Competency 9: Developing High-Performing Teams

As the newly promoted chief administrative officer (CAO) at Suburban West Hospital, Mary Moses had the chance to reshape the hospital's leadership team to better serve the organization's needs. With a lot of support from the system, she hired several new middle managers within her first 18 months, all of whom were excellent. She now felt the team was ready to achieve the system's ambitious goals to grow the organization, build two more outpatient sites, open an urgent care center, build a new outpatient surgery center, open a new seven-story multispecialty building, and become one of the system's models for the future.

But things changed quickly when the new team started having serious problems. Every new project seemed to end in a bitter and divisive conflict. Initiatives involving major changes inevitably pitted the veteran members of the leadership group against the "new kids on the block," and new program initiatives turned new members against each other. Discussions about strategic direction felt like tense negotiations. As a result, everything was taking much longer than it should.

Moses wanted to respect the autonomy of each group member, but she was getting fed up with their constant, unproductive conflicts. She decided to talk to them about her frustrations at the end of the next meeting. When the time came, she made an impassioned speech about how the vision for Suburban West, which they all agreed on, was now at risk because the group could not figure out how to work together.

The speech did quiet the meetings down. But the conflicts continued, just outside the meeting room. As more time passed, Moses sensed the

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members of the team becoming stiffer and more formal with each other. She tried to bring up the issue again for discussion. When she did, everyone agreed the group was not making progress as fast as they needed to, but no one seemed to have any good ideas for how they could work better together.

THE SITUATION DESCRIBED in this vignette highlights several dynamics that often happen in senior leadership groups. All members of the group have an understanding of the organization's goals—the greater good—which conflict from time to time with their individual roles as advocates for their department's goals. This tension leads to the formation of allegiances, both opportunistic and long-term, as leaders find common interests and opportunities to "horse trade" to marshal support. The dimension of history also exists, in which memorable and regrettable transactions from the past become filters through which the contemporary challenges these leaders grapple with are viewed.

We can encapsulate this enormous complexity in the deceptively simple concept of teamwork.

WHAT IS DEVELOPING HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS, AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

For our purposes, we define a *team* as a group of leaders who share common goals and must depend on each other for success. This definition is flexible enough to include different types of leadership groups, even if they do not meet the strict definition of teams. Our focus is not on creating the perfect team, but rather on maximizing productivity within the team in whatever form it takes, and on examining how exceptional leaders use their teams to their fullest potential.

Developing High-Performing Teams means you select executives who collaborate well, actively support the concept of teaming, foster open and constructive dialogue on important issues, motivate and reward team members for working together, limit the political maneuvering that happens outside the team, celebrate successes together, and cope as a group with setbacks and disappointments.

HOW HIGHLY EFFECTIVE LEADERS DEVELOP TEAMS

Building a highly effective team requires leaders to pursue five essential activities:

1. Get the best people for team roles.
2. Align them with a shared vision and collective goals.
3. Build trust among team members (as discussed in Chapter 5).
4. Strengthen the bonds between team members.
5. Support team members in resolving the inevitable conflicts arising from group interactions.

With these five activities in mind, we have observed that the following competencies often distinguish the highest performing leaders.

Getting the Best People for Team Roles

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins (2001) explains why it is crucial to "get the right people on the bus." To achieve this goal, leaders must have a solid focus on hiring team players. Effective leaders are careful in their hiring practices; they try to develop a deep and critical understanding of candidates and are willing to spend the time needed to make the best possible hiring decisions.

What sets apart exceptional leaders in this category? They focus on hiring as a continuous process. These leaders constantly think about attracting and retaining talent, and they regularly look for good people before they even need them. They build strong networks of professional contacts, and they keep those networks active throughout their careers. They stay in touch with the high performers they have worked with before; those people become prime recruiting sources in the future. If these contacts are not interested in a specific role, they will still be able to provide valuable references. These leaders also monitor the succession planning processes going on within their organizations, looking for people with high potential whom they may need in the future.

Building a Sense of "We"

In senior leadership teams, collective goals can be tricky to manage. Leaders need to set them and make sure they are followed, but they also have to balance them with

individual accountability. There is also a natural tension between supporting the executive team and representing one's own staff that needs to be balanced carefully.

The best leaders understand these tensions and will find effective ways to help the group keep an optimal balance. Tools that can be very effective in enhancing a team focus include team goal setting and team-based reward systems; a balanced scorecard can also help ensure that the team goals do not overshadow individual accountabilities.

Developing Cohesiveness

Attending to team effectiveness also means attending to the cohesiveness of the team. Techniques that can help to build team cohesiveness include the following:

- *Increasing the frequency of interaction.* The more teams interact, both formally and informally and both on and off the job, the more opportunities members have to know each other as people and the more cohesive they can become.
- *Providing opportunities to discuss group goals, and how they can be best achieved.* Providing incentive compensation goals that are tied to group efforts can also help focus the team toward greater cohesiveness.
- *Developing a healthy sense of competition against other teams.* To the extent that individuals can be rallied around a common "enemy," even if that enemy exists mostly in fun, cohesiveness is likely to increase.

Working Through Conflicts

Every team has conflicts. Carson Dye (2023) wrote in *Leadership in Healthcare: Essential Values and Skills* that many healthcare CEOs try to stifle conflict among their senior teams. Exceptional leaders, in contrast, learn to expect conflict and will lead their teams to develop rules of engagement that guide them in their debates and deliberations.

To minimize harm in conflict, highly effective leaders work hard to:

- ensure there is fairness in resource allocation among team members,
- minimize the growth of smaller intragroup cliques (often by keeping the group size small in the first place),
- keep personal reactions out of the bounds of the conflict,
- ensure team members have minimal role ambiguity, and
- ensure team discussions take place within the confines of the team.

WHEN DEVELOPING HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS IS NOT ALL IT COULD BE

Team development falls short in a number of ways. The most common are outlined as follows.

Using the Team for the Wrong Reasons

If teams are used for the wrong reasons, they will not yield the benefits normally attributed to teamwork. Leaders may fail to use the power of the many and may not see the value that can come from group discussion and problem solving. Instead, they may use teams solely for show-and-tell–type meetings, where group members merely report on their individual activities. Another less effective approach is to use teams as congregations, with an expectation that members rally unquestioningly around the leader's decisions rather than provide healthy skepticism and skillful contribution.

Maintaining Too Much Control

Teams will not reach their full potential if leaders are unwilling to cede enough control to allow members the chance to weigh in on issues and ask questions. Some leaders place too much emphasis on ensuring that meetings proceed smoothly and without debate. Without these critical opportunities for input and dialogue, decisions are inevitably less thought out and tend to have less overall buy-in from the team.

Overemphasizing Individual Roles

One of the greatest barriers to fully developing teams is viewing team members more as individual contributors and less as team contributors. If leaders place primary emphasis on achievements that are individually oriented, then team members will respond in kind. This can also happen when there is little setting of team goals or incentives for achieving these goals. Superior teams are constantly focused on both team development and team performance.

Underemphasizing Team Development

Although most senior leaders have had at least some exposure to team-building efforts, too often the approach is event-driven; rarely does it involve methodically implementing lessons learned into the regular team meeting settings. Although team-building exercises can be informative, they will not build a team for you or even improve team performance.[1] These types of interventions are helpful only to the extent that they are woven meaningfully into an effective, ongoing commitment to team development.

If teams have no routine way to discuss processes and decisions, they will have little chance to grow and develop as a group.

Treating Others Unequally

For teams to work effectively, they need to perceive a level playing field for all members. Maintaining equitable treatment requires active work on the part of the leader; a natural tendency often exists to create an in-group/out-group within the team, particularly when leaders work more closely with some members than with others. Power imbalances within the team can also be a source of conflict; if they are allowed to continue unchallenged, they can create significant barriers to smooth team functioning.

When Developing High-Performing Teams Is Not All It Could Be

Team development can fall short for any of the following reasons:

- Using the team for the wrong reasons
  - Team meetings are only "show and tell."
  - Team members are expected to confirm support rather than provide healthy skepticism.
- Maintaining too much control
  - Meetings do not allow creative input on ideas and problem solutions.
  - Disagreement and conflict are not allowed to surface.
- Overemphasizing individual roles
  - Staff are regarded as individual contributors.
  - There is too little setting of team goals or incentive for achieving team goals.

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- Underemphasizing team development
  - Team building is too event-driven (e.g., too much reliance on Myers-Briggs assessments or other facilitated team-building exercises).
  - No regular forum exists in which team processes can be discussed.
- Treating others unequally
  - The tendency exists to create an in-group/out-group within the team.
  - Some staff receive clear preferential treatment without clear justification.
  - Power imbalances within the team are allowed to continue unchallenged.

MISUSE AND OVERUSE: HOW DEVELOPING TEAMS CAN WORK AGAINST YOU

While many executive groups can benefit from a more team-oriented approach, the risk of misuse and overuse also exists. This risk can show up as any of the following problems.

Using Teams to Avoid Decision Making

The team approach can be misused to avoid making decisions or to avoid accountability for them. For example, a decision that would be best handled unilaterally by the CEO may instead be discussed for weeks on end. Team protocols can also evolve a rigidity that ends up precluding timely decision making. We have seen team structures limit themselves by historical policy; a fast decision might be avoided for no better reason than overemphasizing protocol or simply thinking it feels too rushed.

Creating a "Country Club" Team

A particularly dysfunctional example of team overuse involves the attempt to create a "country club" environment—one in which security and comfort of team members become the primary objectives. While the working environment should not be uncomfortable, too much stability creates a stale culture. Highly effective teams, in contrast, will frequently challenge the status quo and will always be on the lookout for how they might improve.

Overemphasizing the Need to Keep the Peace

Placing too much emphasis on teams can discourage healthy tension and disagreements that arise over different points of view. To keep the peace, less effective leaders may actively discourage healthy competition among team members. They will try to place too much attention on treating everyone the same rather than acknowledging diversity in efforts, ideas, and abilities. Conflicts often present opportunities for improvement; avoiding conflicts rather than addressing them just to maintain harmony will significantly impair team performance over time.

Overemphasizing the Team

Sometimes leaders act as though the team is everything. Their constant references to the team take precedence over ensuring both individual accountability and a clear understanding of roles within the team. A lack of individual accountability often becomes a barrier to addressing individual performance problems and is thus another source of productivity loss.

Misuse and Overuse: How Developing Teams Can Work Against You

- Using teams to avoid decision making
  - Situations that call for individual leadership are overdiscussed.
  - Decisions are delayed unnecessarily because of protocol.
- Creating a "country club" team
  - Team member happiness is overvalued.
  - Security and stability are overemphasized.
- Overemphasizing the need to keep the peace
  - Healthy competition among team members is actively discouraged.
  - Too much attention is paid to treating everyone the same rather than acknowledging diversity in efforts and abilities.
- Overemphasizing the team
  - The team lacks individual accountabilities and clear roles.

GETTING BETTER AT DEVELOPING HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS

Most of us do not enter our professional careers with a refined set of team development skills. Team leadership, like teams themselves, evolves to higher levels of

performance through a combination of skill development, practice, and open, candid dialogue about opportunities for improvement.

Finding Role Models

Role models for high-performing team development are best found by joining and participating in a number of teams and task forces. Many organizations use temporary task forces to address problems and tackle projects. Participating in these can provide many opportunities to learn both the helpful and harmful approaches to team development.

Many operations executives are adept at forming and sustaining effective teams. They often need to accomplish multiple actions by pulling together a diverse group of contributors. Medical services corps leaders who run the hospitals and clinics for our armed forces also tend to be talented in developing and using teams.

Joining boards or other outside groups in the community can provide opportunities to study effective team performance. Participation in church or synagogue leadership teams can give you insights, in particular, into managing volunteers and using persuasion in team management.

Additional Opportunities for Personal Development

There are many team development books on the market. Some of the better ones are listed at the end of this chapter. Many of these books take a theoretical or mechanical approach, which can make for difficult reading. One noteworthy exception is Patrick Lencioni's (2002) highly readable *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team.* Lencioni also suggests, as we do, that trust is a critical foundation for superior team performance. Another is General Stanley McChrystal's *Team of Teams* (2015). Lastly, there is an excellent review of the science of improving teamwork by Christina Lacerenza and colleagues in *American Psychologist* (2018).

SUMMARY

The work of healthcare leaders is increasingly team-based. We expect this trend to continue and quite possibly intensify alongside the increasing focus on population health and value-based care. When there is a lot of time pressure to get through an agenda, carving out the time to reflect and improve team process can be particularly hard. But in our observations of exceptional leaders, that time is well worth it.

Think About It

Many organizations use team-building exercises and programs, often at a retreat away from the workplace. Some of these exercises can be controversial because they may disrespect or invade team members' dignity or privacy. Activities that involve physical or athletic games may make some people uncomfortable. Peer pressure and feeling the need to conform can create resentment. Some individuals feel team-building exercises have little to do with what they do in their jobs the other 364 days of the year.

- Identify at least three approaches to team building, and weigh each against the others in terms of how relevant and useful you think they would be for a specific team.
- Talk to one or more friends or colleagues about their experiences with team-building exercises. Ask for their honest opinions about how helpful the exercises were and in what ways.

Think About It

Building teams involves several complex challenges. The first is that many teams are brought together only based on functional skills (CEO, COO, CFO, CNO, and so on). These individuals play these formal technical roles because of their expertise and position title. Because of this, the impact that the personality has in individuals playing informal roles (e.g., people who act as idea generator, the conscience, the devil's advocate, the caretaker, the comedian, and so on) is often overlooked. Moreover, the role that individual values play in team functioning creates a complex set of dynamics. Lastly, there is no universally recognized way to measure team effectiveness.

- Research the effect of individual factors (e.g., values, personality, diversity) on team effectiveness. What seems to make the biggest difference?
- Develop several methods to improve team effectiveness through a deeper understanding of individual factors.

NOTE

1. A meta-analytic review of 72 controlled team interventions found positive and significant medium-sized effects on both teamwork and team

performance. See McEwan D., G. R. Ruissen, M. A. Eys, B. D. Zumbo, and M. R. Beauchamp. 2017. "The Effectiveness of Teamwork Training on Teamwork Behaviors and Team Performance: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Controlled Interventions." *PLoS One* 12 (1): e0169604.

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