INTRODUCTION

This Team Effectiveness overview is intended for use by staff and faculty leaders and managers across Harvard, as well as HR Partners and Organizational Development consultants. The toolkit is designed to help leaders better understand teams in general, their own teams, identify elements that they would like to change, accept their specific role in building effective teams, and consider methods for fostering team development. Please explore the sources listed in footnotes and at the end of this document for additional depth.

GAINING UNDERSTANDING OF TEAMS

Teams are different from groups in that they have a common purpose and reasons to cooperate. J. Richard Hackman identified five conditions of a successful team:

- the team must require either specific expertise or is created because of the different perspectives members bring;
- the team is working in a compelling direction;
- there are structures that enable the team;
- the team works within a supportive context;
- coaching the team as such is a priority.¹

The widely known stages of team life, named by Bruce Tuckman, are Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing.² The stage of Adjourning was added later. Organizational development researchers and consultants have continued to refine and expand upon the stages, pointing out that teams can get stuck in a stage, and that resting and refocusing are also necessary at times.³

While it's helpful to be aware of common stages of team development, and to design activities

---

³ Corentus Consulting identifies six stages: Form & Connect; Storm & Clarify; Norm & Solidify; Perform & Sustain; Dorm & Drift; Transform & Refocus. Coaching Teams and Groups, A Corentus Mini-Book, 2018.
and expectations accordingly, teams can also go through stages iteratively. External factors such as funding changes, or sudden changes that impact the larger world can also shift a team from one phase to another.

Building and maintaining trust is critical, as this is the foundation for solid relationships among team members. In his book The Speed of Trust, Stephen M. R. Covey points to the metaphor of a bank account as a repository for trust in relationships. Deposits and withdrawals fall in two categories: competence and character. As workplaces shifted abruptly to remote work in 2020, these trust accounts were important foundations for team resilience. (Working as a Remote Team is addressed specifically below in the Managing Teams Remotely section.) Frederick A. Miller and Judith H. Katz assert that the door to trust starts opening up when we lean into discomfort. “It is a simple equation: as I lean in, others become more willing to lean in. As we all lean in together, greater trust is created, greater synergies are created, and greater teamwork and collaboration become possible.”

Assumptions about teams are often grounded in the culture of individual Team Members. For example, what experience do members have regarding how to best develop trust and at what speed? Are individual team members primarily oriented to collective success or individual accomplishment? The article “Debunking Key Assumptions about Teams; The Role of Culture” is an excellent resource on this topic. Given the increasing diversity of workplaces, team effectiveness is certainly tied to the cultural competence of leaders and team members. (See CWD’s DEIB Toolkit for more information.)

“Psychological safety” is also considered an important factor in team effectiveness. Amy C. Edmondson, Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, coined this term with relation to teams, and has called attention to the presence of healthy dissent in high performing teams.

---

ASSESS YOUR TEAM

There are many ways to assess or examine a team. Glenn Parker, in his book *Team Players and Teamwork: New Strategies for Developing Successful Collaboration*, notes the process can be informal, with a question as basic as “how are we doing,” or formal, evaluating the team against specific criteria. He offers these and other common warning signs that indicate a team may be headed for trouble:

- You cannot easily describe the team’s mission.
- The meetings are formal, stuffy, or tense.
- There is a great deal of participation but little accomplishment.
- Disagreements are aired in private conversations after the meeting.
- Decisions tend to be made by the formal leader with little meaningful involvement of other team members.
- People in other parts of the organization who are critical to the success of the team are not cooperating.
- The team has been in existence for at least three months and has never assessed its functioning.

---

FORMAL ASSESSMENTS

Formal assessments come in many different forms. Here are four frameworks CWD consultants commonly use.

The GRPI Model\(^{10}\) is a user-friendly basic approach to assess and develop teams. The four main aspects of this model are Goals, Roles, Processes and Interpersonal relationships. This framework can help a team to prioritize areas to focus on and can identify challenges. Start asking questions about Goals and work your way down the pyramid. Sample questions can be found below. A related HBR article focuses on the dire need to have clear roles for team members. Tammy Erikson stressed the importance of establishing clear roles for team members, which she found to be even more important than defining approaches to team work. See her article, “The Biggest Mistake you (probably) Make with Teams”.\(^{11}\)

---


\(^{11}\) [https://hbr.org/2012/04/the-biggest-mistake-you-probab](https://hbr.org/2012/04/the-biggest-mistake-you-probab)
Application: GRPI Questions

**APPLICATION:** CWD uses a two-page assessment to rate both individual and team attitudes. Your own questions can be added.

**MISSION/VISION/GOALS**
- Does your team agree on overall mission & vision?
- Does your team have commitment to the goal(s)?
- Is there agreement on the desired results?

**ROLES/COMPOSITION**
- Are team members clear on their individual responsibility?
- Are team members clear on shared responsibility?
- Is your team diverse with regard to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, national origin, age, etc.?

**PROCEDURES**
- How effective is your decision-making process?
- Does your team address conflict or disagreement effectively?

**INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**
- Has the team-built trust, or rebuilt trust given external changes?
- How effective is communication within the team, both in person and remote?

*Please contact your CWD Relationship Manager for a sample self-assessment.*

**Five Dysfunctions of a Team**\(^{12}\) is an assessment and model that helps teams identify inattention to results, avoidance of accountability, lack of commitment, fear of conflict, and absence of trust. It also lists behaviors of trusting teams that tend to avoid these common pitfalls.

---

\(^{12}\) Patrick Lencioni, *Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*, 1994
Application: Five Dysfunctions Sample Questions

**APPLICATION:** The team self-assessment is scored based on completion of a 15-question survey and provides a jumping off point for meaningful dialogue.

Here are a few sample statements that individuals’ rate as Never, Rarely, Occasionally, Frequently or Always. The team receives a cumulative score.

- Team members are passionate and unguarded in their discussion of issues.
- Team members willingly make sacrifices (such as budget and head count) in their departments or areas of expertise for the good of the larger organization.
- Team members know about one another’s personal lives and are comfortable discussing them.

*Please contact your CWD Relationship Manager for the full self-assessment and point system.*

**MBTI The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®,** has been used by teams for decades to assess preferences, characteristics, and tendencies of individual team members. The assessment is designed to capture a natural or *preferred* way of using one’s mind and directing one’s energy and associated behavioral habits. Teams commonly use the MBTI to compare preferences, identify gaps in “types”, and identify possible actions that come from this awareness. The MBTI is available for purchase on-line.
**Application: Impact of Styles Exercise**

**APPLICATION:** After you have used a personality style diagnostic to identify how team members are different (for example, the Myers Briggs Type Indicator or DISC\(^{13}\)), ask members to share, “According to my style, how do I prefer to…”

- run meetings
- make decisions
- communicate and share information
- manage the work
- give feedback and hold each other accountable
- resolve conflict

By having members answer those questions ‘according to their style’, it allows them to ask for what they want in a logical way. The process effectively surfaces different ways of doing things, none of which are “wrong”, but nevertheless could require agreement to adopt a way preferred by the team.\(^{14}\)

**CliftonStrengths®,** also referred to as StrengthsFinder, identifies at least the top 5 strengths of each team member. The strengths are based on talents, preferences or motivations, and past investment one has made in particular approaches. The information provided to individuals is comprehensive and positive. As in the case of the MBTI, once individuals complete the tool, the team can see its collective strengths\(^{15}\). Clifton Strengths® books and individual on-line assessments are available at a cost.\(^{16}\) Teams have often engaged with CWD to help present and discuss the results, although CWD staff capacity is finite so please choose a tool in communication with your CWD Relationship Manager.

---

\(^{13}\)For further information, please consider [Myers Briggs](https://www.meyersbriggs.org) and [DISC](https://www.discriminator.com) which can be purchased on-line.


\(^{15}\) For another example of how teams can rather easily identify strengths, see [https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/385/building-team-talent.aspx](https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/385/building-team-talent.aspx)

**Application: Building on Individual Strengths**

**APPLICATION:** Whether using Clifton Strengths, or identifying assets of your team members using another tool, here are sample follow up questions to maximize team learning:

- List your top 5 strengths
- What opportunities exist to use your strengths to a greater extent?
- What might get in the way of you using one or more of your strengths?
- How can we better use our collective strengths to: Build relationships across the team? Get the work done as a team? Connect with our stakeholders?
- What might get in the way of our success as a team?
- Given our strengths and our perceived obstacles, how can we best manage through challenges, in both remote and in-person environments?

It is also important to understand the culture of your team. *(See CWD’s Culture Toolkit for relevant information.)*

You can conduct a mini-self assessment by asking these questions:

- What are the official norms, and the unofficial practices of your team?
- Have you agreed on values, and clear performance goals?
- Who speaks in team meetings and who does not?
- Who are the guardians and informal leaders of the team, and who are primarily independent actors?
- What is an example of when your team has operated at its best? What about at its worst?
- Do you have an annual or biannual retreat for self-reflection and team building? Can it be off-site or different in some way than usual meetings?

There are also various Communication styles assessments. The CWD class “Communicating at Work” features the [HRDQ assessment](#), which takes only 20 minutes to complete. The results can be discussed easily. It identifies four general types of communication styles: Systematic, Spirited, Direct, and Considerate.
Application: Communication Styles Exercise

**APPLICATION:** Once team members have identified their dominant communication styles, they can work in pairs or small groups and then explain to peers what they like about this style, and what is challenging. They then have a chance to ask colleagues questions that pertain to a style different from their own. This conversation can lead to ideas for how to improve communication within the team.

Finally, how do emotions and conflict impact your team? Or on the flip side, what is the cost of conflict-avoidance over time? There are several sources that explore using emotions in a positive way, versus steering clear of them. One important aspect to consider is how conflict is resolved on your team, which of course relates to team power structures, and formal as well as informal authority.

Another way to understand the impact of emotions is through Team Emotional Intelligence (TEI). While most commonly associated with individual competency, research and experience prove the relevance of Emotional Intelligence to teams. TEI is about bringing emotions deliberately to the surface and understanding how they affect a team’s work. Vanessa Urch Druskat and Steven B. Wolff have found that building relationships both inside and outside the team can strengthen a team’s ability to face challenges. In fact, teams are more creative and productive when they can achieve high levels of participation, cooperation and collaboration among members.

Whether you use a formal or informal assessment, or one of the applications above, intentional and timely follow through is absolutely essential.

---

Embrace the Centrality of your Role, and Identify Opportunities for Improvement

As a leader, your commitment to improving team function and effectiveness is an essential ingredient. A leader can manage and even inspire individuals, but the team requires dedicated attention as one complex system in order to excel.

With data from assessments or self-reflection in hand, a leader must articulate the need for change, and then drive the process forward with concerted, sustained effort. These questions may be helpful when planning to communicate with a team.

- What about your team would you like to change?
- Why are you prioritizing team development now?
- How has your team performed under recent stresses?
- What about your team would you like to celebrate or preserve?
- What specifically is causing conflict or challenges?

Norms provide a basis for guiding behavior, so team members know what to expect. Discussion of norms may evolve over time, but agreements can be helpful on questions such as these19:

- How will decisions be made? Changed? Communicated?
- How will information be shared?
- How will you use meetings? How will they be run?
- How will team projects be managed and evaluated?
- How will you celebrate successes and hold each other accountable?
- What is the diversity you can draw on, and how can you maximize it?20

---

19 Leadership in Action, a CWD leadership program, includes a Norms Inventory exercise adapted from Mary Shapiro’s HBR Guide to Leading Teams (2015). Available upon request from CWD.

MANAGING TEAMS REMOTELY

Given recent public health demands, many teams have shifted temporarily to working remotely, and will likely continue to do so even when some staff return to campus. Please see CWD’s Toolkit on Managing Remotely, developed in May 2020. Harvard Business School published 10 simple tips for working remotely specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. One tip is to reimagine team meetings — shorter meetings, or “huddles” may work well at this time. Another tip is to make sure outcomes of the meeting are reiterated using other channels such as email, Teams or SLACK, whichever communication method a team uses most effectively.

LEADING INHERITED TEAMS

It is perhaps a leader’s dream to be able to assemble a new team from Day One. However, this is a rare occurrence. Leaders must most often work with the people they inherit, so have to learn to navigate the transition. Michael D. Watkins suggests a three-step model:

1. Assess the people on the team and the dynamics at play.
2. Reshape the team’s membership, sense of purpose and direction, operating model, and behaviors according to the business/organizational challenges you face.
3. Accelerate the team’s development by scoring early wins.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL NEXT STEPS, OR INTERVENTIONS.

Implement both formal and informal processes to prioritize team best practices. Formal interventions could include agreed upon rules of engagement during team meetings and making sure that team goals and criteria for team behaviors are part of performance evaluation. The emphasis on team excellence should be also communicated in informal ways such as during 1:1 conversation with team members and external collaborators.

---

APPLICATION: Possible Next Steps

**APPLICATION:** The following are examples of possible interventions to reinforce team excellence:

- Engage entire team in development efforts, not only those who naturally tend to be team players.
- Establish very clear norms for team communication, both remote and in-person.
- Keep team norms present and refer to them regularly.
- Co-create an Action Plan with the team, to maximize buy in and distribute accountability.
- Engage a Team Coach: Team Coaching is distinct from facilitation, consulting, training and team building. It can be instrumental in assisting teams that want to make shifts in norms, improve communication, build on accomplishments to date, or solve long standing team challenges.

*Please reach out to CWD coaches to determine if your team is eligible for Team Coaching in FY21.*

Keep in mind that course correction is very important, and proven to be even more impactful than initial efforts during team formation.\(^{22}\) It is never too late to improve your team.

**ONGOING ATTENTION TO TEAM PROGRESS**

**Training and Professional Development**

CWD offers a three-hour course for Managers, *Managing a Team*. The class uses Six Characteristics of a High Performing Team\(^{23}\) as a foundation: Common Purpose, Clear Roles, Effective Processes, Accepted Leadership, Excellent Communication, Solid Relationships.

---

\(^{22}\) Connie Gersick, “Time and Transition in Work Teams”, Ibid.

When bringing on new members, what is the team orientation process? First impressions and non-verbal messages play extremely big roles, so pay special attention to these factors by intentionally setting the stage for success early on.

As mentioned above, the best practice is to pause periodically to examine how well a team is functioning. In fact, teams require regular attention, and effectiveness cannot be fully outsourced nor fixed by an external consultant. If a strong team is your priority, make it transparent and determine specific related goals. Then, enlist internal champions so that the formal Leader or Manager is not solely responsible.

**ADDITIONAL USEFUL RESOURCES**

- *What Google learned from its quest to build the perfect team* (NYT 2016)
- [https://99u.adobe.com/articles/66116/how-to-lead-your-team-remotely](https://99u.adobe.com/articles/66116/how-to-lead-your-team-remotely)
- “This Is Me—How to Help Your Team Know You Better,” by Jan and Michelle Terkelsen. People Leaders Podcast, 2020. info@peopleleaders.com.au

If you have additional resources to suggest, please send them to CWD, as we are always interested in what you find useful.