



Why Doesn't Team Development Always Work?

The Question

With so much attention to the amount of money being spent on executive coaching recently, we can easily lose sight of the huge investments that have been and continue to be made in team building and team development. From the boardroom to the operations centre, team building is standard fare, and has been for years. The benefits of effective team play and collaboration are well validated which is often the root of the aspiration. In my corporate days as a specialist in organisation and individual development, I often wondered: "With all the presumed corporate commitment, why are our team interventions seldom sustainable?" We did, of course, have answers such as: "leaders change out", "team membership changes", "the objectives change" etc. These all have an impact on team development, but deep down, I suspected something else was going on.

An Answer

There is a more fundamental answer to this question of sustainability, and a solution, but the solution is not an easy one for many organisations. How do you identify the organisations that need the most work? Here's a clue. Organisations that have "Good Team Player" in their promoted competency and values sets are likely having challenges in building a team culture. It's the ones who have team play without needing to talk about it that have already crossed a bridge. So what is that bridge?

Development Psychology

First, a little more background. The roots of the problem are found in the world of developmental psychology. The notion of "ages and stages" is a popular concept. Taking this notion seriously for the purposes of organisation development has some very interesting implications, as we shall see.

There are a few generally agreed principles embedded in development theory that it might be helpful to point:

- Development occurs in stages, whether looking at individuals or groups. In each stage we consolidate, stabilise, and then move toward a higher stage.
- Each stage incorporates more capability. For example, advances in our thinking ability allow us to deal with increasingly complex problems.
- There is a general rhythm of stages moving from self-centred to other-centred on a recurring basis. With an overall movement from self to others, sometimes referred to as the movement from "I" to "We" to "They" and "It".

- Human beings, in general and across cultures, follow a similar path of development over time.
- There is a natural trajectory, compelling us toward further development.
- There are several “streams” of development, particularly at the individual level, which interact with each other. A few examples include: physical, cognitive, psychological, moral, social and spiritual.
- Development continues on through adulthood and the years beyond.
- All development occurs in a context (family, school, community, organisation etc.) and that context either supports developmental growth or hinders it. An individual in isolation or a group without external interaction tends to develop slowly if at all.

Note: These principles come from amalgamating the thinking of a range of developmental psychologists including Robert Kegan and Lawrence Kohlberg of Harvard, Jean Piaget, the famous cognitive development specialist, Carol Gilligan who takes a feminist view of development and a host of others.

Application to Organisations

So, here comes something that we don’t often think about, and this is critical for the team development problem. If the above principles are true for individuals, and there is more than enough research to indicate that these ideas are quite valid, then they must be true for collections of individuals, who have organised into a system. In our case, this means organisations and primarily, business organisations.

While we are quite familiar with the development stages of children (consider the labels “helpless infant”, “terrible twos”, “adolescence” and “young adulthood”) We have this general notion that it all stops at adulthood. We apply the same thinking to organisations, assuming they go through cycles but not thinking of them as developing entities themselves. For this discussion, let’s take young adulthood as our starting point. In terms of the “self and other” rhythm I noted earlier, young adulthood has us back to focusing on self.

Most of us join organisations at that young adult stage. The important thing is that, for the majority, we join to meet “our own needs”. The management theorist Henry Mintzberg pointed this out a number of years ago. Have you ever worked with new hi-potential recruits? They are usually not about helping each other look better! They are best suited as “individual performers” in their early years. Watching them in team exercises is always a treat. Not that they can’t play in a team, sports for example, but they are generally playing for their own gain. Nothing wrong with that, it’s the stage they are in. For example in early assessment exercises, they will work at being “the best” team player. Not just a little irony there. Over our life in the organisation, our natural tendency is to develop through a set of stages summarized as:

- “I” - Our focus, even when working on a team is to get our work done, get what we need and compete for a favourable position. We want to join an organisation that looks good on the resume. “Individual performer” is a label that suits us well here.
- “We” - The team, develops an importance in and of itself. We start to feel a connection with the identity of the organisation. In later part of this stage, we understand the deeper function of networks, connecting several we’s into a larger system with greater functionality.
- “They” - Our interest in others goes beyond the team at first, appreciating other functions for example then reaches out beyond the organisation to those outside it. We become more and more aware of the impact we are having on the community

and choose to do something about it. Making more than a financial or physical contribution becomes important.

- “It” – We begin to see very large systems and how we, and our organisation are simply a part of it. Taking things like the Kyoto Protocol seriously starts to show up in our thinking.

In a related view, Peter Robertson, in “Always Change a Winning Team”, describes a complexity/maturity scale that incorporates moving individuals and teams from an “I” perspective to a “We” perspective at higher levels.

Now let’s look at the organisation’s development. Organisations, particularly when they start from an entrepreneurial root, are born as self-focused. They too, may go through various stages of development yet as they reach this “young adulthood” stage, they are back to being about themselves. They have an identity and purpose and stick to it. So, whether they stay locked in at the early self-focused stage or move to the adult stage, both are focused on self. If you don’t believe this, get involved in helping sort out joint venture or alliance problems. As a matter of fact, one of the key factors that leads to mistrust in joint ventures is “perceived self-interest” on the part of the other partner. Only the very elevated, developmentally that is, organisations work alliances exceptionally well. If you look closely at an organisation you can get a sense for where they sit. Let me give you a short cut for categorising individual and organisation stages taking off from the adult:

- The “I” Stage: Organisations who exist only for their own purposes (this includes the shareholders of that organisation as they are part of the system of that organisation). They wind up in anti-trust suits, are very difficult joint venture partners and often have very well paid executive teams. This does not mean they are not successful! They might be very good at what they do. How they do it may not be sustainable.
- The “We” Stage: These organisations show a real, not just pretend concern for their employees and business partners. The “we” includes a broader picture of who is involved in their success and that all in that circle need to be not only looked after but listened to.
- The “They” Stage: These organisations realize they are social entities with a lot of impact. “They” includes customers, communities in which they operate other players in the industry or related industries.
- The “It” Stage: Organisations operating at this level see the whole system they are operating in and while incorporating the interests of “We” and “They” realize they have a relationship with the environment and the whole system. Pretty advanced stuff. This does not mean in any way they have lost sight of the organisations purpose. What they have sight of is just much bigger.

At a macro level, speaking of countries as systems, we see a movement from nationalism – “only our nation counts”, through pan-nationalism – “we and those next to us count” on through to trans-nationalism – “all nations count”.

If an organisation has never moved beyond the “I” stage to a true “We”, “They” or “It” stage, how can we expect “We” focused activities like team building or team development to be sustainable. Another example, outside of team building which makes this point between and “I” or a “We” organisation versus one the “They” stage is the high number of failed social responsibility programmes. An organisation at an “I” stage or one at the “We” stage that does not include the community in the “We”, will set up social responsibility programmes to reach targets and be “seen” as a good citizen. This is very similar to the young recruit who competes to be seen as the best team player. The problem is, social responsibility

programmes that come from this perspective are seldom sustainable. Once the target is met, or the objective is achieved the higher purpose that was available easily can be lost.

Note: For some in-depth reading on the developmental stages and levels of large systems, like societies. You might want to do some read some of Don Edward Beck's work on *Spiral Dynamics* via a book of the same title. Ken Wilber, founder of the Integral Institute, brings an integrated picture of individual and organisation development level is *A Brief Theory of Everything*.

The Trap

So, here's the trap, we have an organisation that is at an individually focused stage, recruiting mostly individuals who are at that stage as well. The whole system is now individually driven. How many organisations that promote team play, implement individual performance based ratings and pay? We know there is a conflict when doing this but can't seem to get the system to shift to a fully team based pay concept. That is because the system bias in these organisations is "individual focus". Executive pay schemes that seem to go off track are other indicators of individual focus.

Development Context

Something I haven't mentioned yet, that we need to bring into the formula, is how context plays in. An individual will have difficulty developing beyond the level of the context that he or she finds themselves in. (Note: Exceptions to that rule do occur but how that happens is the subject of another conversation). For example, children raised by parents who have not moved beyond and individually focused stage, will likely wide up appearing selfish and self centred. This happens even though they will have had a natural tendency at certain stages to become more "other" centred. In a individually focused family context, children will not be encouraged to be "other centred" when it naturally occurs to them, as children, to be that way. Remember that these stages naturally "want to emerge". Other families, with parents at a "We" or "They" encourage their children to trust and care for their friends or siblings when they see the slightest inclination in that direction. Over time, the primary context changes and moves through school, community, university and our employing organisation.

Organisations are the developmental context most of us find ourselves in. I have often worked with individuals who are frustrated because the organisation isn't able, for some reason, to provide them with the next level of development they are seeking. Sometimes it's just their immediate work setting or boss at issue. Often however, they encounter the same problem throughout the system, eventually leading them to a development crisis: A powerful desire to grow but no space or support to develop further.

Back to the Team Problem

Now we can apply all of this to the original problem of why team development efforts, in some organisations, don't stick, don't seem sustainable. If you are in an organisation that is in an individually focused stage, and the majority of organisations still are, then the system with its processes, rewarded behaviours and capabilities will not sustain a team focus. It might have intentions to do this because intellect, experience and a host of business books and journal articles tell us it is a good thing. The problem is it is not in, to use a current phrase, the organisations "DNA".

A Change in Approach

We have been trying to solve this problem by doing better, more creative, more intensive team development programmes. We have placed “Teamwork” in corporate values statements and have required “Team Player” in our competency frameworks. We have a host of excellent tools for measuring our team styles and behaviours. These are all good things, but they are not addressing the deeper development issue for the organisation. The following is a place to start:

- The beginning is to understand this deeper development picture for organisations and individuals.
- Then to acknowledge where the organisation stage or bias is at the present (a real and private look, not the one used for the annual report).
- Having acknowledged and understood the present, leadership can set a valid aspiration for where they would next like to take the organisation developmentally.
- The strengths we have in setting business direction and organisation design can then be used to transform the organisation toward its next stages, each characterised by different levels of insight.
- Team building, as an activity, becomes the tool for moving individuals to a place that is already embedded in the culture.

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