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WHY SOME WORK TEAMS ALMOST ALWAYS SUCCEED

THE INFLUENCE SUCCESS COMPANY

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-LEADERSHIP-



TODAY, THE FASTEST GROWING ORGANIZATIONAL UNIT IS THE TEAM – MORE SPECIFICALLY, THE CROSS-FUNCTIONAL TEAM. THEY ARE THE LIFEBLOOD OF THE MODERN ORGANIZATION AND CENTRAL TO ADAPTING TO A CONSTANTLY CHANGING COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENT. YET TOO OFTEN THEY FAIL TO LIVE UP TO THEIR POTENTIAL, RESULTING IN COSTLY DELAYS, BUDGET OVERRUNS, AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES.

THE CAUSE OF THE PROBLEM IS SURPRISING – AND THE SOLUTION IS WITHIN YOUR GRASP.

INFLUENCE
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

High performing cross-functional teams are essential to profitable growth in the 21st century. They are designed to broaden perspectives and find innovative solutions to complex problems. Unfortunately, they too often fall short of their potential and result in unproductive conflict, delays, and higher costs.

Research has found that teams with peer influencing skills and the confidence to share leadership are much more successful. They work well together, understand the bigger picture, and find more innovative solutions to the problems they have been assigned to address.

The good news is that the required skills can be taught, and any required changes in team or organizational culture can be facilitated with planning and skilled execution.



Success or Failure?

Which of the following situations is more likely to be found in your organization?

“Houston, we have a problem.” Apollo 13 was halfway to the moon when the lives of the crew were thrust into grave jeopardy. One of two oxygen tanks exploded, blowing out the entire side of the service module and damaging the remaining tank. The situation was critical, time was short, and there was no margin for error. A team of NASA engineers was hastily assembled. Their mission: problem-solve, adapt, and invent a way for the crew to survive and return to Earth. The team was successful, transforming a potentially disastrous mission into a legend of effective teamwork.

Jump to Nepal in 1997. Several teams were attempting to reach the summit of Mt. Everest. Renowned mountaineers led the teams, but this season on Everest turned out to be disastrous. On one team, four of five members died, including the veteran leader. Nine climbers from other expeditions also perished. Yes, the harsh, unforgiving, and constantly changing environment played a major role in this tragedy. But that’s the reality on Mt. Everest. In the time following the disaster it was determined that the perilous conditions were exacerbated by failures of team leadership, coordination, and communication, resulting in the worst climbing season of all time. These are stories of extraordinary success and failure. Yet they illustrate the challenge businesses faces daily: How do we successfully adapt to our rapidly changing environment?

It’s not a stretch to argue that the effectiveness of your own teams will drive the success or failure of your business. Why do some teams almost always succeed while others chronically fall short? What differentiates high performing teams from those that fall short? And what can you do to assure that your teams become legends of effective teamwork in your industry? The answer may surprise you.

How did we get here?

A central cause of poor team performance has its roots in how the concept of leadership developed in early 20th century as the Industrial Revolution was maturing. Thinking on management and leadership had crystalized into what was termed “scientific management.” At its core, scientific management advocates believed managers could study all aspects of work, and optimized procedures could be developed to ensure maximum productivity. An important component of scientific management was the separation of managerial and worker

“SHARED LEADERSHIP IS A DYNAMIC, INTERACTIVE INFLUENCE PROCESS
AMONG INDIVIDUALS...”

responsibilities. Managers had the responsibility for identifying precise work procedures, and workers were expected to follow management dictates.

This managerial perspective believed in a command-and-control perspective on the role of leaders in organizational life. The formally appointed leader was to oversee and direct those below. Workers were to follow instructions to the letter. The idea that leaders and employees might mutually influence one another was largely unthinkable at the time.

Throughout most of the 20th century, the concepts of influence or leadership practices shared by scholars, managers and workers centered on an individual leader whose authority was top-down and based on command and control. Vestiges of this model are still negatively influencing today's workplace. Yet its grasp is loosening as firms learn the benefits of shared leadership and influence.

Why the Use of Cross-Functional Teams Has Exploded

The use of cross-functional teams grew exponentially beginning in the latter half of the 20th century. This change coincided in the early 1970s with the formulation of Moore's law, stating that the processing power for computers will double every two years. This was the start of the Information Age. Since then the rate of change in almost all spheres of life has greatly accelerated. Barriers to entry have fallen across almost all industries. Newly developed knowledge rockets around the globe at the speed of light. Trade barriers are crumbling and your competitors can be anywhere in the world.

Increasing competition and the need to constantly innovate requires skill diversity, high levels of expertise, rapid response, adaptability, and the free flow of information and ideas. Teams enable these characteristics. The old idea of top-down, command and control leadership is the antithesis of what is required to compete in this 21st century.

An Important Question and a Revealing Answer

I regularly speak to groups about how influence is exerted in organizations. To start I frequently ask how many in the audience are leaders in their firms. Few, if any, hands go up. Given that the audience is made up of knowledge workers like marketers, engineers, accountants, product managers, and operations managers, among others, this is a striking example of a misunderstanding of leadership in the 21st century.

When asked who is a leader in their organization, most people answer this question by naming the CEO. If pushed

to name other leaders, the CFO and COO get mentioned. Pushed further, people will mention the heads of a variety of different functions, like marketing, sales, R&D, etc. Unfortunately, this typical thought process reflects an outmoded and damaging concept of leadership by limiting it to a top-down perspective. In highly successful organizations all employees are expected to lead and exert influence, laterally and vertically, when they can help create a better solution.

The Intrinsic Value of Cross-functional Teams

What distinguishes cross-functional teams from traditional organizational forms *is the absence of hierarchical authority*. Although a cross-functional team may have a formally appointed leader, in the real world this person is more commonly treated as a peer. For example, outside the team they often do not possess line authority over the individual members of the team. Moreover, the formal leader is not necessarily the subject matter expert. After all, the purpose of cross-functional teams is to bring a diverse set of functional backgrounds together.

By definition, the team leader's expertise represents only one of the numerous functional specialties around the table. Successful leadership in these settings is not determined by position of authority or depth of expertise *but rather by an individual's capacity to influence peers and by the leadership needs of the team at a given moment*.

Recognition of Shared Leadership

Among all the ideas and writings about leadership, three aspects stand out – people, *influence*, and goals. Leadership occurs among people, *involves the use of influence*, and is used to attain goals.

Note that the previous paragraph does not contain the words *role, position, manager or executive*. Leadership is increasingly recognized as being dispersed, or shared, up and down the organization.

It may be worthwhile to pause here and reflect on your own views about leadership. Do you believe that all employees need to feel confident and lead when they have unique knowledge that will help solve a business problem? Have you articulated these ideas? And rewarded them?

How is “Shared Leadership” Defined?

Shared leadership is a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of a desired goal. This process often involves peer, or lateral, influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence.

A simpler explanation is that shared leadership is the process of influencing others to take action toward a common goal.

However, when using this second definition it is important to remind your audience that we all can, and should, provide leadership. And that limiting the idea of leadership to senior

executives is a throwback to an antiquated time with a rigid top-down command and control management process. In the fast-changing 21st century, a rigid process is a process doomed to failure.

The concept of shared leadership is the very opposite of the “scientific management” ideas described above. Today we live in the Internet Age, and our workforce is, to a large extent, made up of knowledge workers. Success depends on making the best use of employees with specialized knowledge. Similar to the NASA team mentioned earlier, we need our knowledge workers to problem-solve, adapt, and invent new ways for our organizations to survive. That means team members need to be comfortable working with minimal hierarchy, capable of influencing both their peers and others up or down the hierarchy, and able to collaborate with those with more specialized knowledge.

Shared Leadership Teams Perform Better

Research on effective teams has found shared leadership in work groups to offer several significant benefits:

- Greater collaboration and coordination
- More innovative problem-solving
- A fuller appreciation of task interdependency and how member behavior affects the enterprise overall
- More effective peer influence by team members

In short, teams skilled at peer influencing are much more powerful and effective. They work well together, understand the bigger picture, and find inventive solutions to the problems they have been assigned.

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What You Can Do

The difference between a high-performing team and one that falls short of its potential is not always straightforward. And we can't blame team members.

The teams in your organization behave as they do both because of your organization's culture and the larger societal culture that still clings to the outmoded concept of leadership and influence.

If they are falling short, you may need to take steps to evolve your organization's culture and provide support or resources to help them adopt better ways of interacting with greater impact. The good news is that a modest effort can significantly improve team performance.

To get your improvement plan started:

1. ASSESS THE SITUATION

- Are people reluctant to step up and provide needed leadership because of your firm's cultural legacy? How will they respond when you ask them to step out of their comfort zone?
- What is the gap between how things are currently done in your organization and the empowered and effective teams described above?
- Does the team have the required influencing skills? The ability to influence laterally and vertically is central to team success.

2. MAP OUT AN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE PLAN

- If your team members are reluctant to stand up and provide peer-to-peer leadership due to a cultural legacy, you'll need to take steps to build confidence and trust.
- If they don't have the required influencing skills you may want to offer influence training.
- If you aren't experienced with guiding effective organizational change, *The Heart of Change Field Guide: Tools And Tactics for Leading Change in Your Organization* by Dan S. Cohen and John P. Kotter is a great resource.

3. EXECUTE YOUR PLAN

- Changing skills and culture is not a one-off event. You'll need to focus on it for a sufficient period of time. How long? The answer depends on how big the gap is that you identified in item one above. Experience has shown that it is always longer than one expects.
- The good news is that once the new skills and culture take root, the benefits start accruing right away and will last a lifetime.

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INFLUENCE S U C C E S S

The Influence Success Company trains teams to change minds, shape opinions, and move others to action. Our approach is unique. Over the past 15 years, we have examined the academic literature for the most useful research on how humans influence each other. We then combined this hard data with real-world experience to translate the research into understandable, actionable techniques that your staff can use to be more productive immediately. We provide influence training workshops for corporate and institutional clients.

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