



Launching and leading intense teams



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Abstract Collaborative work environments and team-based structures are commonly used across different types of organizations. Leaders increasingly need models for leading in complex intense teaming situations. To understand the team leader's role, it is important to appreciate and know the dynamics of teamwork, including how teams develop over time and the teaming elements that are important for success. By understanding the stages of team development and the dynamics occurring within a team setting, leaders can focus initiatives that are directed at certain critical moments for the team and build positive team dynamics. Team leaders should leverage the natural timelines that are part of running a project to effectively manage team dynamics to achieve high performance. Two crucial moments for the team leader are building and launching the team for a new project initiative. Following the project launch, teams start to collaborate and begin the performing and evaluating cycle toward goal accomplishment. In this article, we discuss our work with team leaders across industries to define and describe the role of a team leader, report on research focused on team dynamics and development, identify initiatives for team leaders to significantly improve the performance of intense teams, and specify strategies team leaders can use to turn around underperforming teams. We offer a new model for understanding the stages of team development and build this model to integrate important leadership tasks at each stage.

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1. The importance of team leaders

Consider the following: *Team members are hijacking team meetings and convincing others to deviate from the original goals. The team leader lacks*

the skills to recognize these dynamics. Furthermore, the leader struggles with determining a turnaround approach and leadership model to effectively regain control of this intense team and refocus the members to achieve the original goals and objectives. Deadlines are slipping, customers are dissatisfied, and the leadership approach is ineffective.

Collaborative work environments and team-based structures are commonly used across different types

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of organizations. Leaders increasingly need models for launching and leading teams that engage in intense collaboration. However, only 15% of emerging leadership research provides guidance to leaders regarding the essential steps for improving the performance of teams (Dinh et al., 2014). Furthermore, leadership theories and models often focus on either a leader-centric approach or a member-centric approach with minimal consideration of the simultaneous impact of both the leader and members (Sauer, 2011). Because of this, it is timely to provide a comprehensive model for team leaders that considers both leader and member approaches simultaneously with specific initiatives for building and improving the effectiveness of intense teams. Intense teams are defined by qualities such as high stakes deliverables, challenging deadlines, and potentially fluctuating project requirements. In addition, intense teams are staffed with skilled knowledge workers and operate in a highly competitive environment. These types of teams often evoke strong opinions, high levels of emotions, and extreme commitment.

In this article, we discuss our work with team leaders responsible for the performance of intense collaborative teams of knowledge workers across industries. The four key objectives of this article include:

- Describing the role of a team leader;
- Reporting on research focused on team dynamics and development;
- Identifying initiatives for team leaders to significantly improve team performance; and
- Specifying strategies team leaders can use to turn around underperforming teams.

The team leader is an individual typically in the middle management layer of an organization with specific responsibility for the outcomes of a team or multiple teams of employees. Team leaders may have a consistent team of employees that work collaboratively to accomplish a variety of projects or they may need to build a team based on the demands of the project. In either setting, team leaders function similar to traditional middle managers; however, their roles are significantly more complex due to the dynamics that occur within a team environment. To understand the team leader's role, it is important to appreciate and know the dynamics of teamwork, including how teams develop over time and the teaming elements that are important for success.

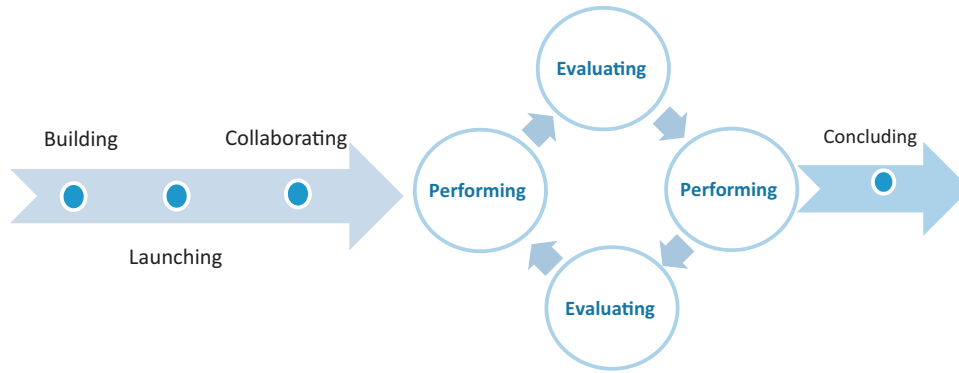
1.1. Team development

For almost 50 years, our knowledge regarding the developmental process of teams has been primarily based on the research analyzing teams not involved in real work environments (Tuckman, 1965). Surprisingly, we continue to rely on this limited body of evidence that states that teams go through five stages of development: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. These stages of team development assume that teams are formed with members that have not worked together before, have unlimited time to work together, and do not have a formal leader. These assumptions are often not true for most teams inside collaborative organizations. Instead, we have found through working with dozens of team members and leaders that intense teams typically have members that have some prior work experience together, work under challenging project deadlines, and have a specific leader.

These teams do not follow a traditional linear team development model. Often performance issues require teams to evaluate and refocus work efforts (Gersick, 1988). Our work with team leaders across a variety of industries has uncovered a dynamic team development process. In fact, team leaders discussed how intense teams can often cycle multiple times between performing and evaluating as a dynamic process to achieve the long-term project goals. This dynamic developmental process is typical for teams with team leaders, a team project plan, intense collaboration, and clear team objectives.

Opportunities for effective team leaders to impact the success of the team are often bound to understanding the team stages of development. Knowing and leveraging the team development phases is critical for team leaders and consistent with the simultaneous leader-member analysis approach. Richard Hackman (2002) argued that team leaders have a significant impact at the start, midpoint, and end of the life of the team. Expanding this research to understand the dynamics of organizational teams, we propose a dynamic team development model. In this model, teams begin at the building stage when the leader learns about the project—before the members are asked to join the team or get briefed about the project. The second phase is the launching stage, when team members are briefed on the tasks and objectives. Third is the collaborating stage, when team members begin determining how to accomplish the team objectives. Next, the team begins performing and working toward accomplishing key milestones. Along this path, evaluation opportunities are built

Figure 1. Dynamic team development model



into the team development cycle which allow for midcourse corrections. Finally, the project goals are accomplished and the team concludes. Figure 1 depicts the dynamic team development model.

1.2. Team dynamics

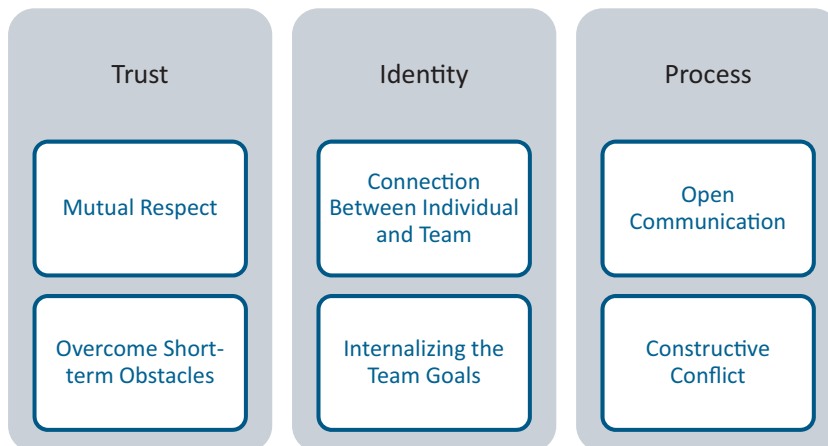
Research we have conducted on intense teams and team leaders across a variety of industries including information technology, manufacturing, technology services, and education guides our ability to identify and understand the fundamental elements of team dynamics that drive performance. Our findings from interviews and empirical studies show that fundamental to the essence of team success are trusting relationships between team members and with the team leader (Schaubroeck, Peng, & Lam, 2011; Webber, 2008; Webber & Klimoski, 2004; Webber & Torti, 2004). This trust is built on multiple encounters and working engagements and is long term, withstanding short-term obstacles and issues. We have also found that individuals are motivated to team effectively when the work environment interacts successfully with the identity of the individual. Social categorization theory has shown repeatedly

that individuals with congruence between their own identity and the identity of the team and organization are more likely to go above and beyond for the success of the team (Roussin & Webber, 2012). Finally, results from our research and others' shows that team processes that encourage open and continuous communication and constructive conflict through discussion of new ideas result in higher performance (Webber, Bishop, & O'Neill, 2012). Figure 2 shows the three important components of team dynamics.

2. Guidance for team leaders

The use of teams in organizations has dramatically increased largely due to the increased challenges of business and the need for groups of employees to solve complex problems. Team leaders are critical for the future success of teams operating in complex environments (Zacarro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001). By understanding the stages of team development and the dynamics occurring within a team setting, team leaders can focus initiatives that are directed at certain critical moments for the team and build positive team dynamics (Lorinkova, Pearsall, &

Figure 2. Components of team dynamics



Sims, 2013). Every team has projects with defined start and end times. Team leaders should leverage the natural timelines that are part of running a project to effectively manage team dynamics to achieve high performance (Hackman, 2012; Hackman & Wageman, 2005). Two crucial moments for the team leader are building and launching the team for a new project initiative. Leaders often ask if this is also important for intact teams. We have found that new projects for both intact and newly formed teams require a well-developed launch phase. During the launch phase, the team leader places primary emphasis on sharing the vision and establishing initial trust. The second phase is focused on sustaining long-term trust between team members and fostering team identity. In the third phase, teams start to collaborate and begin the performing and evaluating cycle toward goal accomplishment.

We all know the power of teams for achieving success. Thinking carefully about the key elements of mobilizing and launching a team and determining the best approach for preparing a team for success are vital elements for building trust and leading an intense team. Building and launching activities can be the key difference to secure the long-term success of any team. Leaders make an important and significant impact on team effectiveness during these two important, yet often overlooked stages of team development.

Building the team means taking steps to consider important elements for the long-term effectiveness of the team. Launching the team involves setting the stage for high performance expectations and getting the team excited about the team vision. For example, a team we observed was thoughtlessly planned. The team leader wasn't clear on the vision of the team or key team milestones, and failed to convey a clear message for the team during the launch meeting. Team members left the meeting lacking excitement or clarity regarding the work of the team and the long-term objectives. Lack of preparation and unclear messaging from the leader during the building and launching phases resulted in a lack of trust in the leader and wavering commitments to the project by team members.

2.1. Phase 1: Building the team

Leaders engaging in building activities focus on elements that positively impact the development of trust and the long-term success of the team. Some of these elements are highly predictable as important to the team, such as team member selection for necessary skills as well as personality congruence and background variety. Leaders during the building phase should plan the project, including

clearly identifying and defining the team task and deliverables. Other important factors that are less clear during the building phase include securing necessary organizational support elements such as resources and linking recognition and reward systems to team outcomes. Effective leaders actively engage in a thoughtful process during the building phase to set the stage for the long-term success of the team.

2.1.1. Preparation

Having a great launch for a new team is largely contingent on the preparation for the launch phase. Building activities are often underestimated and not highly valued in organizations that regularly use teams. Providing leaders the opportunity to develop a launch plan for a new team is critical for creating effective working conditions within the team and allowing the team to immediately begin intense collaborative work. Building involves developing clarity regarding the task and outcomes expected for the team, including charting milestones and deliverables. For example, the leaders of a strategic leadership team created to develop a new organizational strategy charted clear goals and objectives throughout the intense 4-month life cycle of the team. Care was also taken to select team members that offered a diversity of backgrounds and experience to the team. The organizational leadership clearly defined the team objectives and set a schedule to ensure the tasks were achieved. In contrast, leaders often quickly pull together a team with little consideration of team membership and fail to create a timeline with expected deliverables. The expectation in these situations is that the team will chart the plans after they start working together. Too often, these teams quickly begin intense collaboration and encounter multiple challenges as they attempt to achieve the desired objectives.

Incorporating building strategies as an important phase in the life of any team recognizes the value of developing and charting the team objectives. Teams are also embedded within a larger organizational system that can help or hinder their effectiveness. Identifying and developing the necessary support for the team prior to the launch sends a clear message that the team and its objectives are important to the organization.

2.1.2. Organizational support

Organizational supports such as resources provided to the team and acknowledgement of the importance of the team project are critical for the launch of the team. Leaders that engage senior executives in the early stages of the team project by including them in the launch meeting and discussions about

the team expectations improve the opportunities for team effectiveness. Team member engagement increases as well as commitment to the work of the team when organizational support is provided and reinforced throughout the project.

For example, a division manager recognized that customer expectations were not being met due to the evaluation metrics for his teams. Meeting internal promise dates was the primary evaluation for success without consideration for the customer's needs. The division manager launched a team to review and change the evaluation metrics. However, team members resisted the changes and ultimately the division manager was unsuccessful. The manager then enlisted a corporate sponsor from the executive level to visit the team, discuss the need for the changes, and provide corporate support for the change. The new evaluation system is now linked directly to customer expectations.

2.1.3. Team member selection

Trust is often formed early in the life of a team, largely driven by the reputation and qualities of the team members. Careful consideration for the breadth and depth of knowledge, skills, and experiences needed by team members is critical for the quick development of trust within the team. Trust often forms early in new interpersonal relationships and has a lasting impact on the overall performance of teams.

An important consideration, along with team member expertise, is the personality congruence of the individuals joining the team. Certain personalities are generally more compatible in a team environment and lead to the development of trust between individuals. Researchers have uncovered that individuals who are open to new experiences, conscientious, and agreeable foster greater trust in teamwork relationships (Naber, Payne, & Webber, 2014). In contrast, disruptive conflict can often emerge in a team environment where individual personalities are not an effective match. Team member composition should also be considered carefully during the replacement or addition of a new member to an already existing team. Integrating a new team member into an established team with trusting relationships requires the leader to quickly establish the credibility of the new member by documenting and sharing the new team member's unique expertise and the value he/she provides to the team.

2.2. Phase 2: Launching

Launching the team provides the leader the opportunity to establish a shared vision for the team's

work and quickly build trust between the team members. Intact teams as well as project-based teams benefit from a formal launch meeting for any new project. Team leaders should carefully plan the launch meeting to include the vision for the team, the project roadmap, and expected deliverables as well as to acknowledge the individual members and their anticipated contributions to the team. Formalizing the launch process demonstrates the importance of the team's work to the larger organizational goals and sets the stage for teaming expectations for the duration of the project. Team leaders that fail to provide an effective launch meeting often struggle to gain team member support and dedication to the project objectives. In one case, the organization we worked with consistently used a 'kick-off celebration' to thank the team members and leaders prior to the start of the project, building energy for the team to be successful.

2.2.1. Share the vision

One of the primary goals for the team leader during the launch meeting is to share the vision for the team and link this vision to the larger goals of the organization. Team leaders that we have seen effectively launch team projects have a clear and compelling vision for the team and have developed a project roadmap with deliverables that are shared and discussed at the launch meeting. These team leaders also often invite a senior executive or client to the team launch to energize the team and validate the support from the organization.

Leaders we have consulted with often undervalue the team launch meeting. Our research shows that team members are more committed to the team and will provide extra effort when the vision of the team's work is clear and the goals and objectives have been defined. In one case example, the team leader delegated the launch meeting to a team member who failed to plan the meeting effectively. Because he was working with an intact team, he felt this was not necessary. Shortly after the start of the project, the team lacked energy for the project and performance deadlines were not met. To be effective, teams need clear goals and objectives as well as a strong connection with the vision of the organization.

2.2.2. Establish trust

Trust is based on the willingness to be vulnerable and has wide implications for the collaboration among team members. Surprisingly, trust is determined quickly in working relationships and often even before the team has officially formed. Team members have either worked together, are members of an intact team, or have gathered information from others about the reputation of the members.

Leaders need to act quickly in a teaming situation to effectively establish trust as a team. In fact, research we and others have conducted shows that initial trust is often driven by personality and reputation (Roussin & Webber, 2012). In some cases, this early trust is difficult to change and has long-term implications for the working relationships within the team. During the launch meeting, the team leader needs to set the stage for the team tasks by clearly defining the deliverable expectations as well as articulating the link between individual team member capabilities and the larger goals for the team.

Second, the team leader should facilitate a conversation among the team members to determine the team norms—including how the team will communicate and collaborate together—and to determine clear roles and responsibilities. During this meeting, the team leader sets norms about continuous review and improvement of the team's work. Setting the stage early for the process of team reflection and improvement allows for easier correction at later stages of team performance.

2.3. Phase 3: Collaborating

As the team begins to collaborate together, team members work to determine their role within the team and start to identify with the goals and objectives of the team. Connecting individuals to the team and fostering a shared identity within the team are primary goals for the team leader. Second, the team leader should begin to facilitate team conversations and foster relationships among team members. At this phase, team members may test different ideas and creative approaches to addressing the project. The leader should provide a safe environment for exploration, creativity, and candor within the team.

2.3.1. Foster identity

Individuals have multiple aspects to their identity, including a professional identity. Congruence between an individual's professional identity and their work environment results in greater contributions to the team and organization. Our research shows that identity can change and be shaped by the actions of the leader in teams and organizations. We also know that individuals want to identify with the team and organization and will work to try to build connections between their own identity and the identity of the organization (MacLean & Webber, 2015). Leaders play an important role in this process.

Building a team identity is also an opportunity for the team leader to create team rituals that are unique to the team. We have seen team leaders begin each meeting with a team ritual, such as

asking each team member to bring something symbolic to the meeting that represents that team or the project work. One organization in the food industry asked a different team member to describe his/her favorite type of bread and the symbolic relationship to the team's work. Other teams have adopted mascots that represent the team and build a team identity. Team rituals provide a link between the individuals and the larger team and foster greater team identity.

2.3.2. Develop teamwork expectations

Team leaders should facilitate conversations that allow team members to begin discussions about how the team will communicate and engage in constructive conflict. Setting up communication expectations and building a climate within the team that values diverse perspectives and ideas is critical at this stage. Creativity and new idea generation is often linked to the overall success of a team. Too often, teams fail to generate innovative solutions due to the lack of effective facilitation of diverse information (Webber & Donahue, 2001). We know from research that team members tend to share information that they have in common and fail to offer new pieces of material for the group to consider. Team leaders are critical in the facilitation role to ensure that diverse ideas are surfaced across team members.

We also know from research that teams with constructive conflict are higher performers. Engaging in and welcoming conflict within a team is critical for success. Team leaders need to model this behavior by asking for divergent ideas and information. In some cases, teams can appoint a devil's advocate to foster this type of climate within the team. Welcoming constructive conflict offers opportunities for team members to increase innovation and creativity, resulting in a stronger final deliverable.

2.4. Phase 4: Performing

As the team begins performing, the leader has the opportunity to analyze progress toward the goal and employ motivational strategies. During this stage, teams fluctuate between performing and evaluating with guidance from the leader. Key milestones and regular team meetings provide the opportunity to evaluate progress and make necessary changes to successfully meet the team's goals.

2.4.1. Tracking progress

Expectations set early in the life of the team should be reinforced during this phase. Group think phenomenon often occurs during this phase and can

potentially derail the team. For example, one team we worked with lost track of the team goals and objectives during this phase. The project manager allowed a subgroup of members to shift the plans for the team and failed to listen to the other members of team. The end result was a product that did not meet the needs of the customer and resulted in production of three products rather than consolidation to one product. Senior management requested that the team reevaluate the project and redesign the product. In this case, the team leader failed to revisit the goals for the team at this stage and to evaluate progress to be sure the customer’s expectations were achieved.

Communication is an important element of leader effectiveness at this stage. Leaders need to communicate frequently with the team, ask for regular status updates, and ensure communication among team members. Also common during this phase is subgrouping of members, creating factions and potentially dividing the team. Communication between the leader and team members as well as analysis of communications between team members

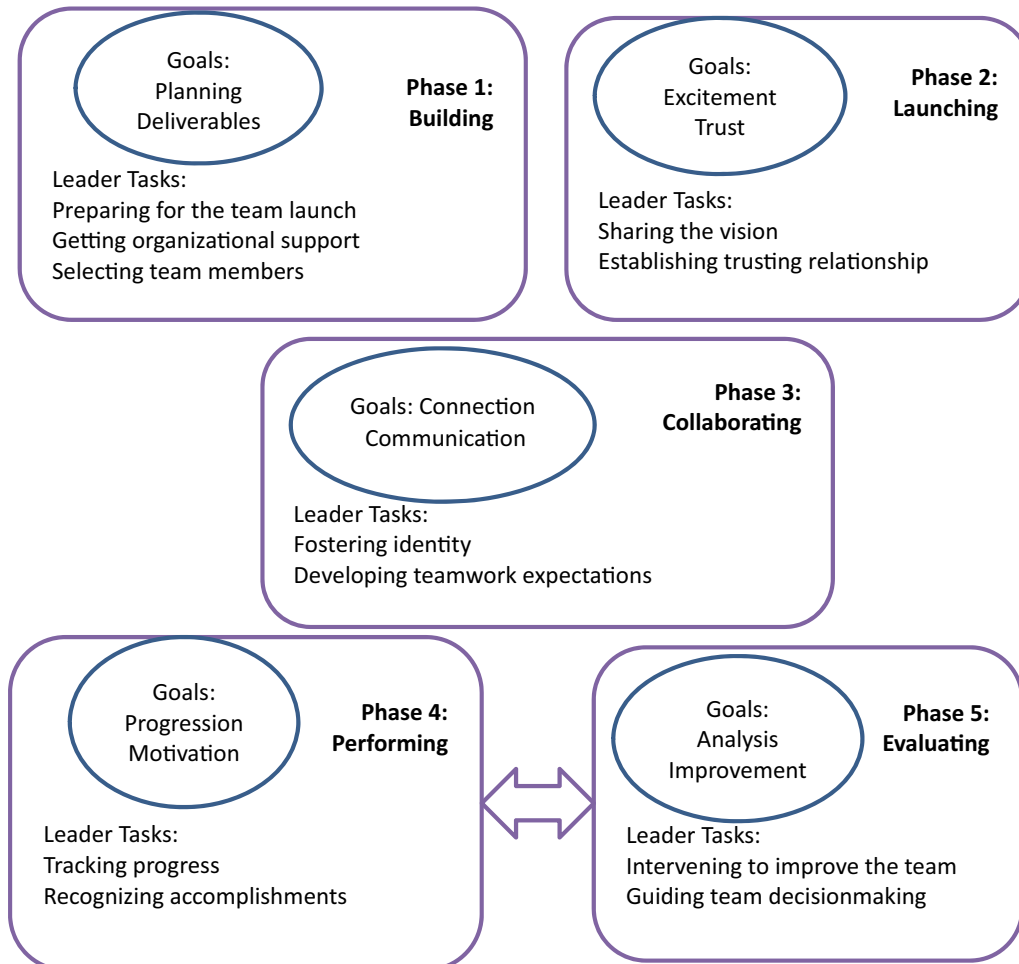
is important to reduce subgroup factions and group think.

Team communication often occurs in team meetings both face to face and virtual, providing opportunity for leaders to facilitate open dialogue among members, including welcoming divergent positions on a topic. Team meetings provide a forum to engage in constructive conflict and creative brainstorming to resolve team challenges. Leaders in these situations are important facilitators of conversations. Team meetings also provide an opportunity for leaders to recognize team and individual accomplishments.

2.4.2. Recognizing accomplishments

Motivating teams and their members is a critical aspect of successfully leading teams. Both individuals and the team overall should be considered in a motivational plan for teams. Leaders we have interviewed often overlook the complexity involved in motivating teams. Simply hosting team outings such as dinners or after work gatherings is not sufficient. Unlike individual recognition, organizations typically

Figure 3. Phases and tasks for launching and leading intense teams



are not consistent and equitable when motivating teams; however, team members still engage in a comparison process with other teams within the organization and quickly recognize inequities around team recognition. In one case, the organization had inconsistent team recognition approaches often providing greater visibility and recognition to one of the lower revenue teams and ignoring the accomplishments of one of the higher revenue teams. Other teams that viewed their contribution as equal or greater were demotivated. Similarly, team leaders need to consider individual rewards along with team rewards to recognize the accomplishments of individual team members as well as the team overall. [Figure 3](#) depicts the phases and tasks for launching and leading intense teams.

2.5. Phase 5: Evaluating

Evaluation occurs multiple times within the life of a project. This is the opportunity for the team leader and members to determine any changes that are needed for the long-term success of the team. Typically, this step also involves necessary interventions to improve team performance. Following the initial set-up of the team, the leader should have specified a performance evaluation process at critical milestones throughout the project. Often team leaders meet weekly or biweekly with the team to evaluate progress and performance improvement initiatives.

3. Team turnarounds

Working with teams over the past 15 years, we are often asked how team leaders can turn around problem situations for their intense teams. Teams are off track and unwilling to recognize the need for change or unable to make the necessary adjustments. Team leaders often recognize the issues before the team understands the problem and are willing to make necessary changes. In other cases, teams are engaged in intense collaboration and are reluctant to change without specific guidance to effectively turn around the situation. In these cases, team leaders need to have a variety of tools and strategies for effectively turning around teams that are underperforming. Here we offer three strategies in order of least to most drastic that will improve team performance.

3.1. Team feedback and reflection meeting

Midpoint feedback has been proven to turn around teams and allows team members to reflect and shift their work to be successful ([Gersick, 1988](#)). Team

leaders should carefully conduct a feedback and reflection meeting with the team to assess the strengths of the team and the areas that need improvement. Facilitation of this type of meeting is particularly important. Team leaders expecting significant changes should ask members to reflect individually and provide anonymous input in advance of the meeting. This material can be combined to provide a framework for the meeting discussion and team turnaround. The team feedback and reflection is an opportunity to break from the project work and engage in a thorough reflection of the team's work. We have seen teams where this is a regular process element of the weekly or monthly meetings. In other cases, team leaders need to introduce this idea to the team and get the necessary buy-in to achieve desirable results.

3.2. Re-launch the project

Although the team is intact and will likely remain with the same members, a re-launch of the project can often provide a new opportunity to accomplish the goals described in the earlier section. Specifically, re-launching the project involves shutting down the current work being done by the team, scheduling a re-launch meeting for the team, and investing in the development of a clear vision and direction for the team prior to the re-launch. The team leader should analyze the current situation, determine a clear vision for the team, and engage in a re-launch meeting. During the re-launch meeting, the team leader reenergizes the team with a stronger vision and purpose. The vision should be linked to the larger goals of the organization and the team should be made aware of the specific outcomes. Re-launching the team provides an opportunity to halt the current work, refocus the team, and create new energy for the project.

3.3. External team briefing

In some cases, team leaders are not getting results from the reflection meeting or re-launch and require a more dramatic shift to the work of the team. We know from research that changing a member of the team can create new opportunities and ideas and often turn around a dysfunctional team. In cases where replacing a team member is not possible, we recommend bringing in an outsider to a review meeting. Here we recommend an external team briefing with the client, senior leadership, or even a peer team leader. In these cases, teams need to prepare a briefing, reflect on the progress of the team, and share this material in a larger meeting situation. Often the process of preparing and

reflecting will jolt the team into seeing the issues or challenges and spark opportunity to discuss necessary changes. External representatives can also prompt changes with questions and idea exchange.

4. Conclusion

Teams have a concluding stage that provides an opportunity for the leader to thank the team members and recognize their success. Some organizations offer symbolic tokens of appreciation such as a company pen or cup to signify the end of the project and celebrate success. In other cases, teams may be recognized publicly at a corporate meeting or retreat. Achieving closure is important for the team members and represents an opportunity to assess any lessons learned for the next team project.

In summary, we have discussed a revised model for team development and provided action steps for team leaders to impact and improve the effectiveness of teams. As organizations continue to implement collaborative work environments, the need for effective team leaders is critical. We provide a framework and model for enhancing the leadership of intense teams and the ongoing effectiveness of collaborative organizations. Teams continue to offer advantages for organizations seeking creative and innovative solutions to problems. The material provided in this article offers analysis and integration for current team leaders to use as they launch and lead teams.

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