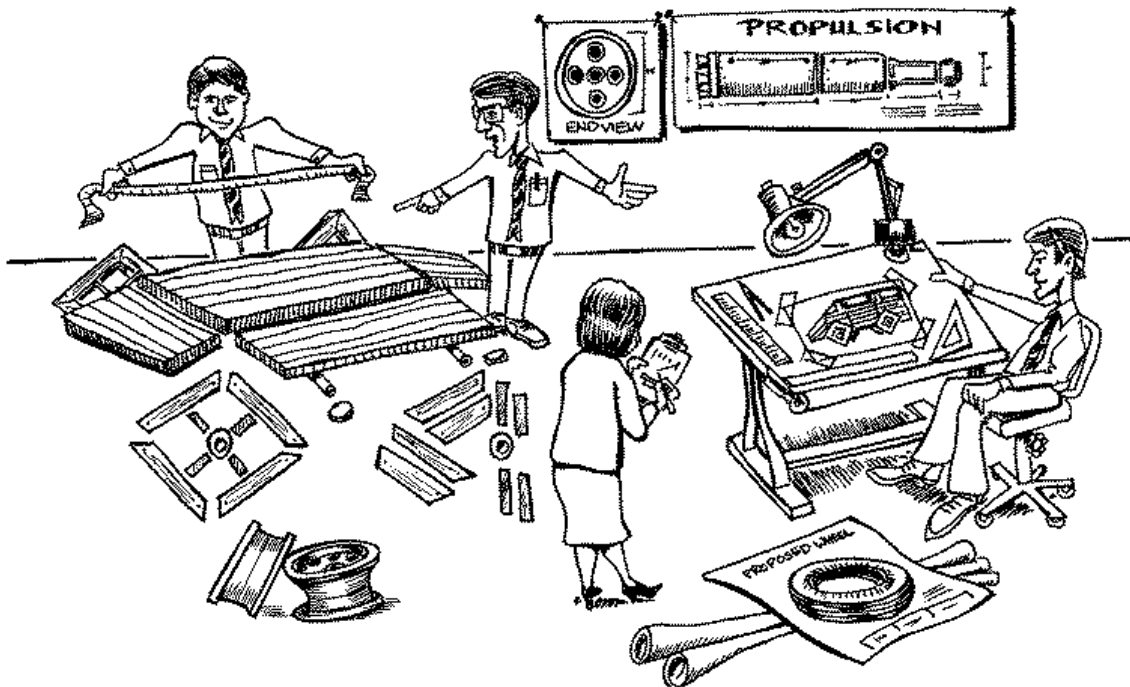


## X-Teams and Improving Team Performance

Maximum team effectiveness comes from aligning people to work together on shared common goals and providing them with the information and resources to get things done. And today's organizational complexities generally mean that only people working together and across departments will generate optimal results on critical improvement issues. Complexity makes it very difficult for even highly effective leaders to motivate people and effectively implement improvements with team involvement. It takes team perspective and alignment to get things done in most cases.



Working together to put new ideas into place and test how things really work. All of us know more than any of us and this is a great time to step back from the wagon to look for new ideas. Don't just do something, stand there and take an analytical look for new ideas and opportunities across the organization.

Developing strong and effective teams and generating focus on key issues and opportunities can have extensive positive impacts of many kinds and there are compelling reasons to use teams to implement improvements. And while improvement goals often seem clear at the top, those same goals are often muddled in the middle and fuzzy at the bottom back of most organizations.

In the Dilbert Principals, Scott Adams wrote:

**A Mission Statement is defined as “a long awkward sentence that demonstrates management’s inability to think clearly.”**

**All good companies have one.**

I remember an old story about Visions and Implementation:

## In the Beginning was *The Vision*

And then came the Assumptions, but the Assumptions were without Form and the Vision without substance. And Darkness was upon the faces of the Workers as they Spoke amongst themselves, saying:

*“It is a Crock of Crap, and it Stinketh.”*

And the Workers went to their Supervisors and Sayeth unto them:

*“It is a Pail of Dung, and none may abide the Odor thereof.”*

And Supervisors went to Managers and sayeth unto them:

*“It is a Container of Excrement, and it is very Strong, such that none may abide it.”*

And Managers went to Directors and sayeth unto them:

*“It is a vessel of Fertilizer, and none may abide its Strength.”*

And Directors went to Vice Presidents and sayeth:

*“It contains that which aids plant Growth, and it is very Strong.”*

And Vice Presidents went to Executives and sayeth unto them:

*“It promoteth Growth, and it is very Powerful.”*

And the Executives went to the President, and sayeth unto her:

*“This powerful new Vision will actively promote the Growth and Efficiency of our departments and the company overall.”*

And the President looked upon the Vision and saw it was good.

And the Vision became The Reality.

Author unknown

(note: You can get a nice copy of the above by clicking [on this link](#))

A clear sense of vision and purpose is essential, and clear communications are critical in getting things started. But there is also a need to allow at least some of the participants to be hands-on kind of people who know specifically what is thumping and bumping along. In many organizations, there are top-down directives that may limit how the teams operate or that direct them

toward very specific outcomes. Isolation from the actual work being done does not lead to effective solutions for most workplace problems.

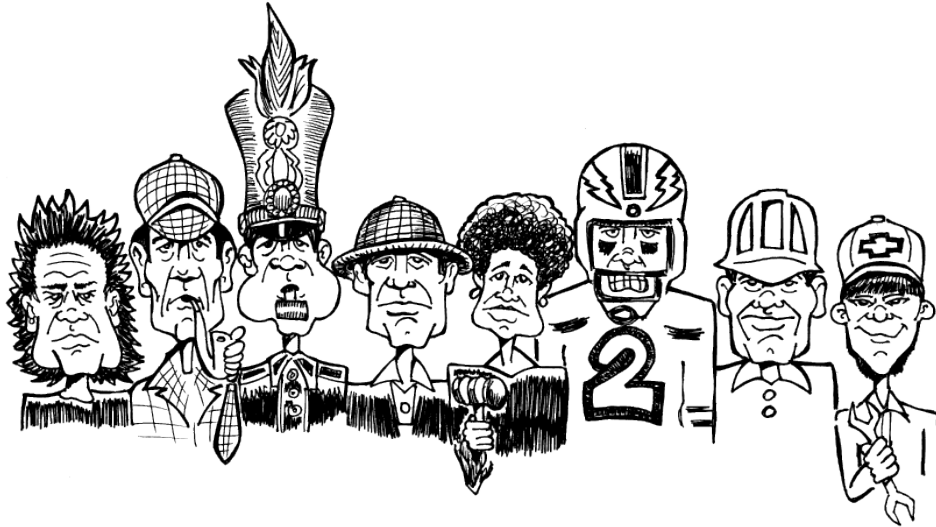
As John LeCarre once clearly said,

***“A desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world.”***

One key for optimizing effectiveness is to understand the choices and possibilities that exist for the initiative. The choices teammates make need to align well with the overall context of their business as well as the specific issue(s) on which they are focused. But generating such a team focus is problematic in many organizations. There is a lot of literature and anecdotal experiences that focus on problems with teams and teamwork. For many, the words “cross-functional teamwork” or “interdepartmental collaboration” are oxymorons – words that do not fit together like “jumbo shrimp” or “live recording.”

An article in the International Management Review back in the 1990s still stands out for me. It was entitled, “The Trouble with Teams.” In it, Jack Gordon takes the position that, “Teams may be the antidote to bureaucracy, but do we really know the antidotes for wayward teams?” There are proven benefits for organizations to use teams and teamwork to identify and implement ideas for improvement but also problems with delegating authority to teams. Identifying effective team leaders and giving them the tools they need is one of the critical ones. He expands on the common issues most organizations using teams discover and offers some logical solutions and perspective on ideas and options for maximizing impact.

Part of this difficulty with teamwork reflects the changing business environment. In the good old days before the year 2000, being a good teammate meant being able to work with others because the focus was on “team dynamics.” Billions of dollars were spent on the personality inventories (MBTI, DISC and hundreds of similar tools) because organizations believed that a focus on The Team was where the energy needed to be spent and individuals would improve if they simply knew more about themselves and each other. Workplaces became more diverse and Consensus decision-making, group dynamics, styles and preferences were what was taught and hopefully learned.



*Different folks need different strokes. And all of us know more than any of us.*

But things changed. Working together as a team no longer meant co-location and collegial relations. Team *player* became a less important value than team *contributor* and rapid change became the norm. More and more, initiatives like Lean Manufacturing, value-chain improvements and globalization meant that these old successful team-based approaches no longer applied. There was more pressure for performance and productivity. Technology allowed for more dispersion of people while organizations downsized. Older employees with a breadth of experience, knowledge and perspective retired. And, more significant payoffs were found with larger multi-departmental, inter-organizational or supply-chain kinds of cross-functional improvements.

Many of the low hanging fruit have already been plucked from the branches as the focus on efficiencies with initiatives like quality improvement and lean manufacturing made dynamic inroads and taught tools and approaches to different kinds of improvement initiatives. At the same time, computers caused work to become more dynamic and complex and speed gained leverage. Rapid change became the norm and individual and organizational survival was a real issue. And these factors came to a head to stall a great deal of improvement today.

Ancona and Bresman's X-Teams book (2007) offers some excellent insights into why some teams perform at very high levels and why others fail to generate desired results. Essentially, the authors believe that teams that focus more externally get better and faster information and operate more effectively than teams internally focused, a belief that is at odds with how most teams in the past were trained and supported.

The book offers many examples of high team performance and its link to issues of communications, organizational improvement and leadership development. It takes a straightforward approach to suggesting how a refocusing of effort from within the team members to a more collaborative and broader organizational focus can deliver higher impacts.

Simply stated, the “X” in the X-team concept means being **externally** oriented, with people working both inside and outside the boundaries. *“While managing internally is necessary, it is managing externally that enables teams to lead, innovate, and succeed in a rapidly changing environment.”* This is the differentiating driving force for maximum success.

An X-team finds it necessary to go outside the team to create effective goals, plans and designs. The team must have high levels of such *external focus as opposed to simply a focus on the people and the processes*. That focus can be on the customer and their expectations, for example, with the realization that these expectations and needs are often changing continuously. A team not focused broadly will find it working on outputs that may not be as relevant or impactful for the organization over time. So, X-teams combine productive external activity with *extreme execution* within the team, developing processes that enable a high degree of coordination and effective execution. Some examples used were meetings and presentations to and discussions with senior managers of their organization, combined with feedback to all members of the team about reactions and necessary changes. Not continually looking for such support was detrimental to outcomes.

Managing change was a primary success factor; business situations would change and the team would need to change with it seamlessly and quickly, a characteristic of effectiveness. This was not the case with a lot of internally-focused teams who never saw the handwriting on the wall. So, a major quality of the X-teams was that they were also *flexible* in their approach, engaging in *exploration, exploitation* of talents and information, and *exportation* where they transferred their learning and experiences to other teams. *(Yes, the authors did get crazy with their Xs!).*

Together, these three elements of external focus and activity, extreme execution and flexibility form the principles by which such teams guide themselves – and they do take a significant amount of autonomy in how they approach and attain their desired outcomes. The key here is recognizing that

the continued external focus and exploration of the environment were important for the teams to adjust and succeed.

Of course, three “X-factors” provide the structure and support such teams need to operate effectively. These include *extensive* ties to useful outsiders, *expandable* resources of people and information (involved as needed by the core team) and *exchangeable* membership--the ability to add new people who come into and who leave the team as warranted by the situation. The authors liken the effective teams to externally focused operational groups who work together cross boundaries and get access to the people and resources they need to be successful.

So, how does an organization generate higher levels of awareness of these issues and opportunities for improvement and generate changes in focus and more successful implementation? A first step is to create awareness of these issues and opportunities and to give teams a chance to discuss and focus on strategies and tactics to focus more externally. We should also know that simply talking about these issues will not lead to much change and improvement, while a more experiential, active-learning approach offers more impact.

My personal belief, backed up by a lot of testimonials from others, is that our interactive team building simulation, *The Search for The Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine*, offers many benefits to an organization looking to readily impact people and generate the motivation needed for workplace improvement. This is PMC's flagship team development exercise that focuses on inter-team collaboration and the optimization of results, a game generating a fun and unique fast-paced learning environment that allows direct linkage of game behaviors back to the issue of optimizing inter-organizational results.

In *Dutchman*, the Expedition Leader charters each team with the goal of managing resources and time to, “*Mine as much Gold as we can.*” Teams are given a clear goal with a measurable outcome and a deadline for getting this project accomplished. Teams can access additional information but this requires them to not take immediate action but to first plan the journey – we find that the impetus to get started generally overweighs the (charter) of gathering information external to the team. Teams can talk to other teams that have additional information, but the reality is that teams with this information may choose not to share it freely, keeping it for their own competitive advantage.

The participants should view leadership, in any improvement initiative, as supportive, but this is often not the case. In the **Dutchman** exercise, that message is repeated within the instructions and the behaviors of the delivery team are congruent with support and help. ***“The role of the Expedition Leader is to help teams be successful and maximize ROI”*** (return on investment).

Observation of team behavior however shows a consistent tendency for the teams to behave independently of outside help, often to actively exclude knowledgeable others in their planning and execution. Even though these people can provide additional perspective as well as other resources of information and value, teams tend to go into a *“My Team, My Team, My Team”* mode of operation – one at odds with the X-Teams findings of continually looking outside the team for information and resources. Teams appear to want to avoid any semblance of “Command and Control” from the outside, and thus put the Expedition Leadership people at arms length rather than including them in the team activity. This distributed leadership requires some additional dialog and possible realignment caused by new information and thus might appear to be in conflict with what the team already knows and wants to do, therefore, causing that outsider to be rejected, even when they can add great value to the task.

Good teams can fail when they are not aware of all the information available and when they reject the support offered by or available from outsiders to their team. *“My Team, My Team, My Team”* is a powerful motivator of peer support, teamwork, good performance and member camaraderie, but it is *not* the strategy that high-performing teams need to survive and prosper in today’s rapidly changing performance-based landscape.

The key here is that the debriefing activity will focus the discussion on the behavior of the teams, behaviors that are often self-limiting and non-optimizing in the context of overall group effectiveness. Teams make choices in narrow ways and their awareness of the impact of focusing on collaboration is often overshadowed by the energy resulting from a competition with other groups. It is this paradox that we address, the desire to compete and succeed balanced with the contribution that collaboration will have on the organization overall. Competition cannot be the primary motivator. (A great discussion on the negative impacts of competition on individuals and organizations comes from Alfie Kohn in his book, “Punished by Rewards” and his other writings. Consider that having one “winner” also generates a number of “losers.” Some people tire of losing and simply choose



not to participate, a deadly situation in most organizations and something often not recognized.)

It is an issue of shared missions and community goals – the focus must be on the Big Picture and the contribution of individuals and teams to the overall organization rather than their focus on simply succeeding in a more circumscribed and limited way.

**The Search for The Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine** is a great tool to generate the process and discussion of these issues and the possibilities for improvement. It is guaranteed to be effective and memorable and to generate real discussion of alternatives to current team behaviors to move toward a more successful future.

For the **FUN** of It!



Dr. Scott Simmerman, Expedition Leader

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