Team effectiveness is no small topic. Researchers and writers dedicate volumes to the subject. Theories abound, as do how-to books and training classes. We have studied the books and participated in, and sometimes led, a number of the classes. But mainly, we have been in the field, working with companies to help them achieve their goals. It is from this perspective—years of team effectiveness coaching and change management consulting—that we write.

Teams are an essential method of organizing work in business. How well these teams function indicates how much the company will achieve.

Through these experiences, we understand that teams are an essential method of organizing work in business. No leader we know of thinks a project can be completed; a major change, implemented; or a culture, transformed through the work of a single individual. It takes teams, and often teams of teams, focused on a common purpose to move the needle.

Performance in business is the domain of teams. And how well these teams function indicates how much the company will achieve.

This paper is a compilation of four blogs I first published for Expressworks, International. Together these blogs provide an overview of what we at Expressworks believe are the most important aspects of teamwork.

Many of us, at some point in our careers, have the experience of being on a great team. It is an experience we never forget. Energy and animated conversation come naturally. People laugh. Life-long friendships can be formed. Discussions are honest with differences ironed out in candid conversation. Trust abounds, rooted in personal credibility and mutual respect, along with an almost unbreakable commitment to an effort larger than ourselves. And, perhaps most importantly, great work gets done—meaningful work that gives team members a sense of pride and accomplishment and that gives the company the results it wanted.

In this paper, I share stories and my experiences working with great teams. But, I realize team experiences are not always so positive. Because teams are essential to getting work done in organizations, I know other people have their stories, too. I asked a colleague of mine to tell her experiences—both positive and negative—about working on teams. Here is her story.
It Was the Best of Teams…
In 1997, I was on a great team, and more than twenty years later, I remember it well. Five of us, including the leader, were charged by the CEO of our 30,000-employee, international manufacturing company to ensure that the non-IT areas of the company were ready for the Y2K switch-over. This included all manufacturing, assembly / test, security, emergency, and plant systems in our global facilities.

I didn’t know it at the time, but this was the perfect stage for a high-performing team. We were a small group of dedicated, competent people with different skills (business / technology analysis, communication, process engineering, project management) who were tasked to accomplish a vital company goal.

In fact, our team fit the definition of a team according to Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith in their classic book, *The Wisdom of Teams*:

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

Over the three-year effort, we established a unique company-wide Y2K vocabulary; implemented common standards, processes and systems for testing and recording readiness data; created a governance model for accountability; tracked and reported progress; provided an exception process for the systems that could not be adjusted; and, in preparation for the event, conducted Y2K simulations in a few of our manufacturing plants. I spent New Year’s Eve, 1999, with my team in our on-site control center, celebrating as the “All-is-Well” check-ins swept the new millennium across Asia and Europe and finally the U.S. It is one of my favorite New Year’s Eve memories.

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

It Was the Worst of Teams…
Conversely, we all know the deadening effect of being on a low-performing team. Commitment stalls; team members miss meetings and deliverables; effort dilutes as barriers crop up. Frustrations rise as people lose confidence and trust in the leader and each other. And then, typically, the project limps to a close with a flurry of empty activities and little accomplishment. The final status report is sent to the sponsor with little interest in or, even, expectation of a response. There is no sense of pride and no joy of accomplishment.

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About five years ago, I was on a team with six bright, highly capable, self-motivated people. Regardless, the team leader micro-managed us. He meticulously scrutinized all output, even though we had been told to provide an 80 percent solution. Insignificant words were closely examined, and phrases were laboriously re-worked to convey minor subtleties. In the end, the team used meeting time to discuss the best ways to avoid editing sessions with the leader. We also kept a running tally of the number of rewrites each of us had. The once empowered, highly energetic team down-shifted into low gear well before the project ended.

At about the same time, a colleague of mine was the change consultant for a cross-functional effort to consolidate and improve a significant core administrative process spanning multiple lines of business (LOBs) within the company. The team leader reassured the team (as reportedly he had been reassured by his executive vice-president) that the only goal for the initiative was process improvement. LOB team members were also reassured that organizational change was out of scope. However, the EVP had a reputation for empire building and, based on her past behavior, team members were suspicious of the true motives behind the initiative. To overcome their skepticism and reluctance to commit to the effort, the team leader repeatedly and publicly guaranteed that org change was not in the picture. Team members suspended their skepticism and committed to the effort. The team was engaged, and work was progressing well.

At the 11th hour, the team leader abruptly changed his position. Whether he buckled under pressure from the EVP or made his own choice, it didn’t matter. Despite his prior guarantees, reorganization was suddenly in the center of the table, very much in scope. The reaction was instantaneous; the team revolted. This was the “land grab” they suspected in the first place. Team members felt betrayed. They stopped working and quit the team. Their LOBs, retreating behind silo walls, refused to provide replacement resources. The effort quickly fizzled and the team leader lost respect and reputation.

It’s counter intuitive that business leaders don’t commit the time and effort needed to get their employees and themselves really good at working in teams.

Unfortunately, it seems most of us have more stories about working on low-performing teams than on high-performing ones. It seems great team experiences are rare. What a shame. Teams are the basic work unit for business and for good reason. A group of people working together can produce more and better work than someone working alone. It’s counter intuitive that business leaders don’t see that value and commit the time and effort needed to get their employees and themselves really good at working in teams.

Expressworks believes team effectiveness is the core of business performance. It is the heart of building an organization’s capabilities and capacities. Without it, a company’s potential for significant success and lasting achievement is diminished.
The word “team” is one we frequently and quite off-handedly use. Like coaches, business leaders often call upon their employees to work together.

“We need this organization to work as one team,” they might say.

“We need to get everyone on the same page.” Or more directly, “We need more teambuilding.”

Leaders might voice complaints about “misalignment” and “lack of engagement.”

We value the work we know teams can produce, but do we really understand what it takes to do great team work? Yet, business is often organized around teams—executive, project, functional teams—to name a few, each with the need for people to work together to do great things.

*We value the work we know teams can produce, but do we really understand what it takes to do great team work?*

For a leader to lament a lack of teamwork isn’t unusual. Just because a leader recognizes the power of teams, doesn’t mean the leader understands what it takes to create a work environment where teams thrive, or that the leader knows how to change a culture where internal forces and ingrained behaviors are strong barriers to teamwork.

Let’s look at a few well-known companies to better understand what “working as one-team” means.

The LEGO group doesn’t just make snap-together plastic building blocks in varying shapes and sizes, it seeks to “Inspire and develop the builders of tomorrow.” Its vision is “Inventing the future of play.” Lego is a great example of a company that knows a one-team culture starts with a shared, compelling, and meaningful purpose—something all team members want to be a part of.

In a 2003 interview, Herb Kelleher, Southwest Airlines cofounder, Chairman Emeritus and former CEO, explained how he and his management team drove the airline’s success:

“We have been successful because we’ve had a simple strategy. Our people have bought into it. Our people fully understand it. We have had to have extreme discipline in not departing from the strategy.”

“We basically said to our people, there are three things that we’re interested in:

- The lowest costs in the industry—that can’t hurt you, having the lowest costs.
- The best customer service—that’s a very important element of value.
- We said beyond that we’re interested in intangibles—a spiritual infusion—because they are the hardest things for your competitors to replicate.

**Individuals and groups who do not share a common and compelling higher-level purpose will naturally choose self-interest...**

The tangible things your competitors can go out and buy. But they can’t buy your spirit. So, it’s the most powerful thing of all.”

An airline that operates as one-team will purposefully think, talk, and act to ensure departmentalized functions work seamlessly to move a customer from check-in, through waiting, to boarding, through the in-flight experience, and finally to baggage claim. Each department knows what the next department needs and wants in order to serve the customer. Southwest’s LUV is not only its ticker symbol, it also describes Southwest’s approach to employees and customers.

Individuals and groups who do not share a common and compelling higher-level purpose will naturally choose self-interest rather than subjugate their own goals and priorities to those of the larger organization.

An airline that operates in siloes without a clear compelling purpose, or that lacks practical cross-departmental procedures and training, is easy to spot—ticket counter agents hand off problems to the gate agents, the gate agents don’t help the cabin crew, the cabin crew complains about the gate agents who dump problems into their cabin. This type of *un-team* environment directly affects the prevailing attitudes among employees and the level of service for customers.

Communicating a compelling one-team mission will be perceived as hollow if the message is not supported by leaders who insist upon, and constantly strive to improve, cross-departmental collaboration. Consider this well-known challenge issued by John F. Kennedy, “I believe that this Nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth.”

**A key responsibility of leaders is to establish and communicate the direction and priorities for an organization.**

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3Spoken during his acceptance speech when Kelleher was granted the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Strategic Management Society (SMS).
At its peak, the Apollo program employed 400,000 people and required the support of over 20,000 industrial firms and universities. Imagine, almost half-a-million people working as one-team to fulfill President Kennedy’s compelling goal. Aside from this being a great example of a compelling purpose by a charismatic leader, the successful Apollo program serves as a strong example of cross-departmental collaboration.

Leaders had to secure sufficient funding and resources. Personnel had to be mobilized and new facilities constructed. NASA had to bring together contrasting institutional cultures and approaches into an inclusive organization, moving along a single unified path. Three critical factors were defined and deemed interrelated—cost, schedule, and reliability.

Naturally, groups within NASA competed over the priorities and resources. For example, engineers worked in teams to design and build hardware that would carry out the missions, while scientists engaged in research and designed experiments that would expand scientific knowledge about the Moon. The scientists’ experiments affected payloads which, in turn, changed the engineers’ original hardware requirements.

The differences could have derailed an ordinary team; however, NASA leadership understood how to encourage teamwork. They ensured that all sides aired their views, and they clarified priorities to foster cooperation and achieve the program goals to land a man on the moon and return him safely before the end of the decade.

The well-known story about President Kennedy’s conversation with a janitor during his visit to NASA headquarters in 1962, perfectly describes the one-team mentality. The story goes that Kennedy introduced himself to a janitor who was sweeping the floor and asked him what he did at NASA. “I’m helping put a man on the moon,” the janitor replied.

A key responsibility of leaders is to establish and communicate the direction and priorities for an organization.

Is operating as one-team a clearly articulated direction and priority for the leadership in your organization? If not, what’s the likelihood that a one-team culture will become a reality? Simply declaring that an organization should work as one-team won’t change the systems and behaviors that run counter to teamwork. Common purpose and cross-departmental cooperation create the foundation for a one-team organization.

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CHECKPOINT

A compelling purpose—a shared aspiration or goal that captures the hearts, minds and energy of every person on the team—is required for an organization to work as one-team. Without a compelling common purpose, individuals and groups stray toward self-interest and personal agendas rather than commit to the larger organizational purpose.

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4Allen, Bob (ed.). “NASA Langley Research Center’s Contributions to the Apollo Program.” Langley Research Center, NASA.
5Project Apollo: A Retrospective Analysis

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PART TWO
ONE-TEAM STARTS WITH LEADERSHIP AND THRIVES ON TRUST

The dilemma for a leader is how to get people to commit to the organization’s purpose and act in a way that embraces its vision and strategies. The solution is dependent on the leader’s ability to create and nurture an environment where individuals thrive on teamwork, share in the success, and ultimately grow the capability of the organization. This kind of environment isn’t created by proclamation or mandated by executive order. It evolves because of deliberate, consistent actions a leader takes in two vital areas: relationships and mechanisms that support teamwork.

Teamwork Requires Trust – But There Is More

A foundational element of human relationships is trust. Trust between colleagues, between worker and boss, between employee and company. Without trust, people won’t fully believe in a leader’s vision and strategies or commit to follow them. Without trust, people don’t work collaboratively; they aren’t open with their thoughts and feelings; or they hesitate to admit mistakes. With trust, openness, constructive debate and collaboration naturally occur. But, trust alone is not enough.

A leader’s job requires establishing systems and structures that encourage, support, and reward work that is aligned with strategic intent and company direction.

Teamwork also requires mechanisms that support people getting great work done. A leader’s job requires establishing systems and structures that encourage, support, and reward work that is aligned with strategic intent and company direction. Nurturing shared values, streamlining decision making, aligning work groups, holding listening sessions, recognizing excellence, and celebrating accomplishments are all part of the mechanisms that enable teams to thrive.
Trusting relationships and supportive mechanisms are the main components of the one-team environment. But, often, leaders dive directly into creating teams and bypass working to improve the environment. These leaders ignore or are unaware of the importance of wrapping teams in a culture that fosters teamwork. Unfortunately, it’s too common an error. It’s like planting crops without preparing the soil. The wise leader understands that teams and the environment they operate in are interdependent. The wise leader develops both with equal attention and care.

What are the chances that individuals will work as a team if the organization’s senior leaders are not having deep conversations about shared values and goals, the supporting mechanisms required for teamwork, and the leadership behaviors that bring about teamwork?

The answer to this question is likely obvious, but the caveat imbedded in it may not be. If senior leaders are simply talking about values, goals and behaviors without acting in ways that consistently and visibly demonstrate them, their words will fall on disbelieving, even cynical, ears. “Talking the talk” without “walking the talk” is worse than not talking at all. Simply put, leaders must lead. They must go first, set the example and lead by doing.

One Leader’s Success Story

I have been fortunate to work with many extraordinary leaders during my career. One such leader was John Vandegrift, a senior manager in a global document technology company. John once told me, “They report to me, but my role is to serve the team.” Much has been written about servant leadership, yet John lived the role, developing energetic and successful team environments throughout his career.

John did the things good leaders are encouraged to do: articulate a compelling purpose, establish organizational goals and measures, allocate resources, define roles, and improve work processes. John did all this, and more. He passionately nurtured the shared values and behaviors that build trust and commitment. He didn’t just talk—John “walked the talk.” He consistently conducted himself using the values he professed and visibly demonstrated the behaviors he desired. He lived them every day in his dealings with his employees and peers. He listened, he encouraged, he rewarded and empowered; he acknowledged his mistakes and insisted others learn from theirs. He valued honesty and encouraged open discussion. John built a high-performing, successful organization and in the process, earned the respect and affection of those he worked with.

John once described himself as the department’s “social conscience.” He was fluent in discussing his expectations about the personal and interpersonal behaviors that foster teamwork. John expected the leaders who reported to him to do the same. Managing directors, operational managers, and team leads could articulate how teamwork and trust were based on personal credibility and mutual respect. Leaders could facilitate conversations with team members to clarify the day-to-day behaviors that nurtured trust and teamwork.
Building Support Mechanisms is Vital

But John didn’t rely solely on deep discussions about the trust-building behaviors. He also searched out mechanisms in the organization that worked against the shared values of teamwork and fixed them. The leadership team looked at everything to leverage the enablers, remove the barriers, and introduce changes necessary to create a one-team environment.

The leadership team looked at everything to leverage the enablers, remove the barriers, and introduce changes necessary to create a one-team environment.

Leadership development training started with an exercise to identify your personal values. John understood that if leaders had not prioritized their own personal values, their behavior could seem erratic and unpredictable to others.

Annual performance objectives included team objectives and trust-building behavioral expectations. Performance feedback mechanisms emphasized frequency and quality—not just the typical semi-annual or annual reviews—to provide prompt, meaningful feedback. Most leaders intuitively know people need frequent and worthwhile feedback. However, it’s easy to fall in the trap of exception management—where supervisors become adept at coaching individuals only when they do something wrong or poorly.

As a deliberate way to break the habit of exception management and create a new pattern of frequent, positive reinforcement, John’s management team employed a simple approach called “Five Coins.” Each day, we started with five coins in our pocket, or on one side of our desk. Before noon our goal was to move all five coins to the other pocket or the other side of the desk. The criteria to move a coin? Find someone doing something right and make sure they knew you saw. You told them what you observed and why you thought it was right. Can you imagine the positive energy this creates in an organization that does this habitually? John could. Ours became an invigorated environment, built on energy from people—not posters or PowerPoints.

John and the leadership team initiated a host of effective team development mechanisms. Over the years, they:

- Established overarching organizational goals and measures. These included a triad of clear-cut revenue, cost, and customer satisfaction goals which everyone had a stake in through quarterly gainsharing payouts.

- Restructured sales and service departments to align with the customer accounts for end-to-end accountability and support.
• Moved people who needed to work together to the same location to better serve customers. Before, conversations between sales and service typically happened only when a customer complained. After the move, collaborative conversations proactively occurred. It was common to hear, “Hey, I’m thinking about selling solution “x” to customer “y.” What do you think?”

• Held “All Hands” meetings focused on progress toward shared performance measures and significant team accomplishments. Everyone celebrated—or lamented the lack of—gainsharing payouts.

• Attended employee lunches, informal after-hours social time, and acknowledged team members’ life events.

• Involved teams in choosing their next leader when leadership transitions occurred. (Imagine how team members feel when they choose their own leader rather than having a new leader thrust upon them.)

To What End?

So, how did these actions impact organizational performance? This business unit of over 500 employees was a top performer year over year—revenues grew as costs were contained, customer satisfaction was high and employee turnover, low. Because of these results, we were frequently asked to test and evaluate innovative ideas. Our performance was so consistent, corporate leaders would frequently visit to observe and try to figure out the secret sauce. This level of performance remained constant under John’s leadership.

As I look back, I realize this organization exhibited all the characteristics of outstanding teamwork. We were able workers, guided by a visionary leader, working toward a common goal. Individually we each committed to do our best. Together we achieved exemplary results, far greater than anyone could have done alone. In the process, we worked hard, laughed a lot, and developed friendships that thrive some 15 years later.

John Vandegrift and his leadership team taught me that creating an organization that works like a great team requires authentic leaders who think and act on two fronts: deliberately building trustworthy relationships and creating the support mechanisms required to sustain the environment.

CHECKPOINT

Building a one-team environment requires leaders to communicate a clear and compelling purpose, cultivate trusting relationships, and build supportive mechanisms. These efforts stand a greater chance of succeeding in an environment where honest and open conversations thrive.
If eyes are the windows to the soul, then the words and phrases we use are the windows to our beliefs and thoughts. It’s true for people and for organizations. An organization’s conversations offer insights into its culture, its values, and its potential to realize the benefits of working together as a high-performing team.

Teaming behaviors and conversations are by their nature interactive. They occur as needed interchanges to establish trusted connections between people. Team members share information, apply critical thinking, and value constructive debate to make sound decisions. They personally and collectively expend energy on the tasks required to move the team toward its goals.

**Leaders Establish Operating Guidelines and Set the Tone**

It is the leader’s responsibility to establish the operating guidelines for effective teaming interactions. How are teams organized? How do team members discuss and then commit to team decisions? How do team members talk to and listen to each other? How do they ensure all ideas are heard? A leader instills key phrases which verbalize the teaming culture an organization wants to develop and sustain.

*It is the leader’s responsibility to establish the operating guidelines for effective teaming interactions.*
Jeff Bezos, Amazon Chairman and CEO, famously did this by making “disagree and commit” an operating principle of Amazon. A company I once worked with had a similar belief, “It’s OK to disagree, but ultimately we must all commit to the decision.” To reinforce this, when a final decision was on the table, team members would stand up to show their commitment to the decision. Regardless of prior discussions, each team member moved from casually voicing or nodding agreement to physically demonstrating commitment to the decision by getting out of a chair and standing. This created a vivid picture of personal accountability and commitment among all the team members. It also made it difficult for members to renege or disavow their commitment, and it eliminated the unsound practice of assuming silence means agreement.

The words and phrases we establish as habits within our organizations can impact team productivity and decision making, both positively and negatively. I’ve witnessed the consistent use of one-team collaborative language practices in high-performing organizations. Here are a few examples of these high-impact statements: “I’d like to make my thinking visible. Please tell me your thoughts behind that idea. Let me test my understanding. Let’s poll the team to see where we stand.” The pervasive use of such language signals that the organization has purposefully adopted teamwork messages and collaborative language.

**What We Say and How We Say It Matters**

How team members communicate with each other is vital to the success of the team. MIT’s Human Dynamics Laboratory studied the impact of communication patterns on team performance. In their study, team members were equipped with electronic badges that collected data on their communication behaviors. The sensor data enabled them to analyze body language, tone of voice, who each team member talked to and how frequently. They also tracked such attributes as how much each person talked, gestured, listened and interrupted. The study not only confirmed that communication is critical for successful teams, it also found that communication patterns were an important predictor of a team’s success.

The study revealed that in successful teams everyone talks and listens to each other in roughly equal amounts, with roughly the same frequency and energy. No team member is isolated or minimized. This suggests that building a great team is not just about putting smart and talented people together in a room to accomplish something. To develop successful teams, we should also observe how team members interact and then coach the team, so their patterns of interaction stimulate and enhance the team’s energy and commitment.

Communication patterns were an important predictor of a team’s success.

This means the leader and the team members must understand and adapt to individual communication needs. For example, how might an introvert and an extrovert communicate in a meeting? What needs to be done to make sure the introvert has an opportunity to speak? Or how might someone who is comfortable “thinking out loud” communicate differently from someone who prefers to digest and ponder before speaking?

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A Story About Trust and Enriching Team Conversations

I was once on a team where one of the members was a creative and confident person. She had lots of ideas and could also talk very fast – especially when her ideas were flowing. I like to listen, take in the ideas that are offered, and then comment. In this case, her ideas were coming so fast, I couldn’t think, much less speak. The eyes of the other team members told me they were feeling the same. I gently interrupted, “Ronda, your ideas are really great, but I am having a hard time processing all the things you are saying. Please continue thinking, but could you pause a minute to let us catch up with your thoughts?”

Ronda stopped and agreed. The other team members and I captured the ideas she had suggested, and we began a more tempered discussion. Ronda added more ideas, but this time at a pace that was workable for everyone.

This intervention was possible because as team members we understood each other’s communication styles and could recognize when they were conflicting. Because we trusted each other, the interruption was not taken as a personal affront, but as a desire to openly discuss and consider all the valuable ideas Ronda was contributing.

Leaders Must Align Their Actions to Their Words

As we discussed earlier, a one-team environment can only become real when it rings true—when leaders’ actions and words align. Consider how one-team messaging could be stifled by unintentional actions. Do leaders dominate meeting discussions? Do leaders dismiss or denigrate team members who openly share their concerns during decision making? Are favored individuals recognized over team results and contributions? Leaders’ actions are the key and their actions always speak louder than their words.

I recall a colleague once saying, “It’s difficult to talk your way out of something you acted your way into.”

A one-team environment can only become real when it rings true—when leaders’ words and actions align.

CHECKPOINT

Developing a one-team environment requires commitment to a compelling purpose; leaders who articulate clear priorities and build supportive mechanisms; and the consistent cultivation of the unique language of a one-team organization.
Today, work is completed by teams of people who share information, make decisions, and take action. It’s commonplace for individuals to work on multiple cross-functional teams. On any given day, a worker might start the morning by collaborating online with a team of engineers in several locations, move on to exchange emails with colleagues designing a new product, join a conference call with a marketing team, then get called in to help solve a customer problem, all while juggling various meetings with stakeholders and suppliers.

*Work teams are the backbone of a one-team organization.*

Based on these examples, an organization that operates as one-team is really a collection of individuals and teams, working together toward the achievement of shared goals. Work teams are the backbone of a one-team organization. Work teams include teams that work together daily to serve customers, or they could be project teams, problem-solving teams, or leadership teams. Teams can be housed in a single location or distributed across the globe in different time zones. They can be short-term, long-term, formal, informal, functional, cross-functional, and / or self-organizing. They can serve many purposes, but typically, they share certain, consistent characteristics.
The Four Fundamentals

When you are establishing and developing work teams, consider building these four fundamentals: purpose, people, practices and relationships. (My colleagues groan and roll their eyes when I jokingly call this model the “PPPR model” because the four fundamentals help make your team PPPR-fect. It’s cheesy, but it works.)

- **Purpose**
  Work teams depend on a clear purpose from leadership—they know precisely what the team is expected to achieve—with appropriate measures. Without a clear and compelling what, teams will struggle and become frustrated figuring out the how.

- **People**
  It’s a given—almost “table stakes”—that competent people with suitable skills and experiences are needed on the team. In addition, a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities is also needed to facilitate coordination and leverage team member knowledge, skills, strengths, and abilities, both within and between work teams. Without clear roles and responsibilities, teams will become confused about who is responsible for what.

  **Without a clear and compelling “what,” teams will struggle and become frustrated figuring out the “how.”**

- **Practices**
  Operating practices effectively guide how a single team works together and how teams work with other teams. Consider how the team(s) communicate, employ technology, solve problems, resolve conflicts, make decisions, and perform the work. High performing teams are constantly evaluating and improving how they work together. Without well-designed operating practices, teams will certainly be inefficient, and likely ineffective.

- **Relationships**
  Collaborative working relationships establish and grow trust between people. Highly effective teams are aware of, and agree on, the behaviors that can build and destroy trust. Team members get to know each other’s non-business lives; they develop personal connections that often last well beyond the life of the team; and they care for each other. They become aware of and are sensitive to each other’s preferred style(s) for communication, decision making, and dealing with conflict. They create a safe place for each member to grow. In short, the members’ personal relationships bind them together and unite them around working toward the team’s clear purpose.

  **The members’ personal relationships bind them together and unite them around working toward the team’s clear purpose.**
Behavioral Norms are the Secret Sauce

Teams with high trust and collaborative relationships create energy and make the workplace enjoyable. Teams with poor working relationships...well, you know how draining these can be to an individual and to an organization. A team’s working relationships are influenced by team norms—the traditions, behavioral expectations, and unwritten rules that govern how a team functions.

Teams falter without supportive and positive behavioral norms. Consider two of the most impactful:

- **Balanced sharing of conversations**—each team member is given more or less equal time to talk and share their opinions.

- **Interpersonal awareness**—team members can tell how others feel based on their expressions, tone of voice, and other non-verbal cues. Successful teams know when someone is concerned or feeling excluded.

These norms foster an environment of openness and interpersonal growth. They lay the foundation for what has been termed “psychological safety”—a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.”

What Google Learned

Google, in its well-publicized effort to understand why some teams succeeded while others failed, came to similar conclusions about team norms:

- **The “Who” is not the most important factor**
  “...there was nothing showing that a mix of specific personality types or skills or backgrounds made any difference. The ‘who’ part of the equation didn’t seem to matter.”

- **It’s the “How” that makes the difference**
  “The researchers [from Carnegie Mellon, M.I.T., and Union College whose work was studied by Google] concluded that what distinguished the ‘good’ teams from the dysfunctional groups was how teammates treated one another. The right norms (group traditions, behavioral standards and unwritten rules), could raise a group’s collective intelligence, whereas the wrong norms could hobble a team, even if, individually, all the members were exceptionally bright.”

- **Psychological safety is behavioral norm #1**
  “Google’s data indicated that psychological safety, more than anything else, was critical to making a team work.”

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7Psychological safety was first defined by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson in 1999
The Effect of Successful Teams... Building Organizational Capability and Capacity

One-team effectiveness bears bountiful fruit. Whatever the purpose of a team, success is ultimately judged by performance. In the traditional sense, successful teams deliver results—they fulfill whatever goal they set out to achieve. But team effectiveness pays even bigger dividends.

Team effectiveness is the critical, core competency an organization can use to drive consistent, high-levels of performance while it grows individual capabilities and organizational capacity.

The one-team experience develops the capability of individuals and teams, while advancing the organization’s capacity to execute its strategies. It’s a PPPR-fect combination.

*The one-team experience develops the capability of individuals and teams, while advancing the organization’s capacity to execute its strategies.*
In this paper, I have attempted to convey that certain actions and supporting mechanisms are required to create and sustain a one-team environment. This kind of environment can be described as one where people willfully and energetically work together to achieve something of meaning and purpose. Organization leaders, plus team members who have the ability and desire to shape the future, play a key role in developing the mechanisms and behaviors that support the one-team environment.

I introduced you to John Vandegrift, an extraordinary leader who taught me that a leader should be able to articulate a clear, compelling direction and purpose which aligns with the values of team members. He also put in place supporting mechanisms, such as overarching performance goals and measures, a team-based structure, personal accountability, team training for leaders, and team rewards tied to organizational results.

I also discussed the power of language and conversations as an important component of a one-team environment. Leaders can influence the words and phrases that reflect and sustain the teaming culture. I described the four fundamentals required to facilitate the movement of individuals into teams. A one-team environment works for individuals, teams, and teams of teams.

And finally, we discussed that supportive team norms create the psychological safety needed for team members to bring their best, confident selves to work and to feel positive about their contributions to the team’s goals and the organization’s success.

A one-team workplace is a great place to work.

Creating and sustaining a one-team environment is complicated whether or not you have the word “leader” in your title. We help companies create environments for great teamwork. Get in touch to see how we can help.

A one-team workplace is a great place to work.