

## Team Dynamics in Today's Workplace

by Dr. Stephen C. Schoonover  
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### Why Teams?

A new business environment-one that is shaping a revolution in the workplace-is driving a deeper commitment to team building. Businesses today must compete in a worldwide arena in which information and technologies are widely distributed and rapidly applied to new products and services. The rapid innovation required to meet these competitive pressures dictates a new, more effective approach to idea generation and development.

At the same time that businesses are coping with the many challenges of this new, fast-paced marketplace, they must also be dealing with the unceasing demands for higher productivity, improved service and better quality. These combined demands for speedy innovation and more and better performance necessitate ever-increasing levels of coordination and communication-levels that can only be achieved through well-honed, quality teamwork. Many organizations, therefore, are undergoing a transformation to a much more participative, team-oriented culture.



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Businesses are realizing that they can open up a vast array of previously untapped resources and countless creative options by fostering the efforts of employees working together and cooperatively in teams. Hewlett-Packard and Xerox, for example, have used teams as the driving force in simplifying product designs and bringing new products to market faster. Proctor & Gamble, AT&T and General Electric, striving to increase productivity and empower their employees, have implemented self-directed work teams-teams that work independently within a department. Corning uses cross-functional teams-teams comprised of members from many different departments-as the backbone of its innovation process. Ford, too, has formed cross-functional teams and has managed, as a result, to halve the design time for its new models.

Most leading-edge companies, in fact, have now recognized the critical importance of team spirit, team commitment and team skills for confronting problems, for ensuring the implementation of both corrective and innovative processes, and for working together to successfully complete challenging projects. Teams are as old as humankind. They have

been vital forces throughout recorded history, from ancient tribal rituals to the intricate cultures of our most effective modern corporations. Researchers have painstakingly studied team dynamics, probing what makes them function well, determining what makes them dysfunctional and theorizing about what could make them contribute even more to society and to the workplace. Teamwork, according to these researchers and their studies, provides an important tool for enabling people to be more productive.

At their best, then, teams create new ideas, motivate their members and promote significantly greater work than the collective efforts of individual members. At their worst, however, teams can undermine the spirit of the workforce, suppress original thinking and waste time and resources on conflicts without yielding productive work.

Teams work well **only** when organizations make a commitment to them. The frontier spirit of lone individualists served America well in the past, but the more complex, high-pressure work environment of today demands the new, more flexible approach that team initiatives address. The business environment

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in the last decade, however, is not the sole factor contributing to the revolution in the workplace. Employees have changed, too. They are more diverse, more educated and better able to accept delegated responsibility and self-management. More egalitarian, team-oriented work practices generate more empowered jobs and yield, not surprisingly, more positive impact for the business and far greater satisfactions for the individual employee. Unfortunately, in many organizations, the most important reason for teams-their unique ability to innovate and create-is least emphasized. Businesses, in order to remain competitive and successful, need to realize that well-developed teams are the most effective method for generating new ideas, solving problems, reaching goals and motivating the new workforce.

These are remarkable times. We are witnessing fundamentally new processes at work-dynamics that will inevitably make creative team-building the competitive edge for many companies. Yet establishing and developing high-performance teams presents many challenges. To provide a framework for promoting team excellence, this article describes a simple model of team functioning,

specifies basic team skills and outlines a set of practical strategies for assessing vulnerabilities and improving overall team performance.

### What is a Team?

A team is a group of people acting together to achieve a set of common goals. From the most traditional perspective, teams usually have a leader and members who work closely together over time on a common set of interests. In today's organizations, teams are still groups of people with shared objectives, only now they often do not have a formal leader, may have members who do not work in close proximity to one another and may frequently change both their mission and their membership.

Today, "teamwork" is becoming as much a philosophy of working together collectively toward a shared vision or goal, as a method for applying the efforts of a few people to organizational problems and goals. Teams-formal and informal-are inevitable in any organization. The "team" may be the whole workforce in a small organization. A larger organization, on the other hand, may have many different types of teams in place to perform its many and varied functions. Em-

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employees in most businesses are members of several teams that frequently have competing agendas. In all cases, the choice is not whether to join a team, but how to develop the right team with the right skills tailored to each specific business context and goal.

Ideally, teams are configured-and re-configured-to fit changing situational demands. Form should follow function. For example, problem-solving teams are often comprised of a selected group of specialists driven by a formal or informal leader toward a specific outcome. In contrast, self-directed work teams are often leaderless, sharing power and work roles.

Successful modern teams are perhaps most accurately pictured as open systems: sets of interacting parts with boundaries that allow selected information and energy to enter and leave. Since open systems permit the exchange of products, resources and information with their environment, they can readily develop and change both themselves and the tasks or ideas presented to them. Essentially, these systems create new

possibilities by opening and closing physical or conceptual boundaries inside and outside the team. For example, information gathering or brainstorming opens a team to new ideas; establishing work policies or procedures closes the range of possible team processes in the service of greater efficiency and effectiveness.

The general properties of a well-functioning team have been understood for many years. More challenging market and customer demands, however, and less structured organizational settings have added to both the complexity and possibilities of team environments. By developing a framework for overall team functioning, specifying role definitions and role behaviors and clarifying improvement strategies, teams can take charge of their own growth, development and competence.

As teams grow, each forms its own identity, a kind of "mini-culture" separate from the larger organization, that is defined by specific roles and relationships evolving over time. The best teams have a full complement of roles and develop members who can perform

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a range of roles vital for total team functioning. All teams need people who consolidate team identity and trust through accepting, appreciating and validating others and their ideas. Teams also need people who explore issues and possibilities through encouraging, elaborating, expanding, clarifying and summarizing the ideas of others. Teams need people who plan and organize tasks by integrating, activating, initiating and mediating the ideas of others. And, to ensure excellent, timely work output, teams need people who empower, persuade and delegate within the team environment and who can also effectively sell ideas to key opinion leaders and decision-makers outside the team. These various team functions can be crystallized into four roles: *harmonizing, exploring, regulating and promoting*.

Team member roles and role interactions can be represented in a quadrant framework, using the two basic qualities of all interpersonal relations-**what** is being discussed and **how** members are conducting transactions or interactions-as the axes (See Figure 1).

The vertical axis in Figure 1 defines **what is being discussed**. When team members focus

on people-oriented subjects, such as subjective feelings, perspectives and concerns, they are using skills that are located at one end of the axis. When they focus on task or concept-oriented concerns, such as work problems, goals or activities, the skills they are using are located at the other end.

The horizontal axis defines **how team members are conducting transactions or interactions**. When a person primarily takes an active stance, one in which he or she acts frequently or assertively, the skills used lie at one end of the axis. More reflective activities lie at the other. The two axes-what (from an orientation toward people and feelings to an orientation toward tasks and concepts) and how (from an active to a reflective stance)-combine to generate four quadrants, each defining a major team role or skill cluster.

**Harmonizers**, who are reflective and people-oriented, reconcile and mediate team differences and generate and refer to common interests and values. **Explorers** search for differences, create and champion new ideas and gather vital information. **Regulators** set goals, make plans and organize work outputs. **Promoters** ensure implementation of team goals and "sell" outputs to those external to

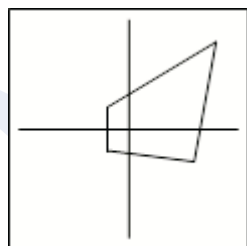
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the team (See Figure 2).

This framework supplies the basic ingredients for assessing team vulnerabilities, developing team skills and confronting vital organizational demands. At the most basic level, every excellent team should have each of the four roles well represented.

To promote best results, teams must emphasize or encourage the expression of a role or roles and the suppression of other roles in various contexts to promote best results. When a team is forming or reviewing its values and norms, the **harmonizing** (and to some extent the **exploring**) roles should predominate; **regulating** and **promoting** roles should serve supporting functions. Therefore, a team role "map" should look like the following diagram.



When a team is trying to generate and test new ideas or focus its efforts on the most important activities, the **exploring** role should

Figure 1.

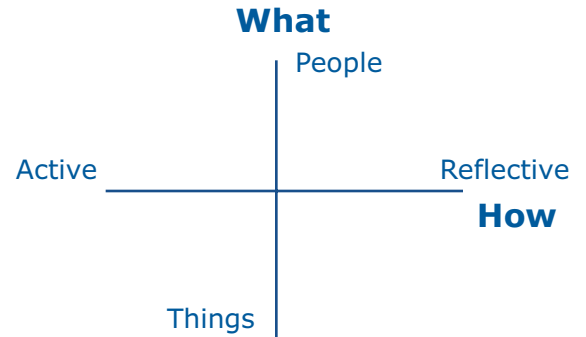
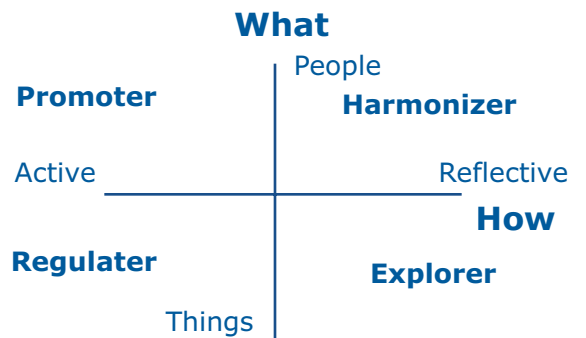
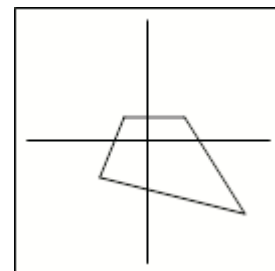


Figure 2.



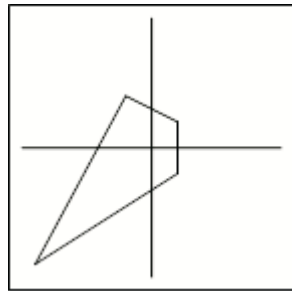
predominate. **Regulating** plays a secondary role to help translate ideas into appropriate team goals and plans. In contrast, **harmonizing** and **promoting** play supportive roles.



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When a team is setting goals and making commitments for plans, a different role complement is required. The **regulating** role should take the lead, with other roles supporting. For example, **harmonizing** might be important for supporting goals or generating agreement or consensus for them.



When a team must sell its ideas, products or services to other parts of the organization or to external customers, the **promoting** role predominates. The other roles play supportive parts.

Each of the four basic roles represents a collection of team behaviors best adapted to promote four general team outcomes. Harmonizing generates trust. Exploring generates team focus. Regulating generates rules. Promoting generates work output. For each role, following a critical path or set of steps called **key actions** maximizes achieving its primary

goal. For example, establishing team identity can be simplified with four discrete steps that can be used to focus member's efforts (See Figure 3).

### Figure 3: Key Actions for Establishing Team Identity

1. Discuss the team's purpose and agenda.
2. Ask members what they think and feel about the team's purpose and agenda.
3. Generate a list of key factors required for optimal functioning.
4. Specify the team's core values and activities.

But when should a typical team formally institute these key actions and how should it complete them? In practice, teams should constantly use the skills and steps encompassed in the team role model in an informal manner. However, when a team begins specific **functions** (organizing team activities, for example) or needs to respond to specific demands or **cues**, members should review, refine and implement key actions as a method to ensure meeting the situational challenge (See Figure 4).

The emphasis on each step, even the nature

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of each step, may vary. In all instances, however, a relating process that evolves over time and that includes a series of steps should

occur. (See Figure 5 for the **Key Actions** for each of the four team roles.)

**Figure 4: Establishing Team Identity - Reasons for Using key Action**

**Functions to Perform**

- Start a new team
- Significantly change team membership or goals
- Need to reach a team consensus
- Confront team failures or external assaults or criticism
- Instill a deeper sense of team identity or commitment

**What to Watch For**

- Flagging team morale and a crisis of confidence
- Criticism of team actions by "outsiders" such as management
- Significant changes in team resource allocation or expectations
- Role confusion, unclear goals, poor performance in work procedures
- Scapegoating, arguing among team members or development of factions

**Figure 5: Key Actions**

<b>What</b> (People, Feelings)			
<b>Promote</b>		<b>Harmonize</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify key customer(s) and their expectations.</li> <li>• Determine appropriate team outputs to meet customer expectations.</li> <li>• Decide how to generate customer acceptance.</li> <li>• Reach agreement on steps for transferring team outputs to customer(s).</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss the team's purpose and agenda.</li> <li>• Ask members what they think and feel about the team's purpose and agenda.</li> <li>• Generate a list of key factors required for optimal functioning.</li> <li>• Specify the team's core values and activities.</li> </ul>	
<b>Regulate</b>		<b>Explore</b>	<b>How</b> (Reflection)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe focus for action and identify key goals.</li> <li>• Specify actions and timelines for fulfilling goals.</li> <li>• Assign people to tasks and allocate resources to fulfill plans.</li> <li>• Track and update activities, goals and plans</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask members to express opinions openly about team priorities.</li> <li>• List a range of ideas about problems, concerns or opportunities team members identify.</li> <li>• Select key problems, concerns or opportunities for team action.</li> <li>• Reach agreement on a simple focus for action.</li> </ul>	
		<b>(Things, Concepts)</b>	

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of each step, may vary. In all instances, however, a relating process that evolves over time and that includes a series of steps should occur. (See Figure 5 for the Key Actions for each of the four team roles.)

Team member behavior also entails **individual refinements**. Perhaps most relationship problems stem from a deficit of skill performance—an inability to demonstrate competent behaviors in a refined way. At a practical level, this occurs when team members are not specific, subtle, consistent or persistent in using a team skill behavior.

As part of any major business process, each team follows four major steps: *establishing trust, specifying a purpose or focus for action, developing goals and plans and implementing actions*. Each excellent team process, whether it focuses on problem-solving, project cycle or on a deepening commitment to developing high-performance work teams, is a reiteration of this basic pattern. In other words, each successful team intervention generally moves through a set of challenges or issues—usually from trust, to a purpose or focus, to goals and plans, to implementation strategies. This pattern requires emphasizing each of the four

major team roles in sequence: first **harmonizing**, then **exploring**, then **regulating**, and finally, **promoting**.

Although people frequently fail to learn team skills, more often they fail to apply skills consistently and persistently. Because relationships are not single events but a series of reciprocal feedback processes that occur over time, each moment theoretically requires a new skill mix to fit changing demands. Achieving this ideal is quite unlikely, but people can significantly improve how they communicate by effecting small changes in behavior.

### What Are Team Skills?

Teams are a prerequisite part of modern businesses. However, in many organizations, teamwork and team commitment are touted as necessary for success even though strong upper level support or a clear blueprint for practicing them is missing. We described in the previous section what comprises a team. Now we will discuss what attributes a team should have to promote excellent performance.

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Leaders, managers and organizational specialists alike have understood the value of excellent teamwork for decades. When teamwork succeeds, truly remarkable things can happen to productivity, to the quality of work a team promotes and to the sense of empowerment team members feel. But, when a new fashion in team-building doesn't work, it is most frequently passed off as another "touchy-feely" fad. In fact, generating excellent work teams does not rely on magic, luck or infinite patience, nurturance and resources. Instead, teams thrive when specific **criteria for success** are met.

### Developing Team Member Roles

Perhaps the simplest way to organize team development is to use member roles as a focus. Referring to the team role framework previously generated (and highlighted by Figure 2), each quadrant can be conceptualized as a prerequisite role for a well-rounded team. Each role not only serves vital team functions, but also interacts with and counterbalances other roles to promote creative solutions to problems. Together, the four roles provide a vehicle for understanding, coordinating and developing successful team functioning. *Harmonizers* help build team identity and

consensus. *Explorers* gather information and generate, test and focus ideas. *Regulators* define boundaries and control information flow by formulating and enforcing practices, policies, and procedures. *Promoters* influence, implement and export work and ideas outside the team.

While the four role concepts are useful labels for particular activities and interactions, the behaviors that comprise each role are the most important focus for team member development. Focusing on simple behaviors offers the most powerful means of observing, assessing, coaching, counseling and training both individual team members and the team as a whole. By evaluating behavioral strengths and vulnerabilities, a team can define its role gaps, leverage the role strengths of its individual members and promote overall team competence that grows over time.

All roles are needed all the time for best team performance. However, excellent teams use a different role emphasis to meet various situational demands. Each of the four roles is vital for some situations, but each can also, at times, undermine others. For example, *harmonizers*, through their open acceptance

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of others and their ability to find common interests and values, are most adept at establishing rapport among team members. These attributes, however, frequently present roadblocks to productivity by forcing the team to expend too much time and too many resources on group affiliation. How can a team, therefore, decide what role or roles are most needed for particular tasks? Mostly through ongoing dialogue, refining and redefining evolving team priorities and the appropriate role mix (and behaviors) to address them, a team can assess and establish the best mix for the job at hand.

Besides offering the team advantages in particular contexts, one team role often acts synergistically when used in concert with other roles. For instance, effective *explorers* and *regulators* are most often the drivers of planning and organizing. *Explorers* ensure open dialogue, a flow of ideas and clear conceptualization. *Regulators* help translate these concepts into practical goals and plans that fit with team and organizational practices. Effective teams encourage the creative dialogue-at times charged with creative conflict-between representatives of these two roles.

## Stages of Team Development

While their primary function is to perform work on the job, teams also represent a group process that evolves through a series of life stages. This process seems to be characteristic of all maturing groups of people working together over an extended period of time. The stages of growth occur in phases through activities such as:

- Defining a common agenda.
- Establishing boundaries and roles.
- Testing relationships and group limits.
- Taking chances with feelings and information.
- Sharing and trusting (to form group cohesiveness).
- Clarifying work tasks and procedures.
- Implementing productive work.

The organization, a team leader or any individual member can facilitate team development by strengthening the behaviors that underlie each team role, by enhancing overall team role differentiation and coordination and by defining the prerequisites of team growth stages. In all cases, the most effective teams progress from a group of individuals with

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separate traits and interests to a sharing, cohesive, well-functioning unit with common purposes. This process occurs in four stages- **Establishing Team Identity, Focusing Team Priorities, Setting Team Guidelines and Implementing Team Goals** - each the result of resolving tensions between two or more of the four basic team roles.

The four stages of team development together form a cycle supported by all the roles working together as a coordinated whole. (See Figure 6 on the following page.) The ideal group or team would have all the roles in significant proportions, each coming forward with appropriate force at the appropriate stage.

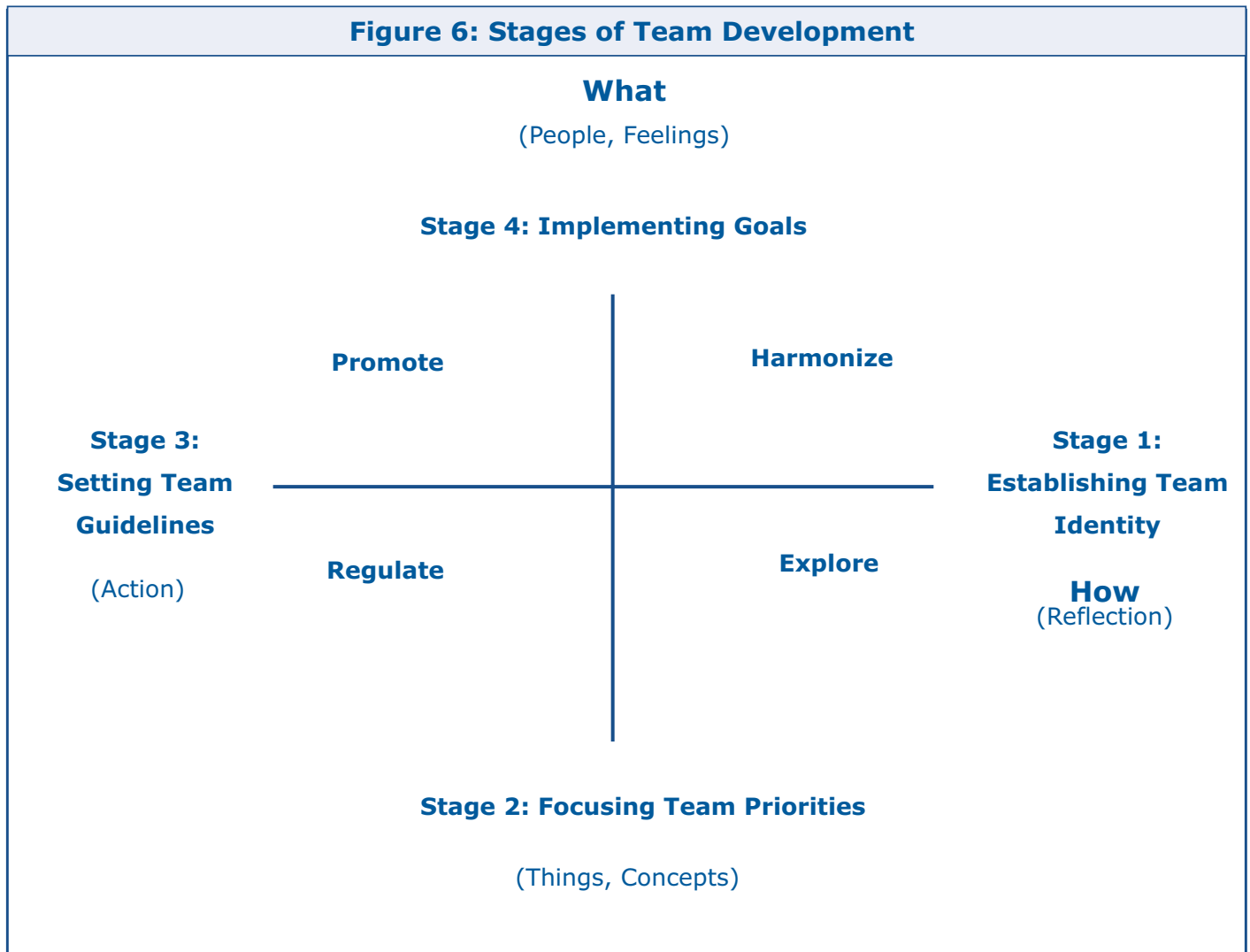
In the **Establishing Team Identity Stage**, the team does not yet have clear boundaries, functions or focus, or specified roles. The basic tasks at this first stage are to establish mutual trust and clarify a focus for teamwork. These agendas are supported by the harmonizing and exploring roles. These two sets of skills represent a dynamic tension in early team development between smoothing differences in order to find a common purpose

or common goals (harmonizing) and fostering an open, inquisitive dialogue to develop a clear focus for action (exploring). Tension or conflict in modest amounts creates a healthy dialogue with enough agreement to establish trust and enough divergence and openness to prevent complacency, conformity or inactivity.

In the **Focusing Team Priorities Stage**, the group agenda shifts from "who is in the team and what will this team do" to developing a specific agenda and the resources and methods necessary for productive work. These team tasks are supported by two team roles- exploring and regulating. Exploration in this context promotes new results in the form of defining the talents and functions of team members (i.e., role differentiation). New team potentials are opened as a variety of group functions and individual roles are classified or conceived. This process develops or taps the diverse human resources of members. The companion role, regulation, in contrast, harnesses team efforts into specific goals, plans, milestones and directions. The result of a healthy, dynamic tension at this second stage is a functional team with clear operations.

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In the **Setting Team Guidelines Stage**, the team becomes stable and effective in implementing its plans. Stability of group identity and consistency are supported by regulating. At this stage of development, this role promotes clear-cut policies and procedures. More importantly, it guarantees that the team's work proceeds through tracking of milestones

and deadlines and execution of contingencies. The companion role, promoting, represents the interactions that change individuals, the team as a whole and team outputs into forms useful to customers. This collaborative stage is responsible for creating new behaviors, new processes, new products and new services.

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In the **Implementing Team Goals Stage**, the team delivers its results to "customers" and decides what resources, if any, to retain for future use and how to use them. This stage embodies a final conflict or tension between promoting and harmonizing.

Production is the ultimate purpose of many, but not all, teams. Output is critical. However, a team that is not time-limited, such as a problem-solving or project team, must decide what information, members, materials, roles and values to develop and retain in order to survive and thrive. Too often, teams—even large teams called businesses—put short-term results and productivity above long-term visions and values. Striking a balance between the promoting and the harmonizing roles can help teams chart more effective, future-oriented strategies.

### Team Leadership

Many, if not most, teams in today's organizations share power and executive functions among various team members. Whether they are labeled a self-directed work group, a project team, a task force or a cross-functional work group, most teams function in a much more participative way than in the past. These new teams are often called "leaderless." But,

are they really?

Team leadership is always an important team dimension and is distributed among the four roles described in this article. A typical leadership behavior of the harmonizing role, for example, is referring to or relying on team values. Assuring wide team participation and avoiding premature closure in exploring issues are examples of leadership behaviors of the exploring role. Some teams informally assign those behaviors to specific members. Others hold individuals or the team as a whole responsible for the various dimensions of leadership.

Team leadership behaviors usually support functions that form boundaries and regulate the flow of information, resources or work between parts of the team or between the team as a whole and the rest of the organization. Each role involves both leader and member behaviors. In every team-building effort, the leadership/ membership equation must be solved in a way that fits the team's culture, purposes and context. For example, in self-directed teams, leadership behaviors are shared or sometimes rotated among members. In crisis teams, leader functions

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are often delegated to a single person to allow rapid decision-making.

### Systems Perspective

If team member behaviors are the engine of team performance and team leadership is the driver, then behaviors that relate the team to the larger system are the road map for reaching goals. Too often, team development is limited exclusively to local, intra-team efforts. Although this is a less complicated, perhaps reassuring approach, it does not adequately capture the essence of team effectiveness in today's organizations. Most current teams must function in and be a major influence on various other components of business systems. These other components include:

- Upper-level management and organizational strategies;
- Internal and external customers;
- Internal and external suppliers and vendors;
- Various business functions (such as finance, marketing, sourcing, etc.); and
- Other teams.

The ultimate function of a team is to provide productive output that not only makes an

impact outside the team, but also outside the organization in the form of products and services. While many team efforts do not have direct external impact, each team should understand how its activities impact on strategic organizational goals. In addition, today's teams must play a much larger part in increasing productivity and quality. New cross-functional product and process design teams, for instance, are promoting astounding reductions in cycle time, parts and design steps by forming a hub of communication throughout entire organizations. Self-directed work teams in many businesses have doubled productivity while improving worker satisfaction. Innovation teams at organizations such as 3M and Corning have been responsible for a significant increase in successful product introductions.

### How to Develop Team Skills

Team development has been an ongoing workplace quest for several decades. Unfortunately, many efforts have failed over time because they lacked focus and commitment to team excellence (See Figure 7).

Systematically applying the team role frame-

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### Figure 7: 10 Reasons for Team Failure

1. Lack of clarity about team vision and mission.
2. Lack of up-front planning and buy-in about team goals and plans and needed resources.
3. Lack of top management sponsorship.
4. Lack of time and resources for team development activities.
5. Competition and undermining from supervisors or middle managers.
6. Lack of deep commitment to team principles.
7. Lack of team skills and limited training opportunities.
8. Lack of persistence in developing team roles and responsiveness to a range of situational demands.
9. Lack of team interactions with other teams, functions, customers, vendors, and the overall organization.
10. Lack of organizational reward systems to grow and develop teams over time.

work can help teams overcome these potential deficits. The model, action statements and behaviors help focus members on activities that increase team competence. In other words, the team framework helps members **fulfill** leadership and membership functions, **respond** effectively to situational demands and **develop** their team spirit, power and skill level.

Team development traditionally has its primary focus **inside the team**. However, in today's organizations, a wider system perspective and overall system support are basic necessities for team success.

All effective teams are anchored by a vision-

often a vision initiated and shared by upper level management-and a mission or set of goals and plans. Possibilities and problems should be central focuses of all visioning or planning sessions. These meetings define the context or situation within which the team must function. In turn, the scale and scope of situational demands drives the priorities and resources required for team development.

This overall process or set of steps is a prerequisite in all team development settings. However, the types of team, the scale of the team-building effort and the nature of the organization determine the best methods of intervention. In most settings, team development is accomplished through a combi-

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nation of training (to motivate members and initiate attitude and behavior change) and ongoing facilitation. Initially, team facilitation is usually done by a disinterested process consultant. Eventually, though, most teams need to become self-designed, self-facilitating and self-changing.

Teams must build-in all instances-their applications skills or tool set (such as meeting management negotiation skills, etc.) and their **team member role competencies** as they move through development steps. Team development efforts should also include clarifying an approach to leadership functions that generates linkages and promotes and fosters relationships to other teams and organizational systems. In larger-scale team-building efforts (self-directed work team programs, for example), consultation must occur at all levels of intervention (intra-team, systemic and cultural) with ongoing "external" or facilitative support over time.

A typical team development path might include steps such as:

- Generating a vision of teamwork that fits with larger organizational strategies;
- Specifying a mission for team functioning

that includes an initial set of goals and plans;

- Assessing current team functioning to define gaps between current reality and excellence;
- Developing team role competence;
- Enhancing the team tool set and techniques;
- Gaining team skills for responding to complex organizational demands;
- Developing linkages with the larger organization; and
- Generating team methods for member development and continuous team learning and change.

Finally, large-scale efforts such as self-directed work force initiatives or cross-functional design team formation must evolve over time-often over many years. First efforts usually promote significant, but all-too-often superficial change. Frequently, organizations subsequently undermine the structural or cultural changes that have been initiated but not yet firmly established. Therefore, large-scale interventions requiring significant changes (such as value shifts, reporting relationship changes, appraisal or compensation systems) must have review and renewal processes built into

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### Summary

We are at a crossroads in American business. Today's and tomorrow's demands for excellence will require new designs for human systems to promote competitive advantage and to deal with the complexities of new technologies. New forms of teamwork, in particular, will be one of the most significant factors in the future success of organizations.

The teams of the future will be more egalitarian and much more integrated with the entire system they serve. As a result, we will need new, more effective ways of forming, assessing and fostering teams that have much more flexibility, depth and breadth of skills. Developing these teams will require more commitment from organizations and individuals alike, but promises to promote a new era in the workplace—one that offers more productivity for organizations and greater responsibility and gratification for employees.