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Team Management Starts by Defining the Team

So, you're interested in team management. But are you and your people a "group" or a "team"? Let's begin by discussing what a team is. Is it the same thing as a committee? Can a group of 30 ever become a team? Must a team have a leader? These questions are typical of those raised when a group looks at the meaning of a team.

One way to define a team is to differentiate it from a committee. A team by definition is a group of three to twelve people with the following characteristics:

- **Joint accountability.** All team members must have more reasons to cooperate within their group than they do with persons or groups from outside. This means they are within a defined boundary and all work for a common person or unit.
- **Common goals.** The team must have a common goal and purpose, work to be done, a convening activity.
- **Required interdependence.** The goal requires some kind of interdependent action in its attainment; no one individual can drive team goals by himself.

When all these characteristics are present, your work conditions require a team instead of a committee. A committee is a group of individuals whose primary pursuit is to satisfy their own needs ahead of those of the group. In such cases, the group meets to bargain and trade using techniques such as feigning ignorance, concealing one's true interests, overstating, lying, and generally doing whatever is necessary to win the majority's support. Committees make decisions by voting.

Not all teams look the same. This is especially obvious in the world of sports. A skating or gymnastics team, for example, is widely different from a football team.

This is also true in the world of work where we have teams of unique focus, size and shape. As you'll see, one important criterion in determining the best way to lead a group is rooted in the type of team you have.

A typology of teams model that characterizes various kinds of athletic teams is a useful way to start the process of determining the best decision-making and leadership approach. Athletic teams can be classified as either 'co-acting' like golf or track teams, or 'interacting' like football and volleyball teams. The vertical axis of the matrix (see box below) is used to plot the level of task differentiation; the horizontal axis evaluates the level of task integration.

		Team Typology Matrix	
		Co-Acting Teams	Interacting Teams
Task Differentiation	HIGH (each is unique)	Track	Football
	LOW (all are alike)	Golf	Volleyball
		LOW (score separately)	HIGH (score together)
		Task Integration	

Where does your team fit in?

Where is your team on the matrix? Are you a “track” team with multiple roles; or is your group a “volleyball” team where you must all work together in order to score?

For an example of a track team in the world of work consider a university, where many different specialists are employed. A faculty of scientists, engineers, physicists and economists is not a team in the traditional sense because performance is scored individually.

The same is true for a track team. The group is comprised of a host of specialists whose personal scores are not dependent upon the scores of other individuals. The pole-vaulter may or may not reach his goals, but this doesn't affect the distance runners' times. They are independently scored and evaluated and so have little or no need for consensus group decisions.

But if our university faculty were charged with developing a strategic plan for beating a common enemy, say a competing university, then the committee chairman could become a coach, challenging and guiding the group as though it were a team.

In contrast, a football style team meets conditions that require a highly differentiated yet highly integrated team. Football is a complex sport with each team made up of a half a dozen sub-teams: kicking, kick return, offensive and defensive, to name a few. The team leader must be a coach of sub-coaches, as much a manager as a leader.

A golf team, however, consists of similar-looking and like skilled people who all perform the same task and who do not work together. The analogy in the world of work is a company of route salesmen, each with a separate geographical territory. They perform identical tasks, and the work of one has virtually no effect on the others.

A useful comparison with volleyball exists in the medical setting—for example, a group of

registered nurses at a hospital. They are virtually interchangeable. Their licensing is designed to ensure uniformity, and the cross-shift handoff is smooth since all the nurses have common skills. As in volleyball, everyone performs the same basic functions and so can be moved about from position to position.

Hang together or hang separately

With athletic teams, the members' skill in acting like a team is crucial to success. The degree of cohesiveness among highly interactive teams (volleyball, soccer) correlates with winning. The feelings of members about their peers, factors such as morale and cohesion, even momentum, have grave importance to highly interdependent teams.

This is also true in the world of work. Simply forming a group and putting it to work is like using a track-coach technique with a football team. You must consciously design events that improve the team's sense of oneness, cohesion, and commitment to the common goal.

So the structure of a team makes all the difference in the world when it comes to how you lead your group. I have never been invited to do team-building with golf or track teams, but rest assured there are some very effective coaches in these sports who build a team feeling and common goals. The managers of these units work one on one and make decisions depending upon individual need.

However, the 'football' and 'volleyball' categories are interdependent and must perform as one unit. Leaders of highly interdependent teams, whether in the field of athletics or the world of work, face a daunting challenge: the members of their teams have as much pressure to move apart as they have to work together. The more senior a company's management team, the greater the pressures to lead a group that by its nature is complex and differentiated.

I find it helpful for team leaders to be able to identify the type of team they're leading and to define the characteristics that shape their group. Locate your team on the team typology matrix by placing an "O" in the area of the matrix most representative of your situation. What type of team are you? Share your ideas with others on your team, asking:

- What are our common goals?
- What do we need from each other in order to meet the goals?
- What can I do to make my service to you even better?

Leading and managing groups to act more like teams begins when you define common goals, require interdependence to meet goals, and establish joint accountability in member roles. In doing so you will be more effectively minding your business. ■

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