Introduction

What Makes an Effective Team?

Teams are where business is done. Whether it's a team within one department, an interdisciplinary or interdepartmental group, or a team that includes outside parties such as contractors or clients, it's people working together that creates success.

Yet, not all teams are effective. Some groups seem to gel and work together effortlessly, whereas in others strife and struggle seem to be the norm, with work progressing in fits and starts. Why the difference? What makes an effective team, and more important, how can your employees learn to create teams that crystallize instead of clash?

Let's start examining these questions with a brief discussion of what an effective team is and the research on what makes good ones work. I'll then identify a set of skills that, when adopted, lead to the characteristics of effective teamwork.

Effective Teams

What is meant by "effective" teamwork? While definitions may differ, when I talk about it I'm referring to a group of people who work well together to create outstanding outcomes. After all, this is in the realm of business, where results matter. While many approaches focus on how to set objectives and reach them, interpersonal skills are important to ensure that the team collaborates well to achieve their outcomes.

Interpersonal skills are often referred to in business as "soft skills." Though this term implies a devaluing of these skills, in fact more and more employers and leaders recognize that soft skills are important. As many as three-quarters of business leaders think that these skills are even more important than job-specific (so called "hard") skills.[1] Yet there's also a skills gap here, as many people and businesses focus their skill-building and professional development offerings on the job-specific skills, not on communication and collaboration.

Most people began learning their social interaction skills in preschool—we were (hopefully) taught how to play well in the sandbox. There's a prevailing assumption that if you learned those skills in preschool, you will continue to play well with others now. Yet, as any manager knows, often the interpersonal skills that allow a team to be effective are missing.

Fortunately, there's an increasingly large body of research pointing toward what makes an effective team and the skills that matter most. As one example, Patrick Lencioni has written extensively about teams, both what makes them work and what doesn't. He identifies five dysfunctions of a team: absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. He suggests that some of the characteristics of a high performing team include comfort in asking for help and admitting mistakes and taking risks in offering feedback.[2]

Recent research at Google points in a similar direction, showing that what distinguishes effective teams is *how people interact*. Having the right set of behavioral norms makes teams better at working together and achieving their goals, because these norms create a sense of psychological safety. People feel like they can take interpersonal risks and speak their mind without fear of embarrassment or rejection. Respect and trust characterize the interactions between team members. What are the norms that researchers identified? First, people share the stage approximately equally, so everyone on the team contributes, raising the collective intelligence. Second, people exhibit social sensitivity—they intuit how others are feeling based on nonverbal cues. In other words, they empathize.[3]

Thus, with an increasing amount of work being done in teams or through collaboration,[4] it pays to pay attention to the skills that make effective collaboration possible.

The Skills That Matter

So what are some of the skills that are essential for teams to work? Here are some of the skills I've found that increase team effectiveness.

Self-Connection

Connecting with yourself is a fundamental skill that helps you return to presence and choice when experiencing a stress response. Interactions at work often trigger a basic Fight-Flight-Freeze response—people interpret some level of danger. Experiencing stress limits our options to respond in a way that enhances collaboration, whereas connecting to ourselves gives us a greater possibility to connect with others. While lots of means of self-connection exist, I use a simple breath-body-needs practice that can be done as a daily exercise and quickly in the heat of the moment.

Listening

One of the fundamental skills that helps build *psychological safety* among people is to listen. Most people may think they listen fairly well already, but I'm talking about listening to the speaker's satisfaction (not to the listener's). That means including a few other skills that help the speaker know that they've been heard, such as listening for the needs they're trying to meet, repeating back what the listener heard and checking if that was what the speaker wanted to be heard, and clarifying what the speaker would like from the interaction. It's listening that includes empathy.

Why is listening in this way so important? Because when people know they've been heard to their satisfaction, and then in turn they

hear others in the same way, it *builds trust* between people. With this kind of listening, over time people know they can be vulnerable. They can say the things that might be difficult to say, yet would help the team move forward, with the confidence that there will not be personal repercussions.

Making Clear Requests and Agreements

The ability to make clear requests and agreements (and help others make them too) is another fundamental skill that is unfortunately not taught, as it is essential to teamwork. In teams where these skills are lacking, requests may be vague and open to interpretation. People may leave a meeting without a well-defined understanding of who is doing what and by when. These skills ensure that everyone is on the same page, and support people to be more *accountable* and pay more attention to *results*.

Having Difficult Conversations

Any time two or more people work together, conflict is likely to occur. In fact, in team situations, conflict between different perspectives is often necessary to arrive at solutions that will create greater success. Yet these are often missed opportunities, due to the fear of conflict and the inability to have these potentially difficult conversations in a way that creates connection and resolves the conflict with forward movement.

In truth, there are multiple skills at work here. One is the ability to prepare for a conversation through addressing any judgments of the other people, the situation, or yourself. Another is the ability to have the conversation with a level of presence that allows people to listen to one another even when tensions rise. Finally, there's a skill to debriefing the conversation so that instead of going into more judgment, people learn from what occurred and are then better able to meet their needs going forward.

Taking these skills together, there's a clear cycle here that I call the learning cycle. When team members can prepare, have, and debrief their conversation, interactions can take on an upward spiraling effect, with people using the self-reflective process to continuously work toward their own and the team's needs. As these conversations become the group norm, the elements of *psychological safety* are generated in this repeated cycle. Respectful conversations where people listen in order to create connection engender *trust*. People also develop increased *social sensitivity* as they are more attuned to listening for what's going on behind someone's words.

As the team creates, one conversation at a time, their creations are then enhanced as the team works ever better together.

Interrupting

People are often taught it's impolite to interrupt. In my view, it's actually more impolite to let a person continue beyond what I can take in. Since people are taught not to interrupt, however, they're also not taught the skill of interrupting in a way that creates connection instead of disconnection.

In a team meeting, knowing how to interrupt is a valuable skill, as it can help keep people on track, get to the point more quickly, and foster cohesiveness. This is not interrupting for interruptions sake or to get your point across—it's interrupting to increase clarity, make a request, or create something greater for the group as a whole.

Giving and Receiving Feedback

Feedback is crucial to team members' ability to learn and grow as well as to the team being able to work together successfully. Most people have experienced attempts to give feedback that backfired—whether on the giving or receiving end. In my view, this is often because people are disconnected, either from themselves or from one another.

Learning the skill of giving feedback while focusing on the quality

of connection makes it more likely the feedback will contribute to the receiver. When this skill is present, people can also receive feedback— even that given judgmentally—in a positive and enriching manner. Finally, knowing how to give feedback from connection increases the likelihood that people will take risks in offering it—one of the characteristics of a high performing team.

Expressing Appreciation

Expressing appreciation or gratitude is actually a subset of giving feedback, however it's helpful to separate it as a separate skill since, in some places, expressing appreciation is such an alien concept. The way it was expressed in my boyhood and the people I worked with was, "Why would I say 'good job'—they're supposed to do a good job! I'll tell them when they *aren't* doing a good job!" Unfortunately, this is all too often the prevailing attitude in the workplace.

Nonetheless, especially in teamwork, expressing appreciation goes a long way toward creating a culture not only where people work well together, but also where outcomes shine. People who feel valued and acknowledged are often desirous of contributing even more. Building into a team the norms of expressing gratitude, acknowledging others for their contribution, and celebrating when things go well engender increased respect and trust. These are exactly the kind of overlooked soft skills that produce excellent teams.

Why Focus on Interpersonal Skills?

One of the difficulties for business leaders is that often it's only when obvious dysfunction exists that the need for these kinds of communication skills surfaces. In reality, I would argue that these skills are essential to a business thriving and ultimately reaching its goals. But, how do we describe and justify the benefits of spending time and money on developing these skills in the workforce?

It's easier to talk about the benefit of team members learning

these skills through what is avoided. When people have the skills I've listed above, it reduces the likelihood of misinterpretations, and when those do happen, people have the skills to work them out without hurt feelings. Negative and destructive conflicts are avoided, as is the tendency for "under-the-surface" conflict that isn't addressed to undermine relationships and the team.

When people are in touch with themselves and what needs they would like met, they are less likely to say things that create disruption, and more likely to say things that create connection. If people aren't connected to themselves, it's difficult (if not impossible) to be connected to others, and without connection, it's difficult (if not impossible) to effectively collaborate.

The skills help people be more present as well as connected to themselves, which has myriad benefits, including being clearer about their goals and priorities. Being part of a team means that professional goals are tied to team goals. One person who has clarity about goals helps the entire team hone in on the team's goals and the appropriate steps to achieve them. In addition, being present with yourself increases your enjoyment and satisfaction, helps reduce stress, and creates resilience. If you enjoy your life more, you tend to play in the sandbox well and produce a better product.

Encouraging a self-reflective process within a team enhances all of the aspects that support effective teams and boosts the sense of psychological safety that is so important to teamwork. When your employees are collaborating well, their collective intelligence is greater than the sum of its parts, generating higher quality decisions and wasting less time and resources. Collaboration—and the skills that foster it—allow for the kind of creativity and innovation that characterizes the most successful companies.

How to Use This Book

I've worked in the field of communication, conflict resolution, and mediation for more than twenty years. During that time, I've trained and coached people in more than twenty countries worldwide and

countless cultures. I've yet to find a culture in which the approach that is outlined in this book does not work. Why? Because it's fundamentally based on what is true for all of us as human beings, which runs deeper than cultural, linguistic, and national overlays. When we can meet one another as human beings first, we can find a way to collaborate.

I wrote this book to help you and your team members learn the skills that foster successful collaboration, and it draws heavily from Nonviolent Communication (NVC), a way of thinking and speaking that is particularly effective in reducing stress and conflict, creating connection, and improving collaboration.

To begin, you'll learn the foundations in Part I. The Fight-Flight-Freeze stress response, which commonly shows up in conflict situations, is our starting point, which will help you begin to recognize your triggers. I then introduce a vocabulary for naming feelings and needs—key components to this model of communication. You'll subsequently learn to apply these components in the Self-Connection Process, which is your foundation to help you return to presence and choice in situations when you are experiencing the stress response.

In Part II, you will then go on to apply these foundations in conversation. You'll practice communication skills to listen to others and be listened to, make powerful requests, prepare for and practice difficult conversations, and debrief for resilience.

Part III will cover additional applications of these skills for team collaboration, including how to interrupt effectively, give and receive meaningful and productive feedback, and express appreciation. You will practice using the inevitable challenges within the team as opportunities to connect, both with yourself and your colleagues, thus improving productivity and reducing interpersonal conflict and stress.

All of these skills make it more likely that your teams will thrive in an environment that encourages individual risk taking, and where members listen to one another's ideas regardless of the perceived differences in power within the team.

While these are the foundational skills for effective communication and collaboration, this book is not (and is not intended to be) a definitive guide to all aspects of working in teams. For a team to be effective,

other pieces must be in place, such as goals, deadlines, and metrics to measure success. Other works cover these essential aspects of team collaboration, so I do not cover them here. Nonetheless, you'll notice that the creation and maintenance of all other aspects of teamwork require and rely on effective communication. Thus, this book provides the bedrock that will help all other teamwork components to be on firm ground.

While reading this book is helpful, the only way it can make a difference in your team is through practice. Each section includes step-by-step instructions to guide you through learning the skills, and most of them are best learned by practicing with others. To help you with this, included is a section on setting up a successful practice structure, using the flight simulator metaphor. Whether you practice with people on your team or not is up to you. While the ideal situation is for all team members to be learning and practicing these skills together, you can still make a difference even if you're the only person on your team utilizing them. If you'd like to become more knowledgeable and proficient using these kinds of skills internally as well, make sure to check out the earlier companion to this work, *Words That Work in Business.*

The innovative team of the future is one where the skills of collaboration are vital to success. This book offers the building blocks upon which collaboration will grow.

1. Infographic: Communicating in the Modern Workplace. http://online.queens.edu/onlineprograms/mba/resources/infographic/communicating-in-the-workplace

2. Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

3. Charles Duhigg, "What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build The Perfect Team," *New York Times*, February 25, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html?smid=pl-share

4. Rob Cross, Reb Rebele and Adam Grant, "Collaborative Overload," *Harvard Business Review*, January–February 2016. https://hbr.org/2016/01/collaborative-overload