'm the one who initiates and solicits new business ideas, gets the plans in motion, represents us at meetings with prospective clients, and stays on top of what we're doing. My associates know that I'm up at 6am in the morning, that I get my workout before starting the business day and stays at it until late in the evening when necessary. They see what I'm doing and know that I expect the same effort from them. That's what a leader does."

Well that may work for Magic but it probably isn't reflective of an effective team.

There are then a number of work processing or accountability principles which combine to create the environment for teamwork to be applied and to develop.

These are:

- Doing the task appropriate to the role. It is little help having the full back scoring goals if his opponent scores more
- Working at the right level and adding value. It is always helpful for the ruckman to let the small man carry the ball especially if the small man has better disposal skills.
- Matching capability with role requirements. The habitual marker of the ball is of little value if you need a spoiler and perhaps training might be necessary to achieve the right fix.
- Behaving in accordance with organizational values.
- Behaving consistently with agreed authorities. Often staff will be unsure of how far they can go in taking decisions. A trainer/runner pulling a player from the ground without the coaches authority can be a problem.
- Managing interpersonal relationships. It is untidy to see teammates criticizing each other on the field or in the corridors

and leaders have the responsibility to act swiftly to sort out such issues.

- Providing feedback on performance. This closes the loop and provides for equality of treatment. People whether they are staff members or team members want to know the answer to three questions: how are they going, where are they going and what does the future hold. Honest feedback on these questions gives comfort and is motivating. Team members get this regularly. Being dropped from a team sends a message but how it is delivered is critical.

If these conditions apply in an organization then teamwork can then have a good chance of success.

In the optimal situation the team knows what the goals are and how they will contribute to their achievement. They know what is expected of them in terms of quality of output from the values that are set. They know that they will be treated fairly by their leaders and that they will be informed on an equal basis as all others and they know what rewards will be available if the team achieves the agreed goals. They also know they can seek clarification from their leaders and can challenge the leaders in a way that is consistent with the organizations values.

I have applied this approach in several organizations. They were all different in starting points and the application needed to account for that. The time taken to achieve results varied accordingly but was never less than two years before the organization started to approach the performance that was desired.

People change in all cases was essential. In one case we changed close on 70% of the staff over an 18 month period. That was traumatic involving letters from disgruntled staff to the Board. But strong board backing and commitment to values was the savior.

In each case we removed silos, increased divisional interaction, achieved an annual increase in staff engagement and had teams forming to tackle issues from across the organization.

That provided satisfaction.

Thank you for listening.