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Leading Teams When the Time is Right:

Finding the Best Moments to Act

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"I am aware that success is more than a good idea. It is timing, too." Anita Roddick.

We have all heard the phrase "timing is everything." While that claim overstates the case, good timing *is* a vital element of high-quality team leadership. Regardless of whether one holds a formal position of authority or is a regular team member who informally provides leadership, the timing of interventions can make all the difference. Timing can be the key to assuring that leadership actions help a team rather than distract or misdirect members, or make no difference at all. This article explores what is involved in providing just the right kinds of leadership at just the right times.

Good timing means taking action to help a team at those special times when the team is ready to receive and use the help that is offered. For example, a project team we observed that was thoughtlessly carving up its work into individual pieces was stopped by the team leader and redirected by a well-timed question: "How are you going to integrate all those separate parts?" Bad timing is either making an intervention at an inappropriate time or failing to act at the moment when help is badly needed. For example, another project team leader poorly timed his efforts to get members to address their uneven levels of participation in the work. Insensitive to timing, this leader stepped in at precisely the moment when members began intensely debating the next step in their work—not a good moment to intervene. Or, just as ineffective, we have seen all too many leaders miss the opportunity to ask, "What didn't work well in that meeting we just had?" Asking that question at the next team event two weeks later, when the meeting is but a distant memory, is too late.

Some of the moments when a team will be open to leadership actions are highly predictable—for example, when members first come together, around the midpoint of their work, and when a significant piece of work has been completed. But there are other times, unpredictable times, when leader interventions also can be helpful. During the course of a day's work, for example, members can fall into intense, unanticipated conflict, or become stuck, or embark on an extended discussion of a trivial or task-irrelevant subject. A well-timed intervention that helps the team deal with developments like these can head off a downward spiral of increasing frustration, and raise the chances that the team will get back onto a more productive path.

The best team leaders exhibit good timing in both of these circumstances—at the predictable times in a team's work life, when members are reliably open to leadership interventions, and at those unpredictable times when developing events require immediate action. We refer to the former as *Type I timing* and to the latter as *Type II timing*. We discuss them each below.

TIMING TYPE I: KNOWING WHEN A TEAM WILL *PREDICTABLY* BE READY FOR LEADERSHIP INTERVENTIONS

Having great Type I timing is a matter of getting well prepared for *predictable times* in the life of a team when members are especially open to helpful interventions. It involves knowing what kinds of interventions will help a team at particular points in its lifecycle, and having those interventions already established in one's leadership repertoire. Even well considered and well-executed actions are unlikely to be helpful if the team is not ready for them. In fact, ill-timed interventions may actually do more harm than good, by distracting or diverting a team from other issues that do require members' attention at that time. For example, some years ago, Richard Hackman (in collaboration with Janet Weiss and Ken Brousseau) set out to show that groups offered a strategy-focused coaching intervention when they start their work will perform better than teams that plunge directly into the work—but only when the most obvious way of proceeding is *not* actually the optimum. Although the findings supported that prediction, perhaps the more important lesson from the study was that it turned out to be nearly impossible to get teams to actually *have* a discussion of strategy at the start of their work period. Members needed to focus on getting some actual experience with each other and with the task before they were able to have a useful discussion of how best to go about accomplishing the work.

So when *are* teams most open to intervention? A line of research conducted by Connie Gersick, in which she carefully tracked a number of project teams whose performance periods ranged from just a few days to several months, points the way. Gersick found that every group developed a distinctive approach toward its task as soon as it started work, and stayed with that approach until precisely halfway between its first meeting and its project deadline. Moreover, almost all teams underwent a major transition at that calendar midpoint. In a concentrated burst of changes, they dropped old patterns of behavior, reengaged with outside supervisors, and explored new perspectives on their work. Then, following their transition, teams entered a period of focused task execution that persisted until very near the project deadline, at which time a new set of issues having to do with termination processes arose and captured members' attention.

Gersick's findings provide a refreshing alternative to standard "forming-storming-norming-performing" models of group development, one that recognizes the importance of calendar time in developmental processes. Moreover, her findings suggest that the *readiness* of teams for leader interventions waxes and wanes across the team life cycle. Different issues are naturally on team members' minds at different times, and interventions that address issues that are "alive" for a team at a particular time are especially likely to take root and be helpful. Actions taken when a team is not ready for them – for example, talking about team member relationships at a time when a team is fully occupied with getting an urgent piece of work accomplished – are unhelpful and often disrupt the positive aspects of a team's work processes.

We describe below the particular kinds of interventions that are most helpful when a team is launched, when it reaches its midpoint, and when a significant piece of work has been completed. But some of the most powerful interventions a leader can make to facilitate teamwork are accomplished even *before* team members come together to begin their work. As we will see, how a group and its work are set up makes an enormous difference in how group process and performance unfold. Therefore, there are four predicable times at which team leaders can reliably help their teams both perform their tasks well and learn from their work together: (1) before the group exists, (2) at the initial launch, (3) at the calendar midpoint, and (4) at the end of a performance period.

Before the Group Exists

Whether a team succeeds or fails is often determined before the team ever meets. Initial team design choices powerfully shape team effectiveness on several dimensions: how well the team serves its clients, how much the team itself learns, and the development and well-being of individual members. It is ironic, therefore, that so many team leaders approach the initial meeting of a team without having made the preparations that can help a team get onto a positive trajectory. Excellent pre-work involves knowing what a high-quality team design entails, and then getting as many of those conditions in place as possible before convening the team.

We and our colleagues have conducted a great deal of research on a wide variety of teams to identify the design conditions that reliably foster team effectiveness. The conditions we describe come from studies of senior leadership teams from around the world, of analytic teams in the U.S. intelligence community, of teams of grass-roots organizers, and of a range of consulting, production, service, sales and project teams. These teams come from small businesses, huge multinational conglomerates, and all kinds and sizes of organization in between. Many are from not-for-profit and public sector organizations. The teams work in a variety of industries, come from at least 12 nations, and include organizations you have never heard of as well as many high-profile players.

In brief, the conditions for team effectiveness we have identified are (1) creating a real work team (rather than a set of people who are a team in name only), (2) specifying a compelling direction or purpose for the team, (3) creating an enabling team structure, and (4) providing an organizational context that supports teamwork, and (5) coaching the team as a team. These conditions are described in more detail in the accompanying sidebar; guidance about strategies for creating them is provided in the readings in the appended bibliography.

Collectively, these design features create a high and sturdy platform on which to launch a work team. Shaping the features of the team's design is an essential team leadership activity, because a high-quality team design establishes powerful and persistent positive influences on the key processes that drive performance over time. *Creating* a good team design can be a quite challenging leadership task, however, one that requires both conceptual work and behavioral skill.

Thinking it through. Great pre-work always involves cognitive activity—in particular, careful thought about which design conditions are most critical for the work the team will be doing. For example, thinking through the task demands, and defining the capabilities members must have to perform the work well is largely an analytic task. And that task should be done long before a team is brought together. We have, for example, seen far too many chief executive officers (CEOs) take as a given that their "team" refers to all their direct reports. The best of them, by contrast, first ask: "What do I want of my leadership team? Which of my senior leaders have what it takes to think about the whole

Sidebar: Conditions for Team Effectiveness

1. **Real team**. Real teams (1) have clear *boundaries*; (2) are *interdependent* for some common purpose; and (3) have at least some *stability* of membership, which gives members time and opportunity to learn how to work together well.
2. **Compelling direction**. The specification of the team's overall purposes is (1) *challenging* (which energizes members), (2) *clear* (which orients them to their main purposes) and (3) *consequential* (which engages the full range of their talents).
3. **Enabling structure**. Three structural features are key in fostering competent teamwork. (1) *Task design*. The team task is a whole and meaningful piece of work for which members have autonomy to exercise judgment about work procedures, and that provides members with regular and trustworthy data about how well the team is doing. (2) Team *composition*. The team is as small as possible, has members with ample task and interpersonal skills, and consists of a good *mix* of members. (3) *Core norm*s of conduct. The team clearly and explicitly specifies both those member behaviors that are especially valued and those that are unacceptable.
4. **Supportive organizational context**. In addition to the material resources needed for the work, three features of the organizational context are especially consequential: (1) the reward system provides positive consequences for excellent team performance. (2) The educational system makes available technical assistance or training for any aspects of the work for which members are not already knowledgeable, skilled, or experienced. (3) The information system provides the team with whatever data and projections members need to select or invent strategies for carrying out the work that are fully appropriate for the team's task and situation.

   When the first four conditions are in place, it becomes useful to provide the fifth:
5. **Available, expert coaching**. The team has available to it someone expert in helping members make good use of their collective resources as they work together.

enterprise, and to make decisions in collaboration with their peers?" The answers to those questions determine who is invited to the table.

Similarly, crafting an initial statement of purpose is conceptual work. It involves thinking through one's choice of words and how to provide clarity. It means finding ways to link the statement of team direction to members' values or to the overall purposes of the organization, to make it compelling to team members. This cognitive planning puts a team leader in the best possible position to engage the energy of members, to be sure that the work the leader has in mind really does call for a team of people, and to identify who should be put on the team.

Getting the key design conditions in place is a sequential process. For example, there is very little a team leader can do about choosing the right people and creating constructive norms of conduct in a team before first having thought through what the task is, how to make it a *team* task, and how it will be communicated to the team in a compelling way.

Getting it done. Team leaders sometimes find it difficult or impossible to create a good team design, especially in organizations that have been fine-tuned over the years to support work performed by *individual* employees. Creating true team tasks, for example, can be quite a challenge. Sometimes it requires reassembling pieces of work that, for the sake of efficiency, have been partitioned into small, routinized subtasks doled out to individuals. Similarly, state-of-the-art performance appraisal systems that provide good measures of individual contributions are often completely inappropriate for assessing and rewarding work done by teams. Creating a team-favorable design, therefore, often requires skilled negotiations with managerial colleagues to obtain resources and to make organizational changes. And those activities are far better done in advance of the team beginning its work rather than later, when a poor design is already creating difficulties for the team.

A second kind of behavioral pre-work is to rehearse one's intended statement of purpose before actually convening the team. Practicing the team launch offers a leader the opportunity to draw on the advice and reactions of a trusted advisor as a sounding board. For many leaders, hearing an advisor's perspective on how one's words come across, and what is actually being communicated, is the best preparation possible for a high-quality team launch.

Launching the Team

A leader's behavior at the launch of any work team serves a vital function—namely, to breathe life into the team's basic design and thereby help the team start functioning on its own. Good team beginnings are especially critical because the majority of key leadership functions are fulfilled, for better or for worse, by

the time a team is only a few *minutes* old. And it is the beginning that offers the best chance to engage members' motivation with the work at hand.

When team members first come together, the most pressing piece of business is to get oriented to one another and to the task. This orientation involves establishing the boundary that distinguishes members from nonmembers, starting to differentiate roles and formulate norms about how members will work together, and engaging with (and, inevitably, redefining) the group task.

Some leaders are fortunate because long-standing organizational processes for launching teams are already in place. At PepsiCo Inc., for example, we found that there were very strong norms about how people should operate both as team leaders and as team members. A carefully scripted "on-boarding" process for teams was in place that showed leaders and members how to bring the core conditions for team effectiveness to life in the first meeting. That process included: (1) identifying and highlighting the core capabilities that each member brought to the team's work; (2) articulating the team purpose and inviting members to respond; (3) creating a sense of shared identity, emphasizing what "we" share and "our accountabilities;" (4) identifying the main resources the team would need and how to get them; and (5) putting the norms and expectations for members on the table for the group to revise and ratify. Collectively, these elements of the launch script animated all the essential conditions for team effectiveness. And they established a positive trajectory for teams that made later coaching interventions immeasurably easier.

When a launch is successful, the leader has helped a group move from being just a list of names to a real, bonded team. The official task that the team was assigned gets examined, assessed, and then redefined to become the slightly different task that the team commits to tackle together. And the team has begun developing and trying out the initially specified team norms, to be gradually revised and made the team's own.

Even so, it does not all happen at once—some cycling back to issues that the leader may have thought were already settled inevitably occurs. In the course of a launch, for example, members typically test the leader's statement of purpose, they may ask clarifying questions that have a confrontational undertone, and they eventually redefine the purpose at least to some degree. That is one reason why it is so important for the leader who commissions the team to achieve clarity in his or her mind during pre-work. It is during pre-work that a leader can get her own mind clear on just what is needed from the team, and about those aspects of the purpose that are negotiable—and those that are not.

Sometimes leaders ask the team members to debate their work strategy at the launch meeting. That is almost always a bad idea. When teams are just starting out, they are not yet ready to address questions about alternative ways of going about the work. In fact, as we have seen, it is nearly impossible to get groups to actually have a productive discussion of performance strategy at launch. The beginning of a work cycle turns out to be an inappropriate time for a coaching intervention that focuses on work strategy. It may not be until the midpoint of the team's work cycle that members become fully ready for interventions intended to help them settle on a strategy that they actually will use in completing their work.

Consulting at the Midpoint

Major changes in how a team works are unlikely to happen until there is some natural break in the work. As Gersick's research demonstrated, the midpoint is an especially pronounced and predictable breakpoint. Halfway through a cycle, a meeting, or a project, teams tend naturally to reorganize and reorient their processes in preparation for the second half. The midpoint, therefore, is a time when a team is likely to be ready (or, in some cases, even eager) for consultative leader interventions, which help members revise and refine their work strategy.

Some of the most deft team coaching we have seen takes place during these predictable "downtimes." Well-conducted midpoint consultations often involve asking a team to reflect on which approaches to the work are effective and which are misdirected, off-base, or simply not working. Even the best teams have a tendency to get caught up in the heat of a difficult decision, or to get mired in inappropriate behavior and digressions. We see patient and dexterous leaders let that process go on for a while. Then, when the team is fully ready to reflect on how things have been going, the leader poses questions such as "How is that working? "What's not helping?" "What do we wish we had or hadn't done?" "What shall we do differently for the next half?" The discussion that ensues can be the best way to help the team generate a good way of moving forward with the work.

For example, a business unit president of a global mining firm used the last hour of the first day of his two-day management team meeting to conduct a midcourse review. He briefly described some of the behaviors in the team that had improved since the members had begun working together three months before, the norms that he saw them consistently enforcing, and the few things they still did not do well despite trying hard: "Like me jumping on top of Hailey's comment without even understanding her point, when we said we wouldn't do that." He then invited the team members to add their own comments and

observations about the team's work processes. It turned out to be an important opportunity for the team to change a few key features of their work process, such as how well they addressed each others' business concerns. And they experienced significantly greater traction in their decision making in the next day's work.

The midpoint, then, is a time when members are most likely to welcome and be helped by interventions that encourage them to assess their work progress, to review how they are applying members' efforts and talents to the work, and to consider how they might want to alter their task performance strategies to better align them with external demands and internal resources. A good midcourse review also can uncover important gaps in team members' knowledge and skill for the work at hand, especially when the problem or client is new to the team, and when anticipating all the necessary capabilities would have been an exercise in clairvoyance. Midpoints are *not* good times for teaching team members new skills, however. If it becomes clear at the midpoint that the work is suffering because of missing capabilities, it may be better to engage the team in locating people outside the group who can provide some help than to take time out for members themselves to hone their knowledge or skills. As will be seen next, learning is best done later, when the group has reached the end of a performance period.

Harvesting Lessons Learned at the End

The final predictable opportunity for helpful team leadership occurs when the work is finished or a significant subtask has been accomplished. At the end of a task cycle, a team has all the information they are likely to get about what members can learn from their team experiences. Members are ready to internalize and use the lessons they learn from their work. Anxieties about getting a piece of work organized and finished on time dissipate once the work is completed, the main reason that learning-focused interventions are best done at the end: People do not learn well when they brim with anxieties. Finally, there usually is *time* for reflection once the task has been finished. The post-performance period, therefore, is an especially crucial time for leaders to undertake learning-focused coaching.

Excellent debriefs not only build the team's reservoir of talent for subsequent work, but also contribute directly to the personal learning of individual team members. Some years ago, Ruth Wageman, then a doctoral student, was conducting research on task interdependence among field service teams at Xerox Corporation. Her academic advisor, Richard Hackman, accompanied her to a meeting with the managers who would be involved in the project. At the end of the meeting, one of the Xerox managers asked, as was customary at the company, two debriefing questions: "What did we do especially well today? And what needs some improvement?" Various items were called out in response to the first question. There was but a single suggestion for the second item, however: "The professor's interpersonal skills." The professor joined in the laughter. But later he reflected back on his behavior in that meeting—and he found that there were indeed some ways in which he could have behaved more competently and helpfully in team interactions. Those reflections, and the learning they spawned, never would have happened if the Xerox service organization had not routinely and habitually conducted post-meeting debriefings.

Without direct intervention, team members are not likely to conduct a systematic debriefing. If the team has succeeded, they will be more interested in celebrating than in reflecting. If it has failed, they may be driven more to rationalize why the poor outcome was not really their fault than to explore what might be learned from it. Finally, even if members do take the time to reflect on possible explanations for the team's level of performance, leader coaching can be helpful in bringing those explanations into alignment with reality before the team either moves on to another task together or disbands to address other work.

Conclusion

Team leader pre-work sets the stage for team effectiveness. By creating conditions that foster team effectiveness before a team meets, a leader substantially lessens the chances that the team will succumb to intractable process losses. Moreover, pre-work increases the likelihood that members will generate real synergies, or process gains. In addition, getting the first four conditions in place goes a long way toward making the fifth condition – competent coaching – possible. If the team is poorly designed, there is very little a leader can do in real time to redress the difficulties that the team is almost certain to have. But if the basic conditions for effectiveness *are* in place, then real-time leadership actions can help a team get over rough spots and take advantage of opportunities that a poorly designed team would overlook or mishandle.

Once the team is underway, expert team leaders focus on three predictable times when coaching can be especially helpful: beginnings, midpoints, and ends. At the beginning of a team's work, motivational interventions that focus on the level of *effort* the team applies to its work are especially helpful. Such interventions can help minimize free riding (a process loss) and build high-shared commitment to the team and its work (a process gain). For example, articulating a specific, challenging goal and attaching a valuable reward to achieving it are leadership actions that can motivate members to focus intently

on the task at hand and to work hard to accomplish it.

At the midpoint of a team's work, consultative interventions that help the team revise and improve its *performance strategies* are especially helpful. Such interventions can help the group avoid over-reliance on habitual routines that may be inappropriate for the team's task (a process loss) and instead invent work strategies that are particularly well-suited for the task and situation (a process gain). For example, a team leader of a problem-solving team can introduce the team to people who have tackled similar problems and invite team members to explore alternative ways of getting the work done.

Finally, at the end of a performance period, educational interventions that help the team make good use of the full complement of members' *knowledge and skill* can be especially helpful. Such interventions can minimize the mis-weighting of members' contributions (that is, when the importance given to individual members' contributions does not match their actual talent for the task, a process loss), and foster peer-to-peer teaching and coaching that can increase the team's capabilities (a process gain).

Clearly, a team that applies ample effort to its work, that uses a performance strategy that is well-aligned with its task and situation, and that appropriately draws on members' knowledge and skills is much more likely to perform well than a team that manages these processes poorly. Leader interventions can be extremely helpful to teams in managing these essential performance processes—but, as we have seen, it is vital that each one be addressed at the specific, predictable time in the team's life when members are ready to receive help and use it.

TIMING TYPE II: KNOWING WHEN TO ADDRESS THE *UNPREDICTABLE* NUANCES OF GROUP DYNAMICS

> The [project] team had been preparing its presentation for the client, but they really weren't seeing it through the client's eyes. . .. It was clear from the first slide they showed me when I walked in the room that we had very different expectations for what the clients needed to see. . .. I knew I needed to lead them to a place where they could look at [all the information they had assembled] from the client's perspective. . .. So I had to make a snap decision whether to say right away, "This is not what we're looking for," or whether to wait until after the presentation and act as if we had come to this conclusion.—*Tony, a partner at a global consulting firm, on coaching one of his project teams before a meeting with a client*

Tony had a choice to make during his meeting with the team he was supervising. He had quickly diagnosed an unexpected problem, but he also needed to weigh the pros and cons of intervening earlier or later. Intervening immediately, he could see, would save time and get the team onto a good trajectory more quickly, but might undermine the team's sense of autonomy and short-circuit any learning that members could harvest from figuring it out for themselves. On the other hand, while waiting would allow Tony to get a better sense of what was going on and why, the team could end up wasting valuable time before the meeting with the client.

Tony's dilemma typifies the second type of timing that team leaders must master. Our emphasis on predictable times of readiness could be viewed as suggesting that leadership actions are irrelevant or ineffectual during the great majority of a team's life—that is, in the extended periods that lie between its beginning and midpoint, and midpoint and end. It is true that teams are remarkably impervious to major interventions made during times of low readiness. However, by actively watching for emerging opportunities to motivate, consult to, and educate teams, team leaders can make significant contributions to the team and its work.

To exercise great Type II timing, team leaders must diagnose group problems and opportunities as they occur and craft competent interventions on the fly. As will be seen, both diagnosis and intervention require a finely honed sense of timing and considerable coaching skill.

Diagnosis on the Fly

It may seem unnecessary to say, but we have found many team leaders need reminding that: *Diagnosing a team's problems and opportunities requires that one actually observe the team doing its work.* Too many team leaders, when they do not have formal responsibilities that require their presence with the team, choose to work on other matters rather than observe the team in action. Others pitch in to help the team with its work rather than keep an eye on team processes. Still others, although fewer in number, have learned about the importance of coaching interventions at beginnings, midpoints, and ends—and pay close attention to what is going on in the team *only* then, thereby potentially missing important developments that occur between the predictable times.

Occasionally, however, we have observed team leaders who get good data about team processes throughout the team's entire life cycle. Moreover, some organizations have developed policies that explicitly encourage this. At Tony's organization, for example, the firm's partners scheduled three hours per week to check in, observe, and raise questions with each

project team that they supervised. This policy created ample opportunity for the partners to identify struggling teams before they caused problems for clients, and to develop team members' individual and collective capacities in real time.

Whenever a team leader observes a team at work, he or she should focus on the team's standing on the three performance processes. Team leaders can discern subtle but critical dynamics by scanning the team interactions and asking themselves a short set of diagnostic questions—"How are they doing on effort? Are there signs of mindless routines, or does their strategy seem well-suited? Is there anything going on here that is causing the team to underuse some talent?"

However, dramatic moments in the interaction can often lead team leaders to overfocus on one process and miss opportunities to be genuinely helpful with others. For example, at a management team meeting at the Center for Application of Substance Abuse Technologies (CASAT), several team members complained vocally that work was unfairly distributed among team members. Executive Director Gary Fisher, captured by the intense feelings expressed, focused on the emotional and interpersonal aspects of what he heard in the meeting. In response, he called an all-day meeting in which team members aired their interpersonal issues and decided to redistribute responsibilities more equally. However, the team's performance problems persisted—and were ultimately solved by a small, strategic shift in their work operations. By focusing energy on the surface content of team member complaints, rather than by watching the problem as it was occurring, Gary not only misdiagnosed a simple task strategy issue, but wasted the team's time and resources. To avoid such misdiagnoses, team leaders must balance their attention across the three performance processes and properly diagnose unexpected issues as they emerge.

Merely paying attention to these processes is not enough, however. Team leaders also must competently *interpret* what they see. For instance, we often show our management students a reenacted video of a real-life leadership team. In one tense moment, the team is engaged in a heated discussion as they try to decide how to reduce the organization's overhead costs by 20 percent. Some students see in this discussion a productive debate about work strategy, and they do not see a constructive purpose to intervening in the team's process. Others, however, are concerned that interpersonal conflict between members is undermining the team's effort on the task and argue that the chief executive should intervene. Either interpretation might be appropriate, but each will affect both the timing and type of intervention the leader should choose. Team leaders with good knowledge of the task and of the team and its history are in the best position to make accurate diagnoses of what team dynamics *mean* for the three key performance processes.

One word of caution: A common error we see team leaders make in diagnosing team processes is focusing too much on the quality of members' interpersonal relationships. Relationship dynamics are easy to see, especially when conflicts and disagreements develop, but they can prompt interventions that miss the mark, as Gary Fisher's experience dealing with the negative emotions in his management team illustrated. Although some leaders assume that harmonious interaction is a sign that a team is working well, interventions focused on improving relationships do not actually foster team effectiveness over the long term. In fact, as Robert Kaplan documented years ago (in an article tellingly titled "The conspicuous absence of evidence that process consultation enhances task performance"), relationship-focused interventions impair team effectiveness as often as they help—by distracting members from the work at hand. Team-building exercises that emphasize trust or cohesion are indeed enjoyable and engaging, but they often divert members' attention from task-focused activities that actually have a chance of improving performance outcomes.

It is true that building harmonious interpersonal relations among members can reduce the amount of conflict that exists among members—but conflict about the best ways to do the work, or about the relative worth of different ideas that members propose, actually can foster creativity and, ultimately, team effectiveness. Unless a team leader observes that interpersonal difficulties are diminishing the team's motivation, or members' capacity to develop appropriate strategies, or their ability to leverage one another's talents, interventions that target interpersonal relationships are unlikely to help the team with its work.

Crafting Real-Time Interventions

Once team leaders diagnose the signs a team needs help, they must contend with the key issue of timing on the fly: How *soon* should they intervene? Should they act immediately, as soon as a problem surfaces, or let things play out for a while? The dilemma is that intervening quickly is more likely to correct the problem before it becomes intractable. But early action makes a team dependent on its leader and undermines the team's capacity for self-correction. Intervening later allows the leader to gather more data and offers room for the team to learn from its experience and correct its own mistakes. But delay also increases the chances that a problem will become too large ever to be corrected. Here is how Tony, the consulting firm partner, concerned about his team's upcoming presentation, handled this trade-off:

> I decided to [wait to intervene and] let them walk me through [their presentation], just in case I was missing something. I also felt that, from interacting with the team, the engagement manager had the thinnest skin, and I wanted to steer them in a way which wouldn't make him defensive or question his leadership. So, I had [two other team members] role-play the presenter and the client, while the engagement manager and the other team members watched. I didn't say much while this was happening, but the other members of the team started to ask questions from the client's perspective, and they quickly realized that they didn't really have recommendations that fit. And I did this on purpose so they could learn but not feel bad about themselves and I wouldn't have to lecture them. They could both test out the material for this particular project and, hopefully, learn a technique to help them better prepare for meetings in the future. . .Rather than beating them over the head with [what I thought they should do], I wound up walking them to a place where they could find that out on their own.

In this example, Tony detected a problem in team strategy. But he believed that the additional data he and the team would gain by waiting was valuable enough that he chose not to intervene when he first noticed the problem. He also made the judgment that, because he would not be working with this team regularly, the team *had* to have the ability to self-correct. Had the client meeting been sooner, or had his coaching meeting with the team been of shorter duration, he might reasonably have chosen to intervene more quickly.

Tony's intervention was also appropriately modest. Because the effort, strategy, and use of talent in a team are set on a trajectory by the team's initial design, team leaders swim against strong existing currents when they attempt trajectory-changing interventions in real time. Major changes therefore are best made during those predictable times, discussed earlier, when teams are ready for them. Moreover, as Ruth Wageman documented in her study on self-managing teams, teams that are poorly designed and launched are not helped by real-time process interventions. Well-designed teams, on the other hand, do benefit from modest interventions that aim to achieve small, positive shifts in team effort, strategy, and knowledge and skill.

One way in which team leaders can intervene in the periods between beginnings, midpoints, and ends is by using operant techniques (i.e. positive and negative feedback) to reinforce constructive but infrequently observed team behaviors—for example, praising a team for eliciting participation from quieter members, or pointing out that members' attention to the key issue has slipped. Such interventions can both increase the frequency of desirable behaviors and decrease the frequency of behaviors that are distracting or disruptive.

However, operant interventions only influence the frequency of *existing* behaviors. What actions can a team leader take in the moment to elicit effective behavior that is *not* being exhibited in the team? Leadership research often differentiates between "directive" and "participative" leader styles of intervening. Essentially, directive interventions tell teams what to do and what not to do with a minimum of input from members. They undoubtedly are faster and clearer in the moment. Participative interventions, generally executed by asking questions of the team, invite discussion and the invention of new and alternative ways of behaving. They take time that otherwise could be spent working on the task, but they can clarify team members' understanding of what is needed, and strengthen their commitment to behave differently.

Even though participative interventions often sacrifice short-term efficiency, they also may elicit new behaviors quickly that would not have emerged spontaneously. That is precisely what happened in the example above. Tony set the team up so that members could question each other and identify their own mistakes, and then solve their problems without his direction. This time-consuming intervention helped the team add new ways of preparing for client meetings to its repertoire. Moreover, the new behavior was more valuable to Tony and to the client than the small amount of time that would have been saved had he quickly told the team what he thought was wrong and what they should do about it.

A directive approach, by contrast, may be especially useful when a team is stuck, is headed for a major disaster, or is fixating on inappropriate matters. For example, Yuki Fujiyama, who runs a major business unit for a large financial services organization, found her leadership team consumed by a heated debate about an unpopular cost-allocation process that the chief financial officer (CFO) had recently introduced. Seeing that the team was on an unproductive tangent from which it was unlikely to recover, she stopped the debate cold, asserting that the team would spend no more time second-guessing its CFO and would turn, instead, to their planned discussion of strategic priorities.

Such pointed interventions that let members know that they are significantly off track can sometimes be highly constructive, especially if one also addresses *why* the behavior is problematic and what behaviors might be more appropriate. However, Fukiyama did

take the risk that her team would read her actions as political support of a particular team member rather than as a statement about the kind of work that should be the team's focus. It is better for a leader to explicitly state why she expects what she expects from the team than to allow members to draw their own sometimes-sinister conclusions.

TEAM RE-LAUNCH AS AN INTERVENTION STRATEGY

Even competent, well-timed interventions sometimes cannot save a team from an accelerating downward trajectory. Poorly designed teams with unclear purposes, for example, can develop persistent dysfunctions, in which team leaders and members know there are significant problems with effort, strategy, or use of talent. Unfortunately, the dysfunctions persist no matter who intervenes or how. For example, the senior leadership team of a global mining company returned again and again to the same issues without ever coming together to make a decision. Upon reflection, the CEO saw that while his initial choice of team members looked promising, he inadvertently had included in the team too many people from too many different levels and functions of the organization ever to reach common ground. All the clever coaching in the world was not going to bring that team to a point of effectiveness.

In such situations, team leaders who have diagnosed the problem must lie in wait for an opportunity to change the basic design of the team, or create such an opportunity themselves. In the above example, the CEO had all the authority he needed to redefine the team's membership and purpose—all he had to do was to wait for the right moment. In his case, the approach of the new fiscal year created a naturally occurring point of inflection in the organization. He acknowledged that the team as configured was not working, and announced that he was disbanding the team and "starting over" at the start of the new fiscal year, with a new configuration of members, a new name, and a new meeting schedule. Armed with the lessons of prior experience, he cut the size down to a handful of top executives, all of whom had previously demonstrated the ability to work collaboratively on the kinds of enterprise issues he wanted the team to tackle. Renaming the team made it palatable to those who were not invited to be part of the new team, especially since he preserved the original team for less frequent information-sharing meetings.

Many leaders find this idea of a team "re-launch," as we term it, a source of considerable relief. It's liberating to realize one does not have to live with continuing frustrations and dysfunctions. "Re-launch" does not offer an excuse for not getting the team design right in the first place, but it does offer real recourse to team leaders who are coping with persistently ineffective teams. It can help them to reconfigure the purpose or composition or norms that are ill-designed, and enable the team to have a fresh start.

WHEN TIMING IS BEYOND YOUR CONTROL

There are times in organizational life when team leaders have no realistic possibility of exhibiting good timing. Two such times are when institutional rhythms overwhelm the predictable pacing of teams' work, and when catastrophic events prevent leaders from having any real choice about the timing of their activities.

Institutional Rhythms

The presence of powerful temporal forces that affect an entire organization can make it nearly impossible to properly time team interventions. When an organization begins to move toward a major event like a merger or new product launch, for example, teams invariably are swept along and their natural rhythms are disrupted. In these cases, leaders cannot expect to see the periods of readiness for interventions that come so predictably in normal circumstances, and Type I timing becomes impossible. Only Type II timing is relevant—assessing how teams are doing as events unfold, and crafting interventions in real time as needed. Leaders who still try to do their main coaching at the beginnings, midpoints, and ends of team life cycles are almost certain to be both frustrated and unsuccessful. There are times when one simply must go with the larger flow.

An apparent obstacle to well-timed coaching is work that is performed continuously around the clock and throughout the year. How can one exploit the opportunities for intervention at beginnings, midpoints, and ends if there *are* no beginnings, midpoints, or ends? In fact, we find that there almost always are: If they do not exist naturally, then teams or their managers create them. For example, the semiconductor manufacturing teams that David Abramis and Richard Hackman studied at the Signetics Corporation some years ago operated continuously throughout the year: There were no natural breaks in the flow of the work. But managers at the plant arbitrarily partitioned the year into six-week performance periods. Both team dynamics and the tendency of team leaders to coach at those times were highly responsive to the beginnings, midpoints, and ends of those entirely made-up temporal periods.

The creation of quarters to demark financial reporting periods and semesters to organize educational activities in schools have the same character—they are arbitrary, but nonetheless powerful in shaping the rhythm of collective activity. Temporal rhythms are deeply rooted in human experience, and we do not

do well when we do not have them. If rhythms fail to occur naturally (for example, through seasonal or biological cycles), we make up some markers and then entrain our activities to them. These made-up markers are surrogates for real beginnings, midpoints, and ends—but they create opportunities for team leadership interventions that are just as real as the real thing.

Catastrophic Events

How can a leader do well-timed coaching when all hands are on deck dealing with an unanticipated crisis or catastrophe? Sometimes there really is not much that can be done: When the hurricane comes, it is the hurricane rather than the team leader that determines what happens when. That said, it also is true that there usually are many more opportunities than one might imagine for well-timed leader interventions even in crisis situations.

Consider, for example, an operating room that is convened in real time when a patient develops an unexpected problem that requires immediate surgery. The team in the operating room – the surgeon, the anesthesiologist, the nurses – will not look much different from a team that is performing a procedure that has been scheduled well in advance. The difference, as a pediatric surgeon at a major Boston hospital told us, is that in an emergency situation there is simply no time to have the team briefing that he likes to conduct prior to beginning a scheduled procedure.

In fact, it's a judgment call. Which is worse for the patient: to take a short delay during which the patient's condition may deteriorate while the surgical team gets its act together, or to run the risk that an unlaunched team may have failures of coordination that pose an even graver threat than that of a brief delay? Our guess is that most surgeons would worry more about the delay than about the possibility of team process problems. We are tempted to come down on the other side. There are relatively few occasions when deferring the start of a procedure for a few minutes will have mortal consequences even in medical emergencies, and relatively more occasions when a procedure that should have proceeded quickly and smoothly did not because of team-related communication miscues and coordination failures.

What if all staff on the surgical service had previously been trained in strategies for conducting a quick launch of a surgical team, and had practiced those strategies frequently enough that they became second nature? Would that make it possible for the team to have a reasonable launch even as members were arriving and making preparations for their own roles in the upcoming procedure? And could the same kind of thing be done for mid-procedure check-ins about team strategy, and for quick and efficient post-procedure debriefings? We are not aware of any research that bears directly on these questions. But we are confident that there are many more opportunities for well-timed team interventions even in crisis situations than are generally recognized. Just because a crisis appears does not mean that timing becomes irrelevant; indeed, it very well could be that the timing of team-oriented interventions is even more consequential in crisis conditions than it is in normal times.

WHAT IT TAKES TO HAVE A GREAT SENSE OF TIMING

A great sense of timing requires certain human capacities beyond the basic necessities of team leadership skills. In addition to knowing about the key performance processes that influence team effectiveness and the times when a team is likely to be open to coaching interventions, team leaders also need the ability to sense social systems—that is, to be able to recognize the root causes driving the behavioral patterns they see in teams. Great timing also requires that leaders master their own natural tendencies to analyze endlessly and to recognize when one must act first and analyze later. We explore below what is involved in these two special leadership capabilities.

Ability to Sense Social Systems

Leading teams requires identifying the *systemic* conditions that create obstacles to team performance or, alternatively, that increase the chances of team effectiveness. System-focused action is creating the right design features for a team and then occasionally intervening on the fly, in ways that elicit and reinforce effective collaboration. Consistent with these observations, we find that the team leaders with the best timing are those who are adept both in comprehending the systemic nature of teams and organizations, and in taking actions that respect and take full advantage of systemic forces.

Competent team leadership interventions, therefore, require a diagnostic frame of mind, in which a leader asks "What are the critical functions that are *not* being fulfilled in this system right now?" That kind of diagnostic question allows a leader to identify the actions that have the best possible chance of strengthening a team in its particular context at a particular time. For example, one leader of a regional medical products company had superb system-sensing skill. He recognized that it was unclear purposes and trivial tasks that were the most likely root causes of members' disengagement in a series of team meetings. Other observers might have seen the boredom, restlessness, and surreptitious e-mail checking as signs that members were challenging his authority. But his recognition of the underlying issue allowed him to

take well-timed action, clarifying purposes and redesigning the team's shared work, when the situation presented an opportunity to do so. This diagnostic frame of mind, coupled with an understanding of the main conditions that elicit and reinforce effective collaboration, illustrates what we mean by the skill of sensing social systems.

Impulse to Act vs. Analyze

Team leaders differ in their propensity to act first (and analyze later) vs. analyze first (and act later). Our observations suggest that these differences sometimes can impede a leader's ability to act at the right moment. Consider, for example, a leader who strongly agrees with the following statement: "It is reckless to act without careful advance planning." Such a leader will wait, observe, and learn before taking action. Leaders who have a strong propensity to analyze are more likely to intervene later rather than sooner in team dynamics, and have a better chance of getting the *content* of their interventions right. That is, they put themselves in position to understand what is causing the team to struggle and what actions in their own repertoire are likely to be helpful. Moreover, they run a low risk of undermining the team's ability to self-manage and solve its own problems because the team will have plenty of room to self-correct before its leader intervenes. But such individuals may miss entirely the critical moments in the team when the group is most able to be helped by prompt action.

Now consider the action-prone leader, one who would agree with the statement: "Endless analysis creates more problems than does thoughtless action." Such an individual intervenes quickly, with relatively little observational data about what is going on in the team. Action-oriented leaders are likely to act on problems long before they become intractable or damaging to team performance. But those actions may be taken on the basis of an incomplete or incorrect understanding of the group dynamic. Such leaders also may unintentionally prevent their teams from self-correcting and thereby encourage them to remain dependent on the leader to take care of things.

Among the best team leaders we have observed are those who have learned to shift orientation depending on the situations their teams face. Sometimes these leaders act swiftly; other times they defer action until they have done considerable observation and analysis. The success of this "shifting" strategy of course depends upon the degree to which action- or analysis-prone behaviors actually are under leaders' voluntary control. Sometimes action-prone behavior is driven by a leader's anxiety that the team's trajectory will get out of control and that he will take the blame for the consequences. And analysis-prone behavior can be driven by a leader's lack of confidence in his team leadership repertoire. Developing both capacities – to act swiftly or to wait and analyze more data – may best be done under conditions of relatively low pressure, so that those who hold responsibility for leading teams can learn to choose their approach deliberately when the moment matters.

CONCLUSION

Effective team leadership ensures that the functions that are most critical to a team in achieving its purposes are identified and fulfilled when the moment is right. Anyone who contributes to that – whether a formal team leader, a regular team member, or even an outside manager or consultant – is exhibiting team leadership. This article has described what it means to have great timing in anyone's team leadership activities. It takes a working knowledge of what teams need and when they need it. It means putting the conditions for team effectiveness in place in the right sequence, then exploiting predictable points of readiness in teams, and, finally, watching for real-time opportunities to help teams on the fly. These different aspects of great timing place a heavy demand on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral capacities of individuals. Therefore, when a given leadership activity requires knowledge or skill that is beyond one individual's capabilities, the best team leaders do not hesitate to call on others to lend a hand in helping the team move forward. Team leadership is not a solo act. It, too, is a team activity.


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