The Wisdom of Teams
Just How Wise are They?

There are tons of books and articles in the literature about teamwork; but whenever anyone in our programs asks for just one book to read about the subject, I usually cite the one that's titled as above *The Wisdom of Teams*, by Katzenback and Smith.[1] What I particularly like about the K&S book, apart from the fact that its based on research among many organizations and their teams, is the straightforward, first-chapter, approach on their findings about what makes teams perform at high standards — "high-performance teams", (HPTs) as we've come to call them.

Bottom line, what these authors say in a nutshell is that on HPTs, two necessary conditions exist:

- Team members have an important and challenging set of tasks to accomplish, and they feel deeply about their commitment to these tasks;

- Team members care about themselves and each other and hold themselves and each other accountable for performance on these tasks.

Although many other sub-conditions exist in the K&S analysis — and the book is a really worthwhile compendium of team success factors -- I believe that, simply stated, the major learnings can be boiled down to the above two.

A recent article in the *Harvard Business Review*[2] takes an opposing approach and asks "Why Teams DON'T Work?" The article is actually an intelligent, probing interview with J. Richard Hackman, a Harvard researcher and expert on teams.[3] After reminding us that teams are not the answer to effectiveness in all forms of organizational work — many teams underperform against standards — Hackman sets out several basic conditions that leaders must fulfill in order to create and maintain effective (read "high-performance" teams). In my view, 3 of these offer the most useful corollaries to the above conditions of Katzenbach and Smith. TEAM International has worked with many executive teams during its almost-30 years of existence — some 200 interventions among over 4,000 participants. In addition, our own experience in this regard calls for some real soul-searching and reality-facing in the process of team building. Here are the corollaries:

1. *Teams must be clearly identified as to members*. What this means is that everyone on the team must know who is on the team and who is not. The leader, and the organization, must make this clear — fuzziness and confusion are <u>not</u> in order, and whoever has the highest — or lowest -- FIRO-B inclusion scores may not determine their appropriateness for team realities, i.e. not everyone who wants to be on the team should be accepted, and some people need to be convinced that they belong on a team, even if they are not.

For example, on one of our interventions, with a large (private) petroleum company in Latin America, we worked with the top management "team", comprised of about 13 members. The evening before the intervention, we convened the entire team for an informal dinner, which was calculated to break the ice on some team issues. We borrowed a technique from Patrick Lencioni's *Five Disfunctions of a Team*[4] and asked around the table about the most difficult things people faced as children. One member held us spellbound as he reviewed the history of his father, who was a military man caught on the wrong side of a presidential coup in Uruguay. However, another member refused to share, saying that "…he had no difficulties as a child." The next morning, in the formal meeting, we found that the latter team member was also resistant to any team development, and even hostile toward spending time analyzing the subject. Worse yet, another member stated his position up-front: He was not interested in any team interaction or collaboration, but just in receiving his salary and retiring at the end of his career, about 5 years hence. As might be imagined, these 2 "members" sandbagged our efforts in team-building, and my advice to the president was that they immediately be removed from the top management team, even though their rank and responsibilities might indicate that they belonged. Of course there were face-saving and political issues to be overcome, and the weeding out of these non-productive members took some time. But the CEO had to face up to the fact that these members, although qualified by position to participate in the top-management team, should not be on the team determining strategy and policy for the company.

2. *Teams need the right number and mix of members in order to function properly.* On the first point, Hackman suggests that an effective team should be fewer than double digits in membership. Although most sources I've read indicate that the high number here would be around 15, my own experience working on teams would lower that estimate to about 11, particularly when participants are highly extraverted and dominant. In our leadership and teamwork development programs, we use 5 - 7 as the ideal number range, only partially because of the video requirement of being able to capture all participants on tape or disk. For decision-making purposes, 5 is frequently taken as the lower limit, in order to have enough, and diverse enough, information sources. What we do know is, that if you want to kill a project, or at least limit severely the optimization of acceptable solutions, then assign 20 or more people to it – for assured failure.

    The mix of participants is a bit more difficult to define: What we are looking for is enough diversity of viewpoint so as not to drift into groupthink. Hackman advocates having a "deviant" on every team, "…by challenging the tendency to want too much homogeneity, which can stifle creativity and learning." Deviants are people who are able to stand back and say, "Wait a minute, why are we doing this?" or "Hold on, let's look at this thing from the opposite direction…"

    Lastly, it seems that permanence on a team is highly desirable, with the possible exception of R&D teams, where there is evidence that these teams need a continual influx of new talent to maintain creativity and freshness of viewpoint. But there is considerable research around the value of experience together in the formation of HPTs. For example, Hackman cites the work done by the National Transportation Safety Board on the effectiveness of commercial flight crews: Fully 73% of incidents occurred on a crew's first day of flying together, before the group had had a chance to learn about their interaction

results. In a NASA study, even fatigued crews who had a history of working together made only half the errors of rested crews who had not flown together before. (Makes you want to check the daily airborne time of crewmembers <u>and</u> their interaction time together when you board a plane, doesn't it?)

3. *The third corollary is around the notion of team coaching.* It is Hackman's contention, and I support it entirely, that teams (not just individuals on the teams) need support in improving their team processes. In my experience, the notion of "team coaching" is relatively unexplored; and I remember one discussion among coaches of an executive banking group where the coaches had a hard time defining what the concept meant. Clearly, it is different from individual coaching, which attempts to maximize the personal output of individual executives. But what we know now is that a considerable portion of that output is determined by the executives' ability to marshall resources around him/herself, and to tap into group synergy in order to achieve individual excellence. We find that videorecording group processes helps people understand the impact they have on other team-members and focus on behavioral trigger points that improve group performance and subtract from it. And even skilled team-players are frequently blinded by their focus on the task, and ignorance of what is happening to the team dynamic along the way.

   One recommendation in this regard is to use skilled facilitators (external or internal) to observe team processes and to deftly guide the interaction along a positive path. Another is to rotate the assignment of facilitators around the group and require that he/she focus <u>only</u> on the process, not the content of the interactions. A third is to use the "fly-on-the-wall" technique, where a trained observer views the interaction and does not comment until later, perhaps individually with the leader or other members so as to avoid embarrassment.

I was careful above to mention the *necessary* conditions for HPTs, and moving further into the *sufficient* conditions requires some careful thought. As I think (and read) about this, I come to the conclusion that sufficiency (in the mathematical sense) would mean that we had covered all the bases in our research and in our practice, so that we really know <u>all</u> the pitfalls that can befall HPTs. That's not a likely outcome, in my view. However, my sense is that if we cover all the conditions mentioned in this article, both those of K&S and Hackman , we will come very close to being able to maximize the likelihood that we will achieve full and plentiful synergy with our working groups.

However, there is one condition from the Hackman list that I have omitted above – *Teams need a supportive organization.* As Hackman puts it: "The organizational context – including the reward system, the human resource system, and the information system – must facilitate teamwork."

My concern, indeed, is that the organizational climate/culture that surrounds the HPT, especially other interdependent teams who fall way short of synergy, may undermine its effectiveness. (See previous article on our website "So You Want Your People to Collaborate".) There are also other disrupting factors that can go beyond the systems that Hackman mentions. For example: leadership in the organization may radically change direction, so that the goals and systems around which teams are organized are suddenly upended. Or some outside force, such as political or economic upheaval, may significantly reduce the confidence of HPT members and their abilities to work together, in spite of internal disposition and dedication around the facilitating conditions and principles described above. It is unfortunate that a good example of the

latter disrupting influences may be taking place in the crisis we are facing in 2009, when there is a vastly reduced ability to shore up team resources and systems, with flattened budgets that crush and dismember investments in building our team capabilities and confidence.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES:

[1] Jon Katzenback & Douglas Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*; Harvard Business School Press/HarperCollins Publishers; New York, ©1993, 1994.

[2] J.Richard Hackman (Diane Coutu), "Why Teams DON'T Work", *Harvard Business Review*, May 2009.

[3] _____ *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances*, Harvard Business School Press; Boston, 2002

[4] Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, ©2002.