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Success Factors of Team Leadership – Virtually and On-Site



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1 When Is Teamwork Appropriate?



Teams are an indispensable part of today's work environment. In the broadest sense, a team is a group of persons who share common objectives and collaborate efficiently to achieve them.

The undeniable benefits of teamwork include:

-  Combined complementary skills and experiences that naturally go beyond those of each individual team member.
-  By jointly developing clear objectives and work approaches, teams establish communication that promotes immediate problem solving and initiative.
-  Consequently, teams respond more flexibly to changing situations and requirements, and adapt their approach to new information and challenges faster and more effectively.
-  Team members jointly overcome obstacles, thereby creating mutual trust. They reinforce and motivate each other in their goals. In a genuine team, there is a sense of belonging, which positively impacts the team's work.
-  The members of an effective team enjoy their work more. They experience themselves as an important part of a larger core group.

However, teamwork isn't appropriate for every task, so it should not be used indiscriminately. Teamwork does offer advantages over other forms of work in the following situations:

-  Complex projects with multiple issues that need to be solved in a creative way
-  The success of an assignment depends on the continuous motivation of the delegated employees
-  The task requires a quick and specific reaction to changes
-  The task calls for practical and feasible decisions
-  Fundamental changes have to be implemented
-  A combined effort is necessary to increase productivity or improve quality

But the use of teams also carries risks that primarily result from negative group dynamics:

-  If the team's members have not worked with each other before and don't know the strengths and weaknesses of the other members, a lot of time and effort is needed to coordinate tasks.
-  Personal rivalries, internal cliques or unclear responsibilities can cause the team to close itself off to the outside or no longer be able to objectively make adequate decisions. Individual team members can become unmotivated, alienated or believe that they're being treated unfairly. If in doubt, they just "work to rule."

Only people who know how to avoid these negative developments and how to ensure effective team functioning should assign tasks to such work groups. To do this, it is necessary to look closely at the characteristics, performance requirements as well as the requirements for managing and developing teams.

2 Characteristics of a Team

The characteristic feature of a team is the interlocking of functional and social factors. The more these two areas can be aligned, the more effective the team's performance will be.



On a professional level, the team members share a common objective that can only be achieved when they work with each other. Their work is therefore goal-oriented and characterised by interdependence.

As a social group, the team depends on mutual contact and communication as well as a clear division of roles and clear rules, in short: structured relationships. It defines itself as a common social unit within the company. The attitudes and behaviour of the members influence one another. The motivation of each member depends on the extent to which his personal needs are satisfied. These include, for example, financial security, a good working environment or personal respect.

A mature, efficient team only gradually develops after it has solved some problems, deepened relationships and clearly defined roles. It is characterised (according to Francis & Young) by the following 12 criteria:

1

Qualification

The members are qualified for their tasks and able to apply their skills within the team in order to achieve a balanced mix of talent and personality. The contrasting and complementary talents are one of the main advantages of a team.

2

Engagement

The members identify with the team goals and objectives. They're willing to invest in building the team and to support the other members. Even outside the team, the members feel connected to each other and are able to represent the interests of their group.

3

Climate

There's a team climate that makes the members feel comfortable. They can speak openly and directly with one another and are willing to take on risks. The established rules define the life of the team. After a while, they become practice and are passed on to new team members. This interaction of traditions, habits, relationships, practices, rules, beliefs and attitudes gives each team its distinctive character, referred to as "climate."

4

Proficiency

The team knows its goals and considers them as something worth striving for. These might require some effort, but are still achievable. The team members mainly focus their energies on achieving results. They are able to critically review their work to determine where and what improvements are needed.

5

Role in the Organisation

The team is involved in the overall planning and has a clearly defined and useful function within the overall organisation.



Work Methods

The team has found practical, systematic and effective ways to collaboratively solve problems. It has efficient means to achieve its goals.



Leadership

The team leader considers managing the group a collective task. He/she has the talent and willingness to work closely with the team and invest time in its development. Not only the supervisor assumes leadership functions; each team member has the chance to do so if his specialised knowledge and talent are needed to achieve the common objective. Experienced teams that precisely know the strengths of their members, reorganise themselves for each new task and assign leadership responsibilities according to their specific skills.



Organisation

A team's fundamental pillars are clearly defined roles, a good flow of information and administrative support.



Criticism

Criticism is welcome and encouraged. When discussing mistakes and weaknesses, members refrain from personal attacks – the main focus is to learn from the criticism. This capacity for constructive criticism furthers the development of the team. A climate of appreciation makes it easier to accept criticism.



Personal Development

Members are consciously looking for new experiences and bring in their personality. A mature team ensures that each member can develop his own personal skills and strengths. Everybody feels valued for his individual strengths, and his skills benefit the team as a whole.



Creativity

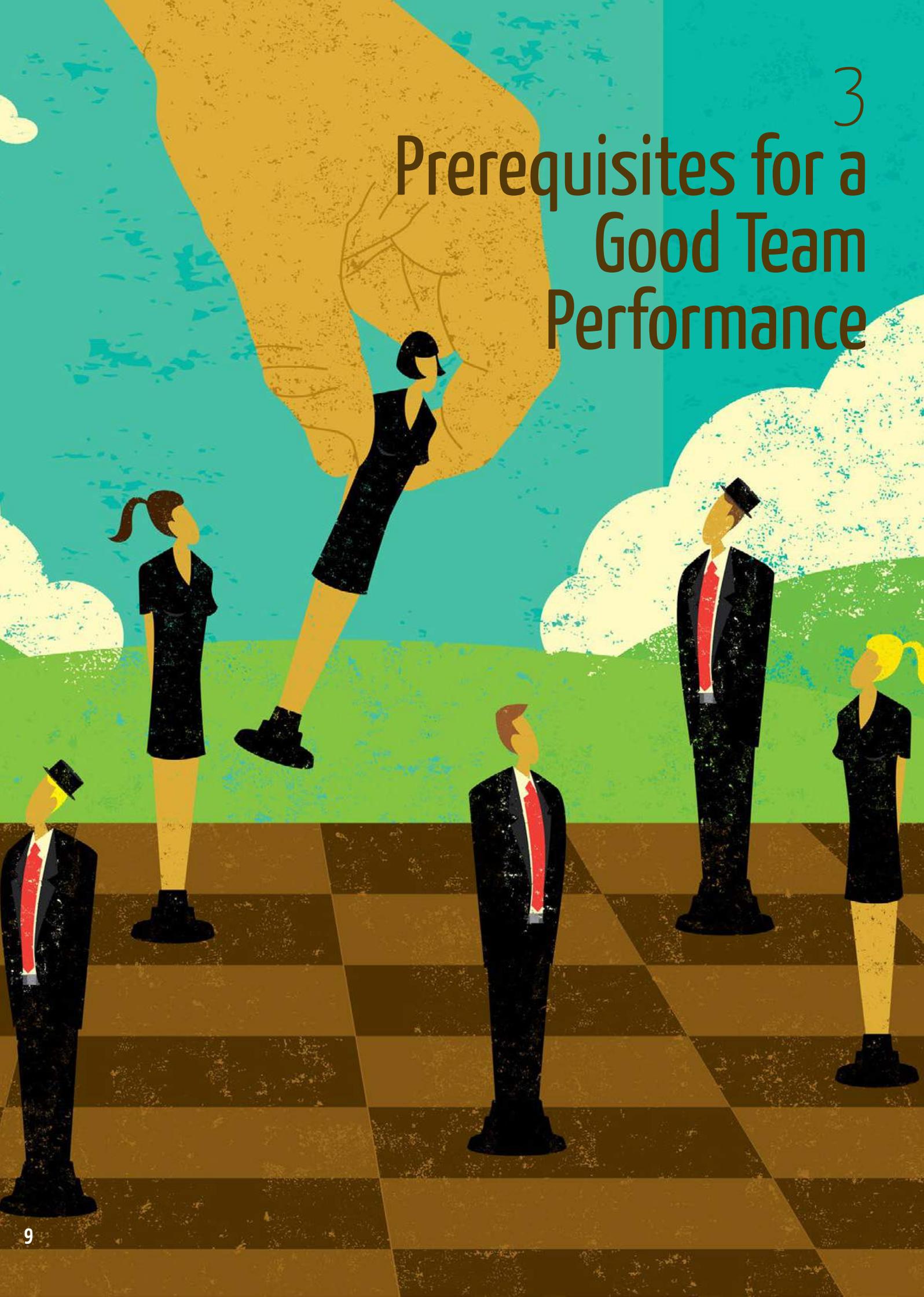
Through its interaction, the team has the ability to develop new ideas, promote innovative risks and accept and implement new ideas from within or outside of the team.



Relationships With Other Groups

The team has systematically established contacts with other groups, thereby developing open and personal relationships that ensure optimal collaboration. Through regular contact with other teams, it coordinates the jointly developed priorities or those stipulated “from above.” Team members have a personal interest in maintaining contact with colleagues in other teams and to collaborate with them.

3 Prerequisites for a Good Team Performance



Prerequisite 1:

The team requires clearly defined tasks and roles.

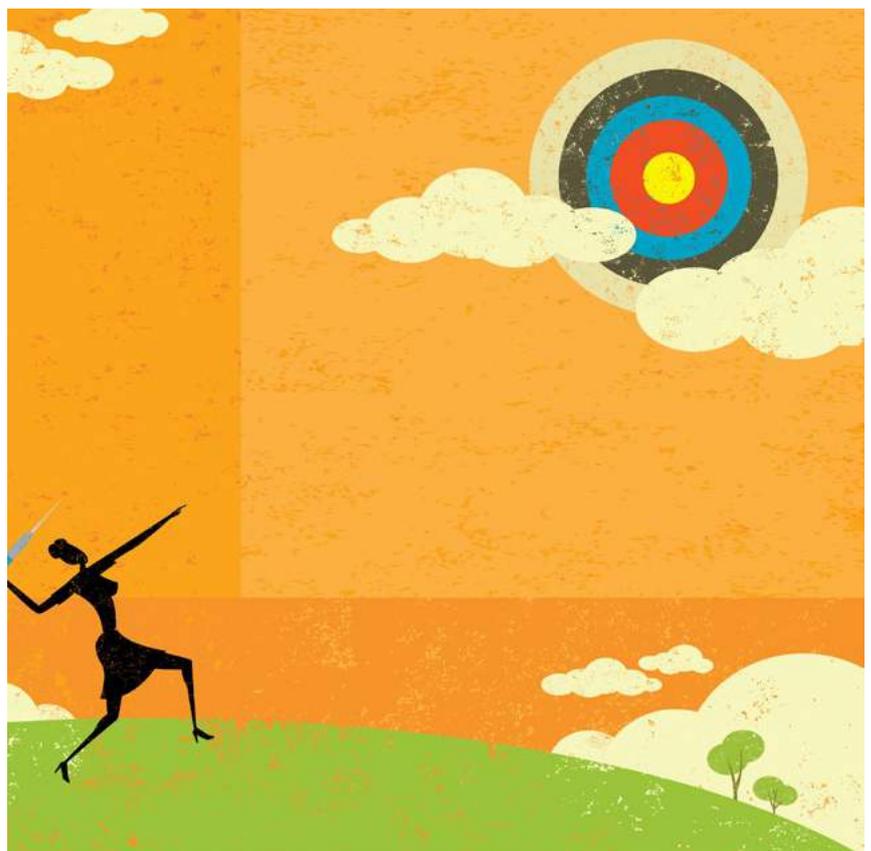
It is important that each team member is assigned a specific function and role, or is able to assume them himself. Additionally, individual members should not only be accepted by their colleagues regarding their role and task, they must also accept themselves in these roles. Otherwise a productive collaboration won't develop. An unclear division of responsibilities or a poor understanding of roles makes it impossible for the team to exploit its full performance capacity. As a consequence, ongoing difficulties might develop (communication problems, disputes over matters of competence, etc.). This in turn means that the team deals with its internal group dynamic problems on a factual level, so that optimal decision-making is no longer possible.

Prerequisite 2:

The team needs an objective.

Whether the objective is set externally or the team sets its objectives itself is not important. But it is critical that the members acknowledge the team's common task, that they consider it important and accept it.

In order for these performance goals to be acknowledged, the objective and subjective goals must match to some extent. That means: While achieving externally imposed objectives, the individual team member must also be able to satisfy his personal goals (such as his need for security, recognition, success and responsibility). If this isn't possible, both the individual team member and the entire team will sooner or later turn against the overall goals, and sabotage them through loss of interest, indifference or rebellion.



Prerequisite 3:

The team needs to be able to communicate.

This is one of the most essential conditions for the development and continued existence of a team. Communication is the medium that supports all social interaction. It allows individual team members to leverage the experiences of other team members, and find solutions that others might have missed.



Communication is the most important tool of the team. The team communicates to analyse problems, to reach decisions and to coordinate individual tasks within the team in order to achieve the common goal. In addition, communication allows the team to identify and solve its internal problems and difficulties. It also serves to facilitate contact with other teams within the company, and to combine the various achievements into a meaningful whole. Information received strictly “from above” can never replace the necessary communication within each team.

The larger the team, the more vulnerable it is to conflicts that can be traced to poor or restricted communication among its members.

4 Teamwork and Leadership



Each team forms a vital structure. It responds to external and internal influences and adapts to the circumstances. It is constantly changing and evolving.

How this development proceeds depends on the team members and its leadership.

It's up to the members to contribute their specific skills and knowledge and, depending on the role they play in the team, to take responsibility for some of the subtasks.

The team leader, however, is primarily responsible for the following:

-  Coordinating the members' tasks.
-  Helping them to define their roles and establish internal rules.
-  Ensuring their compliance.

This controlling role serves to assess the current situation and to reduce mistakes. However, the team not only has a clearly defined and verifiable task, but is also given the opportunity to independently make decisions in a defined context. Otherwise the main advantage of collaboration - the union of task, competence and responsibility - can't be realised.

Due to this task distribution, the team members expect their supervisor to:

-  Support the team, and bring members together to communicate the results.
-  Provide guidance in terms of performance.
-  Protect the team, making resources available and establishing appropriate working conditions.
-  Provide clear work objectives - if possible, together with the team.
-  Involve the rest of the team in the decision-making process.
-  Solve (team) conflicts.
-  Delegate responsibilities as the team becomes more productive.

5 Characteristic Features of Virtual Teams





With growing globalisation, more and more teams are now collaborating across geographic and cultural boundaries. Managers are increasingly utilising the global network in order to minimise the number of costly stays abroad. This leads to the development of virtual teams. Since virtual team members are not working from one location, they can't directly interact with each other. This makes it difficult to establish social contact, which forms the basis for smooth collaboration and mutual trust among the team members.

Virtual team leaders face the following 4 challenges:

1

More coordination is necessary.

Since the team leader can't observe first-hand how individual members are performing their tasks, it is more difficult for him to supervise them, or to intervene in a regulatory manner. This complicates the coordination of the individual tasks and makes it harder to respond to unforeseen challenges. The team leader(s) can partially compensate for this by establishing guidelines for dealing with problems and deadlines right from the beginning, and specifying clear rules for processes and methods as well as for ensuring their compliance.

2

Mutual trust between team leaders and members becomes much more important.

The less chances the team leader(s) have to intervene, the more trust they need to place in the individual team members. As a result, the team leader's role becomes more that of a coach. He must advise the team members, support their efforts and keep them informed about necessary details, so they can perform their task as best as they can.



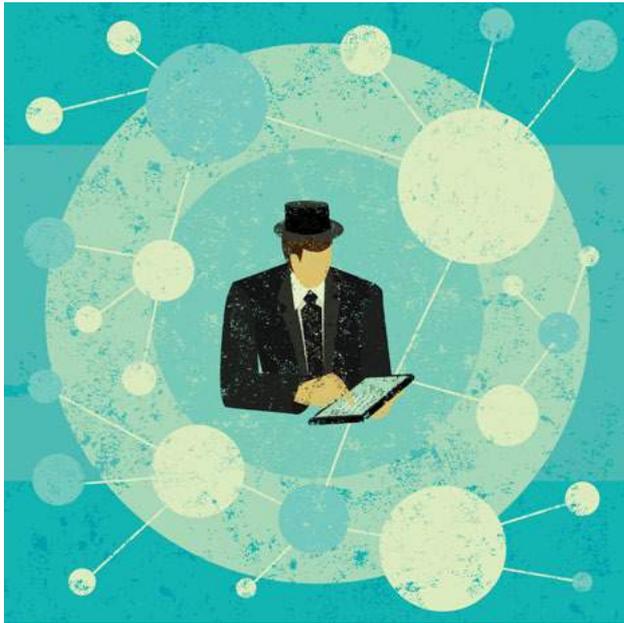
3

Using new technologies

New communication forms and computer-based tools, such as instant messaging, webinars and web conferencing enable virtual teams to communicate and collaborate with each other. These new technologies are taking the place of direct interaction. This means that the management has to provide the appropriate tools and make sure that the team members have the skills required to work with them.

It should be noted that asynchronous communication plays a more important role in virtual team leadership. Whereas geographical distances can now be easily overcome with video conferencing and online meetings, time differences – quite common in globally distributed team members – present a higher challenge. But even that can be managed with a “virtual workspace” such as that provided by [Citrix Podio](#), a platform

specially designed for corporate use. A virtual workspace is in principle similar to a social media platform such as Facebook. Team members can post messages or upload documents, make comments to uploaded posts and files and even “like” something. The big advantage over traditional email communication is that the information is available in a central location that is accessible to all team members, and can also be discussed there.



As for synchronous communication across distances, it is important that the technical tools can be used for team communication. For example, [Citrix GoToMeeting](#) allows up to six team members to share their webcam feed simultaneously in a video conference. This

allows participants to see each other’s faces, gestures, expressions, and reactions, which makes it easier to establish personal connections. Online meetings enable collaboration across distances. Using screen sharing, remote team members can get together and collaborate on a shared document.

Leadership is goal-oriented.

4

Virtual team leaders also have to forego the ability to lead the way through their own behaviour. The team leader has to focus on providing guidance to team members in order to achieve the common goals. That’s why it is more important to clearly and precisely define objectives at the beginning of any project.

6

Team Development



What is team development?

Every workgroup can improve collaboration and performance by detecting and eliminating “weak points” within the work, in the work environment, in collaboration, etc. The more efficient the team utilises its resources and organises itself, the more motivating the work climate and the more efficient and productive the performance becomes.

This is where the team development process comes in.

It is a learning process whereby the functioning of the team is reviewed in order to develop and implement new and more efficient forms of collaboration, if necessary. Team development must always be considered in conjunction with the task to be performed.

Possible objectives:

-  Improving and supporting the communication and collaboration within a group or team
-  Creating a more motivating work environment
-  Development of work structures
-  Improving the understanding of a role within the workgroup
-  Searching for effective ways to deal with existing problems on the factual as well as the relationship level
-  Developing the ability to utilise conflicts positively rather than destructively
-  Improving the team's ability to collaborate with other departments within the organisation
-  Raising awareness that the team members have to be able to rely on each another
-  Promoting the use and development of the group's individual strengths

How does team development work?

In a team development process, the individual members learn how to effectively communicate and cooperate with each other, and to diagnose existing problems.

The prerequisite for positive collaboration and communication is regular metacommunication (talking about the communication process itself). Collaboration difficulties among employees can only be solved efficiently if everyone takes the time to pause, reflect and analyse.

This means:

-  The team leader has to conduct individual interviews in order to gather their views. The goal should be to develop a better understanding of each individual team member.
-  It's necessary to ensure that all those affected should mutually form a clear picture of their situation. This can be done in a specially convened meeting, for example. Search for effective ways to deal with existing problems on the factual as well as the relationship level.

The questions listed below may help you in taking stock of the situation, and deciding on whether and to what extent team development is useful and necessary.

Questions regarding the team's tasks:

-  Which problem-solving skills and talents are required to deal with the task?
-  Can the tasks be broken down into subtasks?
-  Does the team have sufficient freedom to act and make decisions?
-  Are the jointly developed objectives clear and realistic, but still challenging enough?

Questions regarding the team members:

-  Are there any important skills or characteristics that are critical for successful teamwork, but not yet sufficiently developed?
-  Is there a culture of mutual trust and respect?
-  Do the members of the team feel collectively responsible for the team results?

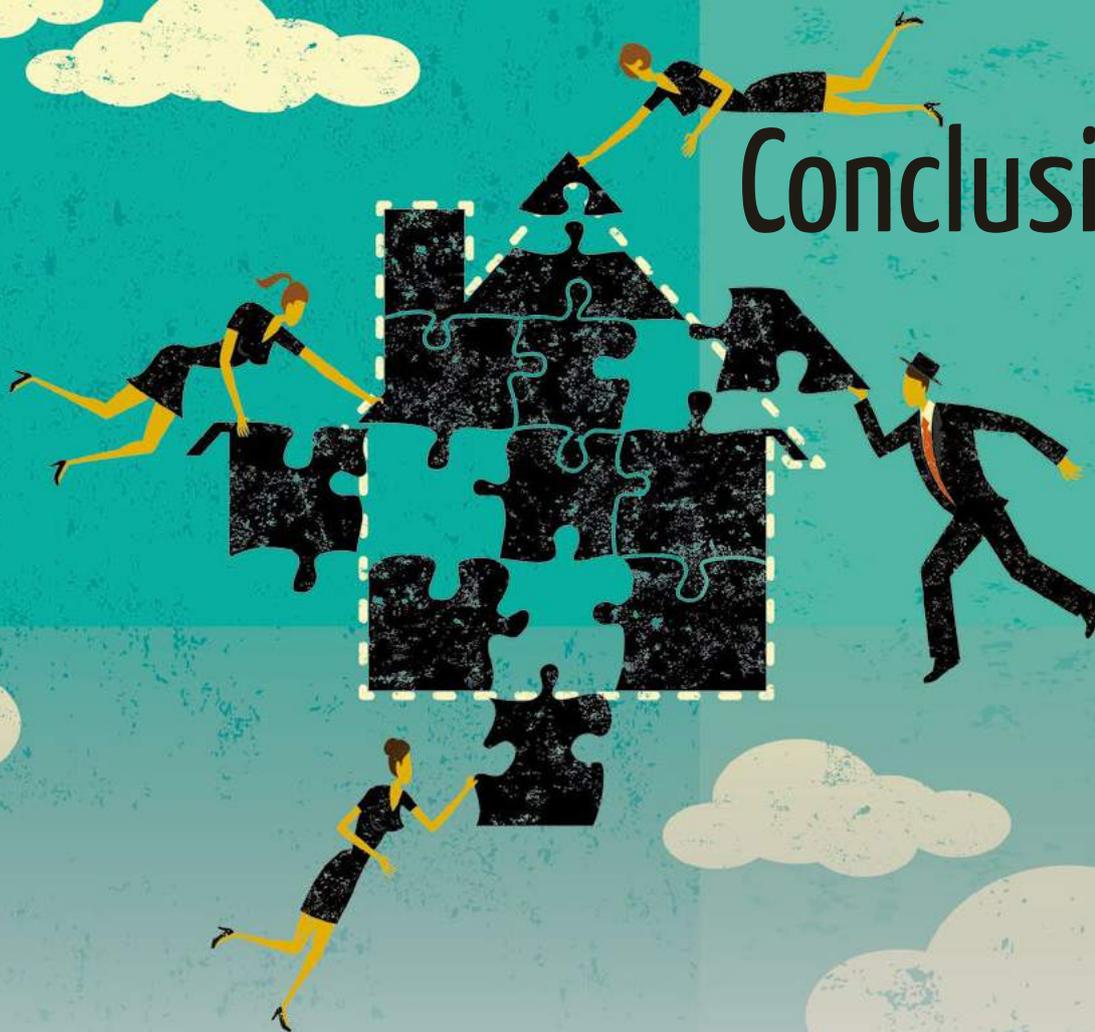
Questions regarding the structure:

-  Is the team sufficiently small so that members can interact with each other on a face-to-face basis?
-  Is it possible to conduct regular team meetings and effective exchanges?
-  Are the team meetings interesting, concisely designed and geared towards concrete results?
-  Has sufficient time been allocated for decisions, so that solutions can be developed with which all members can identify?

Questions regarding team leadership:

-  Does each team member receive recognition for his performance?
-  Does the team leadership rotate in accordance with individual skills and experience?
-  Is the formal team leader accepted as a leader and at the same time perceived as an equal member?
-  Is the blame for failures placed only on individual members?

Conclusion



The interplay of social and professional aspects is the main characteristic of a team. The team members are dependent on each other in dealing with the tasks to be performed. The team itself functions essentially as a social group.

Teams can perform particularly well when they have established clear rules and everyone accepts the distribution of the different roles. The team should agree on a common objective and communicate well with each other as well as with the outside world.

Each member of the team contributes his individual knowledge and skills, and assumes responsibility for his assigned tasks. Despite the relative independence with which the members work, the team still requires leadership. The team leader is primarily responsible for coordinating the team members' roles and responsibilities, and monitoring the compliance with internal rules and norms.

If problems within the team arise, or new tasks need to be assigned, a targeted team development process can be used to optimise work processes, the team structure, the distribution of tasks and responsibilities as well as leadership functions. Joint team meetings offer a useful framework for this measure.

About the Author

Helmut Hofbauer has worked since 1991 as an independent consultant, coach and trainer in employee and organisational development. His clients are large international corporations and medium-sized companies from many different sectors (e.g. automotive industry, electrical industry, banks, services sector), academies and non-profit organisations. He advises and develops leaders and assists in the implementation of change processes.

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