

Teamwork is an Unnatural Act **By Relly Nadler, Psy.D.**

Teamwork is very popular today in organizations, but it is an unnatural act that takes a strategy, discipline and practice. Most organizations talk about teamwork and put a group of workers together and say “you are a team now”. Duly formed the team is marched out onto the field to succeed or fail.

In a performance group or on a sports team, over 90% of the participants time is spent practicing- standardizing their routines or processes, identifying roles and responsibilities, improving communication effectiveness, working on their coordination, alignment or teamwork. The focus is learning from mistakes until they are ready to perform for the audience or fans.

It is a documented fact that, in the corporate world, less than 5% of an individual’s time is devoted to off-line learning. In fact nearly all the learning in organization happens after the fact and in front of customers, where mistakes are costly to organizations reputation and bottom line and the individual’s career development. (Nadler, 2006)

In today’s organizational environment, it is unnatural for teams and individuals to take the same time which athletes, performers and teams do to practice their skills and improve their weaknesses. If organizations are to survive and thrive in the future they must use the creativity and potential of their people at all levels.

There are ten key ingredients, which organizations must incorporate into their work to master the use of teams. Each of these efforts must counteract what is outdated, easy and natural. Actions for leaders to take to facilitate these team ingredients are included.

Team ingredients

1. Shared vision – What is natural is to have a blurry vision of where the organization is going. The vision is not communicated enough or shared throughout the organization.

What is unnatural yet necessary is to create an inspiring vision for the future that is clear and informs all throughout the organization what the future holds and their role in it. It is shared because it is understood and repeated in numerous ways.

Leaders usually do share the vision but usually not enough or in multiple methods.

Actions: Leaders have to be deliberate and have a plan on how to communicate the vision

- Leaders need to share the vision and tie it into the daily tasks every day in their conversations. Can they commit to tie it in four times a day? (Kotter, 1996)
 - People need to be clear what needs to be done and why.
 - Leaders have to include what is in it for the employees, use the word “because”.
 - Leaders need to include others for comments, clarifications or additions. This way they get others “fingerprints” are on it.
 - Leaders need to remember involvement = commitment.
- 2. Trust among members-** What is natural is to rely on your self or your department and not expect much from others.
What is unnatural yet necessary, is to develop an interdependency on others characterized by high trust and risk taking.
Actions: Leaders develop trust by trusting their people.
- Leaders develop trust by being vulnerable and admitting their mistakes.
 - Leaders make and keep small promises.
 - Leaders set high expectations for their team and encourage risk taking and direct feedback.
- 3. Established expectations and guidelines** – What is natural is to assume that co-workers are on the same page and that they understand the desired results.
What is unnatural yet necessary is to be very deliberate in clarifying reciprocal expectations and establish guidelines fro how to work together effectively.
Actions: To be a team the individuals need to co-create expectations for themselves and feel their input was heard and valued.
- Leaders and the team need to decide on how they are going make decisions, i.e. majority, minority a “tell” or content expert, unanimous or consensus.
 - Expectations need to be clarified, leader to the team, team to the leader and team of each other.
 - Meeting and team guidelines are established that flow out of the expectations, such as “One conversation at a time,” “Stay focused”, and “Defer judgment.”
- 4. Communication skill and conflict resolution** – What is natural is to avoid conflict, jump to rash conclusions and not communicate what you are thinking.
What is unnatural yet necessary is to make your thinking visible, fill in the “white space” for people, identify your assumptions and resolve conflicts.
Actions: The team needs to have specific tools to communicate; otherwise the strongest and most senior voice wins out.
- Part of the expectations should involve communication guidelines
 - Most teams need some kind of skill training for communication, like how to listen better, inquiry versus advocacy, summarizing what was said, ladder of inference, left hand column.

- Leaders can assign a devil's advocate role to enliven the conversations and protect against "group think."

5. **Systems thinking**-What is natural is to focus on our own team to the exclusion of the big team across departmental boundaries. It is easy to think of your team's action have limited impact on others across the organization.

What is unnatural yet necessary is to see how departmental actions affect and impact each other. Customers, co-workers, vendors and family are intertwined as stakeholders and can unintended consequences upon each other.

Actions: A leader can help the team look at the big picture

- Leaders can ensure all sides of a situation are looked at, by assigning advocate roles in the conversation for customers, employees, managers and vendors.
- Leaders can ask the team for the possible unintended consequences before rushing to decisions.
- Leaders help counteract organizational learning disabilities such as "I am my position" and "the enemy is out there." (Senge, 1990)

6. **Personal leadership**- What is natural is to stay in your comfort zone and only take risks that you are assured of success.

What is unnatural yet necessary is to take risks that are consistent with your values and become a change leader stretching and encouraging others in spite of your own doubts and fears.

Actions: The team is the playing field for the leader to try out their Emotional Intelligence skills and get feedback on their performance.

- Leaders need to have a developed point of view of their leadership style and know the destination of where they want people to go.
- Leaders need to be aware of the different styles and preferences of their team and vary their style to meet and challenge the individual.
- Leaders can be role models for development by sharing with their team, what are their current areas of focus for development and ask for support and feedback from the team.
- The leader wears many hats on the team and has to know which hat to wear when. Key roles are as an initiator, coach, model, facilitator and negotiator
- Leaders are the glue in the team, reading individuals and the group's emotional states and being able to help regulate it by attention, humor or empathy.

7. **Appreciation of differences**- What is natural is to value team members with similar backgrounds and opinions.

What is unnatural yet necessary is to embrace differences and creative tensions to generate better solutions and raise the "Team IQ."

Actions: The leader is powerful role model to the team for how to deal with differences.

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Emotional Intelligence: Keys to Great Leadership

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- Leaders need to embrace differences as they lead to breakthrough ideas. In studies on creativity and innovation holding opposite and contrary ideas long enough leads to breakthrough ideas. IDEO one of the leading design firms encourages “wild ideas” and “build on other ideas” as some of their guidelines.
- Leaders can help by encouraging the team to stay with the ambiguity, creative tension and dialogue as long as possible versus rushing to a decision.
- The team IQ is a great metric for the group to evaluate themselves on. The IQ should be higher than the IQ of any one individual.
- The differences need to be understood and integrated into new innovations.

8. Accountability and consequences – What is natural is to be disappointed with the efforts of others on your team, but never hold anyone accountable for the missed “deliverables.”

What is unnatural yet necessary is to discuss accountabilities and consequences upfront, before a project gets underway and review them throughout the project.

Actions: Leaders provide the road map for the team to deal with obstacles before they arise.

- Leaders help individual define their roles and responsibilities and make sure everyone is clear about them.
- Defining and clarifying what success looks like will help with clarity and standards for the team.
- Having a conversation about accountabilities and consequences as part of the team’s formation will help eliminate problems later.

9. Ongoing learning and recognition- What is natural is to complete a task, take a sigh of relief, possibly congratulate each other and move on to the next item on the “to do list.”

What is unnatural yet necessary is to take some reflection time to discover what worked to be used again, learn what not to do next time, decide who needs to know this information, disseminate it, and design formal and informal celebrations for the win.

Actions: Leaders are looking for every opportunity to learn and improve.

- Holding lessons learned sessions, will help leaders and their teams to crystallize learning and spread the news to appropriate people.
- Recognizing individual’s efforts and contributions increases discretionary effort and raise morale.
- Giving timely and specific feedback keeps performance focused.
- Leaders take time to develop their team and their team processes.

10. Mentoring others – What is natural is to get caught up with urgent crises of the day and do little mentoring or training of key employees or colleagues.

What is unnatural yet necessary is to take time to train and mentor others to be better performers. Career development, learning and succession planning, keeps skills and motivation high on the team.

Actions: Leaders help others enhance their strengths and develop plans to improve their weaknesses.

- Leaders hold one on one meetings with their direct reports to coach and mentor them.
- Leaders help their team share core competencies by cross training.
- Leaders are sharing their knowledge and developing their successors.

These key ingredients make up the strategy for developing high performing teams. Leaders have specific actions to help their team develop. Each ingredient needs to become a discipline that gets practiced, reinforced and refined. Only then will the unnatural become a habit and the foundation for superior teamwork.

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