



DECLAN WOODS

The glue that binds

Georgina Woudstra seeks to stimulate thinking around team coaching. Guest writer, Declan Woods, examines moving from non-cooperation to collaboration

In this issue I've invited Declan Woods to share his ideas on team collaboration, in particular what he calls 'team glue', a dimension from Middle Circle® for Teams (*Coaching at Work*, vol 13, issue 5), a coaching tool for team effectiveness he created, drawing on his doctoral research on dysfunction in senior teams: *Teams should be greater than the sum of their parts. For this, they need to collaborate.*

Teams are the basic means by which organisation's structures work and there are strong links between team effectiveness and high organisational performance (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Sharma, Roychowdhury & Verma, 2009). However, this is far from guaranteed and, while there are a multitude of reasons for failure, a lack of collaboration between team members is an important one. This is ripe ground for the team coach.


The OED defines collaboration as "the action of working with someone to produce something". For teams, this means members working together to achieve something collectively. This is accomplished by team members being in close enough proximity to work together, and by having enough psychological safety for them to join (Kohlriseser, 2006). This nearness creates the possibility of attachment – for team members to connect.

While 'attaching' to other team members is natural and necessary, it's still insufficient for teams to collaborate fully. For this, they need to go beyond attachment to bonding, requiring individual team members to commit emotionally to one another. This emotional exchange between members creates the 'glue' for team cohesion and collaboration. Team coaches can help by creating enough safety for bonding.

A key criterion of a collaborative team is inter-dependence – where team members rely on one another for collective output (Thompson, 2008). Conflict between team members can impact collaboration and team performance adversely (Jehn, 1995), so conflict needs to be carefully monitored and attended to.

To achieve things together typically entails teams making decisions, and cognitive diversity (thinking differently) is essential to good decision-making (Surowiecki, 2004). But teams aren't usually very diverse because teams recruit members in their own image. Without diversity, it's far harder for them to think differently. Group think (Janis, 1982) can result. The danger is that homogenous teams become cohesive more readily than dissimilar teams but also become more reliant on the group. While cohesion can help form team glue, it can limit broader thinking and consideration of alternative ways of working, diminishing team collaboration.

The answer is simple (but not easy): recruit for difference in teams – it's even more important for smaller teams because their size means less built-in difference. And for team coaches it's about encouraging teams to think about their diversity, including provoking thinking about their composition and roles, and challenging tried and tested thinking patterns.

Teams that are able to leverage differences and strengths may bolster intra-team collaboration. Where they do, the prize is attractive: high functioning, collaborative teams deliver nearly 23% more economic impact (Price & Toye, 2017). What team wouldn't want this? 

Next issue: Team 'detox'

References

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