

Context Matters: Leading Different Teams

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Abstract. In our organizational behavior and management classes, students tend to recognize various characteristics of teams, but are less able to recognize how effective leaders vary their responses to match these different characteristics. In this exercise, three vignettes are used based on the team leadership experiences of one manager. Each experience required different leadership approaches and thus the leader needed to adapt to the specific characteristics of each team. In small groups, students identify various characteristics of the teams and make recommendations on appropriate leader style. The exercise can be used to discuss teams and team leadership.

Keywords: management, organizational behavior, teams, leadership, contingency theory.

1. Introduction

We teach students how to create and lead effective teams. We emphasize the fact that organizations use teams to get work done, to facilitate change, to come up with creative ideas, and to solve difficult problems.¹ We offer team projects across multiple business and college courses so that students will gain experience and, hopefully, get better at working in teams. Students look for the one best way to lead a team rather than recognizing that good leaders identify what a team needs to be effective,² and then work to meet those needs.³ Unfortunately, there is no exact formula for effective team leadership. We have found that one step in

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1. Colvin, G. "First Team Players Trump All-Stars", *Fortune* 21 May, 2012; Gawande, A. "Cowboys and Pit Crews", *The New Yorker* 26, May, 2011; Kezmodal, D. "Boeing Teams Speed Up 737 Output", *The Wall Street Journal* 7 February, 2012; Sundstrom, E., De Meuse, K., & Futrell, D. "Work Teams: Applications and Effectiveness", *American Psychologist*, 45(2) 2012.
 2. Hackman, J. R. *Groups That Work (and Those That Don't)*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1990.
 3. Ginnett, R. C. "The Essentials of Leading a High-Performance Team", *Leadership in Action*. 18(6) 1999.

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helping students understand the complexity of team leadership is first getting them to understand that effective team leader behavior is contingent on the characteristics of the team and situation. In this paper, we share our approach to teaching adaptive team leadership.

One way to show students the complexity of team leadership is to bring business leaders to class where they can share personal stories about leading different types of teams. Where we can't incorporate actual speakers, instructors can recreate the stories from our speakers to give students access to those same experiences. Here, we take three stories from one of those speakers, and share them as vignettes. The vignettes illustrate three different team leadership opportunities, present the challenges the leader faced in each of the scenarios, provide information on how the leader responded, and then describe the team outcomes. We use these vignettes in the face-to-face classroom, allowing students to work in groups to read and discuss the vignette, diagnose the situation, and report back to the class a recommended leadership approach. The activity can be used in an online class in a similar way, asking students to read through each vignette, then engage in a discussion via the class discussion board. The goal of the exercise is to help students begin to recognize that leading high-performance teams is based on a process by which the leader shifts his or her behavior to match the evolving needs of the various teams. In the following section, we highlight how Hackman's Team Effectiveness Model⁴ can be used to help students begin to see the complexity of the interaction between leaders and teams.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Students often superficially see the potential benefits of teamwork. A few of these benefits include greater productivity, more access to resources, more access to expertise and added motivation, and energy from working with others. In his interviews and publications on leading teams, Hackman⁵ frequently highlights the fact that even executives with significant work experience carry these assumptions about the benefits of teamwork.⁶ While teams *can be* highly effective, they often fail to achieve high levels of effectiveness. It frequently takes longer for a team to complete a task, and the outcome is commonly less than what would have been achieved by a high-performing lone member. Teamwork can result in conflict and beleaguered communications. A quick discussion with students causes them to easily also come to this conclusion – most can name times when assigned group projects took longer and were more challenging than individual assignments.

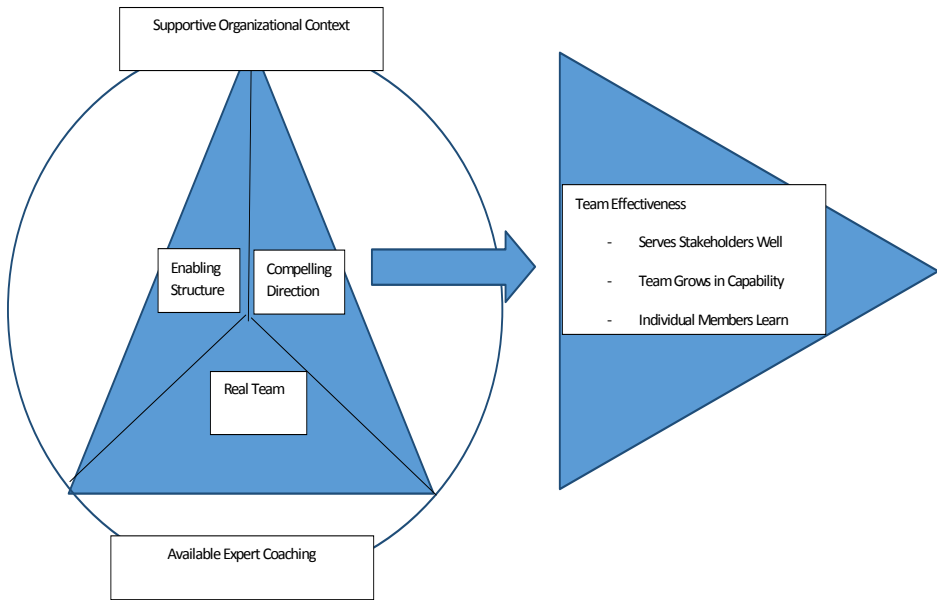
4. Hackman, J. R. *Groups That Work (and Those That Don't)*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1990.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Coutu, G. "Why Teams Don't Work", *Harvard Business Review* 87(5) 2009; Haas, M. & Mortenson, M. "The Secrets of Great Teamwork", *Harvard Business Review* 94(6) 2016.

There are various models that capture the characteristics that distinguish effective teams from less effective teams.⁷ One widely accessible model is Hackman's Team Effectiveness Model (Figure 1). According to Hackman,⁸ teams are more likely to be effective when the following conditions are true:

Figure 1: Hackman's Team Effectiveness Model.



1. The team is a *real* team (not just labeled as a team). Real teams have four features: a team *task*, clear *boundaries*, clearly specified *authority* of the leader or shared amongst the group members, and membership *stability* over time to accomplish the task.⁹ These characteristics lay the groundwork for building an effective team and must be present for the team to be effective. It is important that the leader consistently establish these four factors, no matter the team's size, purpose, and dynamic.

7. Katzenbach, J. & Smith, D. *Wisdom of Teams: Creating High Performance Organizations*, Boston: Harvard Business Review Press 2015; LaFasto, F. & Larson, C. *When Teams Work Best: 6,000 Team Members and Leaders Tell What It Takes to Succeed*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001; Ginnett, R.C. "The Essentials of Leading a High-Performance Team", *Leadership in Action* 18(6) 1999; Gladstein, D. "Groups in Context: A Model of Task Group Effectiveness", *Administrative Science Quarterly* 29(4) 1984; Sundstrom, E., De Meuse, K., & Futrell, D. "Work Teams: Applications and Effectiveness", *American Psychologist*, 45(2) 2012.

8. Hackman, J.R. *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances*, Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing 2002.

9. *Ibid.*

2. The team has a *compelling* direction for its work.¹⁰ Setting a clear direction for a team energizes the team's efforts, allows for focused attention and action, and signals which talents are needed to be effective. The direction should be clear, challenging, and consequential.

3. The team has an *enabling* structure that facilitates rather than impedes teamwork.¹¹ The structure that is good for teams is usually an extension of work that is motivating and elicits high performance in individuals. Many classic models of motivation and performance outline the factors necessary for individuals to feel motivated and achieve high performance, including task design through the Job Characteristics model,¹² goal setting theories,¹³ and needs theories applied to work.¹⁴ The same classic theories that apply to motivating high performance in individuals apply to motivating high performance in teams. Members of teams perform best when the work is meaningful, when they have autonomy to do the work, when each member is aware of his or her responsibility to the team, and when he or she can see the outcome of their labors and the contribution it makes to the organization. The team must have the right composition to include members with necessary skills and knowledge. Finally the team norms must be supportive of that compelling direction.

Note that the above three characteristics are associated with the teams themselves, whereas the next two of Hackman's factors are relevant to the context in which the team operates. These factors are relevant to the larger organizational context and the role of the leader in coaching the team through shaping the structure, direction, and team dynamics.

4. The team operates in a *supportive organizational context*¹⁵ For example, the organization's reward system is a factor beyond the confines of the team that can impact team performance. Having a

10. Haas, M. & Mortenson, M. "The Secrets of Great Teamwork", *Harvard Business Review* 94 (6) 2016.

Hackman, J. R. *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances*, Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing 2002.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Hackman, J. R. & Oldham, G. R. *Work Redesign*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley 1980.

13. Locke, E. A. & Latham, G. P. *A Theory of Goal Setting and Task Performance*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall 1990.

14. Deci, E. L. *The Psychology of Self-Determination*, New York: Harper & Row 1980; Maslow, A. H. *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, New York: The Viking Press, Inc. 1971.

15. Haas, M. & Mortenson, M. "The Secrets of Great Teamwork", *Harvard Business Review*. 94 (6) 2016; Hackman, J. R. *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances*, Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing 2002.