

# Team Coaching—Building Continuous Learning and High Performance

Barbara Pate Glacel, Ph.D.

[www.glacel.com](http://www.glacel.com)

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Enough! Why do we keep talking teams, by many different names? Isn't it old hat by now?

Old talk, maybe...but certainly not old hat. The performance potential of good teams is so far beyond the performance potential of mere groups of individuals that we must continue to work on and solve the puzzle of teams.

Much of what we know about teams is common sense. Perhaps that is why it is not practiced regularly. While there is no magic formula, there must be conscious and conscientious practice at good teaming. Good teams simply don't happen. Individuals must learn to be good team members and team leaders. Only then do they produce the quality results that teamwork allows.



Through the experience of becoming teams, managers learn many practical lessons. While these lessons may sound like common sense, they must be learned through experience to become common practice. Managers must pay attention to these lessons in order to capitalize on them. Team coaches provide a resource for capturing these lessons learned.

## Ten Lessons for High Performing Teams

Often, it is as if a light bulb dawns on team members, and they ask the obvious question: "Why didn't I see that before?" These light bulbs—or lessons—are a good place for any team to start their own learning and to progress to improved quality in product and process.

### 1. Teams start the formation stages over at each meeting.

This means that high performance is never achieved once and for all. Every time team members come together, time must be spent adjusting to the fact that much has happened since the last time the team was together. In fact, members have become different people because of their individual experiences. A brief time spent checking out how each member is doing and what each member brings to the party saves considerable time later.

A good example of this practice is found in a professional organization run by an elected board of directors. The board members meet every few months to manage the policy and governance of the association. The first act at every meeting is called the “round-up.” Each board member tells the others briefly what has happened since last they met, in both a business and personal context. The result of this sharing means that people know each other, care about each other, are invested in one another’s successes on a personal level, and therefore they work more easily together and more efficiently when the time comes to buckle down to business.

## **2. Any change in team membership means a new beginning of team formation issues.**

People are not pegs who fit easily into the same shape left by the predecessor. Because high performance and quality results are based on the interdependence of team members, any change in membership affects the performance of the entire team. When a new member joins the team, formation issues begin again. Trust is reduced, and individuals are not sure how the puzzle fits together with a different shaped piece.

On the North Slope oil fields of Alaska, teaming is difficult because of a one week on and one week off schedule at the oil companies. Two people, called “alternates,” hold each job. Each alternate works seven days on the job (where one lives, eats, relaxes, and works in a remote site). Then the employee goes home for seven days while the other alternate works the job. As a consequence, on any given day, many jobs see the rotation of alternates.

On paper, there are two teams (gold and blue), but it is rare for all members to be there at one time because the changeover days differ for each position. In short, actual team membership is constantly changing. The joke at one oil company is that, there are actually three teams: the gold team, the blue, team and the *other* team. And, of course, whenever a problem arises, it is the fault of the *other* team. With such constant change in membership, high quality performance of true teams is an impossibility.

## **3. Honest and real feelings expressed by team members help stimulate new ideas.**

Feelings are valuable data. Being in touch with and expressing what is in one’s gut makes a person more real. How many times have we heard the very old and incorrect adage that when one comes to work, feelings and personal problems should be checked at the door? This ingrained old work ethic is a tough one to break, even when one knows better rationally.

Expressing fears, hopes, anger, uncertainty, elation, pain or any other feeling is a first step toward building the trust that a team needs to be high performing. This doesn’t mean being touchy-feely. It means being truthful about whom you are and what you bring to the party on any given day. Simply, it means being human. The idea of

expressing feelings also demonstrates that rhetoric is not always reality, and that common sense is not always common practice.

In a well-known consulting company, partners were heavily involved in intense projects at the same time that business was growing rapidly. Short deadlines were all too common. One partner was facing serious uncertainty in his personal life, but had not widely shared this information nor the accompanying feelings of concern. At a crucial point during the project, a colleague commented to the partner, “You seem to lack some resilience that we have come to depend upon for success.” This comment led to wider sharing of the personal traumas, and other team members willingly and expertly picked up the slack. To express the non-work-related stress was an act of vulnerability. Being more real requires one to be vulnerable. To re-learn this lesson was a humbling experience, but it was necessary to continue to the tradition of high performance.

#### **4. There is more information and knowledge within a team than is usually revealed.**

Information is power and in even the flattest of organizations, there is significant competition for promotions, access, success and/or recognition. Information may be guarded carefully for fear of someone else using it to individual advantage. Or perhaps more commonly, the information does not seem relevant to share because team members don't understand the big picture. Team members must feel a sense of unity and interdependence among themselves to comfortably share significant information.

At a high-technology think tank, information technology teams (I-teams) meet regularly for the specific purpose of sharing information widely across functions and boundaries within the company. The members are senior managers in the company who meet to discuss intellectual and scientific issues that are key to future viability of the company. In the rapidly changing information technology world, such sharing is essential for them to stay ahead of competition. These I-teams bring together different parts of the organization, find systems effects of actions, policies and projects, and build strong teams that are more willing to share technology as time goes on and trust builds. When the need for sharing becomes even more important, the foundation for shared trust will already be there.

#### **5. Responsibility falls on all team members to bring people into discussion and to listen to ideas opposite from their own.**

In other words, all members share responsibility for leadership. In high performing teams, there is limited hierarchy. Members join or are assigned to teams because of the value each can bring to the topic at hand. Therefore, input from all team members is required. When hierarchy, conflict, or style get in the way of individual contributions, any member can and must take responsibility for leading the group to be more open and collaborative.

In a recent meeting of executives in a well-known glass manufacturing company, a detailed discussion was held on the facts and a decision was about to be reached on a critical issue. One of the directors leaned back from the table with a frown on his face. "What's wrong, George?" asked a peer. His response was a show-stopper for the group. George said, "Well, all of the facts point clearly to where we're going. I just don't have a good feeling about the decision. I wish I could be more specific. Since I can't be specific, I should just keep quiet and get on with implementation."

Instead of just pressing on, the group probed, pushed, and reconsidered what they were about to do. In the end, they took a very different action that resulted in much improved performance. To get there, each member had to listen to ideas opposite from one's own and share in the responsibility for leadership.

**6. Talking about the team task is easier; talking about the process of working together is more difficult.**

Talking about task is a technical, mechanical, logistical or rational discussion. Only in rare instances does discussion of the task evoke considerable emotional input. It is more comfortable to discuss the task, which is external, than the process of working together, which involves internal and interpersonal issues. Discussing the process of working together means accepting responsibility for one's own impact on others.

Consider again the alternates in the North Slope Alaska oilfields. During the changeover period, information is exchanged about instrument readings, progress of building new facilities, maintenance problems and the like. The alternates who do not get along with each other do not have to face up to the interpersonal relationship problems between them. However, as soon as the departing alternate is on the place south, the incoming alternate is redoing work that was done differently from how he or she would have done it. The complaining and frustration resulting from this weekly exercise in futility drain energy and effort from quality performance. But, it is easier than sitting down one-on-one to discuss how the different individuals can work together to the advantage of the team, the company, and the bottom line.

**7. Face-to-face meetings are needed for confronting difficult issues and reaching closure.**

Even in this day of cyber-magic and instant communications, there is no substitute for face-to-face communication when dealing with difficult issues. Often teams are virtual, that is located in geographically separated locations. Without the advantage of bringing a personality into the discussion, conflicts may either escalate or be swept under the carpet. Reliance on e-mail to avoid solving problems means that teams don't form, products and services don't improve, and quality is always at risk.

At the high-technology think tank, some virtual teams never get off the ground because they do not spend enough face time to find a common purpose for working together and sharing information. In experiments with successful and less successful virtual teams, the

company executives find that computer skills and willingness to use the electronic media do not substitute for mature team collaboration skills. These are skills best built in a face-to-face environment where people know each other enough to disagree in order to reach a higher level of agreement and quality solutions.

**8. The team should capture learnings by reflecting on team process at every meeting, either before beginning the content discussion or at the end of the content discussion—or preferably, at both times.**

This process should be done whenever teams have a joint experience, which could be a problem-solving session, a regular meeting, or a team building exercise. Following the experience, team members identify what happened in a step-by-step fashion.

As activities and actions are identified, members analyze what was going on and what were cause-effect relationships between actions, thoughts, feelings, and results. Finally, generalizations about the experience are determined. These generalizations are the lessons learned about how the team worked together. By reflecting on these lessons, teams work better each time they meet. They repeat the activities that are helpful and avoid those that get in the way of high quality work. The learnings should be published and considered equally valuable to the content actions taken.

As learning teams work on real-time projects, they use this process to improve their performance. They then take the lessons learned back to their functional areas to improve performance. As individuals become proficient with the reflection process, the process takes very little time and yields tremendous results in improved performance.

**9. Teams can get a lot done when they are out to lunch.**

In other words, team development and team learning often do not happen in a formal meeting. Because the team formation process requires people to be themselves, to be vulnerable, and to recognize the whole aspect of one another, considerable progress can be made outside the work setting.

This does not mean that business issues should take a back seat to ropes courses, training games and social events. It does mean, however, that the team that plays together typically works better together. Conflicts and barriers to progress can often be reduced outside the work setting. Individuals with interpersonal difficulties can see each other in a new light. Stress that causes team dysfunction can be mitigated in a social setting.

The shuttle diplomacy of the political world is an example of this phenomenon. Meeting adversaries on their own turf, getting to know their customs, dining together and sharing family introductions, all facilitate the search for common ground among nations. The company softball tournament, holiday party and employee birthday celebrations allow for team members to meet each other on equal footing, putting aside business differences.

**10. Allocate time for forming, storming, norming, and performing every time the team meets, or pay the price of decreased effectiveness later.**

These simple rhyming words describe the process of team development over time. A group of individuals do not immediately come together and produce quality results. Unless the procedure they are asked to perform is very routine and well established, requiring neither discretion nor judgment, the team members must learn to work together. Especially in today's organizations that deal more with information and change than with routine mechanical production, team development is a necessity.

The progression of *form*, *storm*, *norm*, *perform* is not a linear progression. Rather, it is an iterative process that often results in two steps forward, one step back. Just as new members or interim experiences (see #1 and #2 above) require a *re-forming*, these inputs may cause more conflicts (*storming*), new behaviors that are acceptable to the group (*norming*), and a new standard for *performing*.

A mid-sized public relations company experienced this phenomenon when the team leaders wanted to implement a new evaluation process. The leaders believed that since the group had been together a long time and was working well, there would be no problem. In quick fashion, the decision to implement a new evaluation process was explained and agreed in an informal gathering.

Because there was no time for the group to re-image itself by forming (which could be achieved by telling a few stories of its team accomplishments and previous synergies and experiences of mutual trust), and because there was no opportunity for an expression of doubt and anger about doing something that had never been done before (storming such as "what if you score higher than I do?!"), the group ran the risk of coming up with results that were less honest or even sabotaging the whole project.

Recognition of the team's discomfort allowed the team leaders to step back and plan for a more cautious and participative team implementation of the new process. To allow time for forming, storming, norming and performing is especially important when any change of procedure is being considered.

**Some Final Thoughts**

The ten lessons will apply in some manner to every team in every organization. Teams come in assorted shapes and sizes and exist for various purposes. We risk, however, having teams become just another flavor of the month if we don't look at what makes them work, where they work best, and what effort is required to truly gain commitment, synergy, quality and productivity.

A group of people does not automatically make a team. A high-performing team requires communication, commitment, behavior change, continuous learning and continuous feedback. All of these activities are hard work and require skills that are not easily learned within the context of a business crisis. They are better learned within the context

of everyday work learning teams when the team takes the time to consider how they work together.

The change we experience every day and the enormous growth of complex information both mean that teams are an entity here to stay. No one individual can possess all the information required to run an organization competitively in a dynamic society. Therefore, these lessons provide a path to follow as teams start the process of truly learning while they continually produce quality goods and services.

*Dr. Barbara Pate Glacel is principal of The Glacel Group of Virginia and Brussels, Belgium. She is author of a business bestseller on teams. She works with individuals, teams and organizations in the Fortune 500 and not-for-profit arenas. She has over thirty years experience in executive coaching and leadership development at all levels of organizations. She is a well-known author and public speaker and has consulted in North America, Europe, Asia, and South Africa. You can contact her at [BPGlacel@glacel.com](mailto:BPGlacel@glacel.com).*