

Special Report

Better Teams Are As Easy As 1-2-3 (MCG)



By Ron Koller

From the desk of Ron Koller:

Introduction

Believe it or not, reality TV shows provide many great examples of teaming and team development. We thought it was about time someone tap into that well, dig below the surface a little, and hope to find something that will help real work teams. There is a lot of material to sort through and we don't intend to cover it all. Instead, we'll take a look at a few shows that provide good insight. Remarkably, these insights will lead us to a simple, yet insightful model that can help *anyone improve any team*. Before we get to that, though, let's do something thinking about the concept of teams.

We live in a culture based on individualism. Emerson's *Self-Reliance* was required reading for as far back as one can think. Our brains are hardwired to think in that way. We live in a monolithic culture. All team sports, for example, have the most valuable player (MVP) award. There was even a popular TV show in the 80s call *The Greatest American Hero*.

So, when it comes to thinking about work, it is no surprise that we most typically look at individual efforts. When success happens at work, we ask things like:

- Who did it? What did he/she do?
- Who made the sale?
- How did they think to do that?

These are all questions that assume that one person, all by himself/herself, thought of a unique idea and pulled themselves up by their bootstraps to make it happen. This recognition is part of our culture and carries over into how we look at ourselves, and at how we are evaluated by others.

The reality of success at work, however, is that it is rarely the result of one person taking the entire organization on their backs. Work is generally done with others, supported by others, or made possible by others. We almost never work totally alone. We work in groups, ongoing teams, project teams, temporary organizations or traditional organizations.

TV Reality Shows as Models of Work Teams

There are 4 popular reality shows that require aspects of teamwork. They are Dancing with the Stars, the Amazing Race, Survivor and The Apprentice. If we look at these shows we can better understand the concept of teams and the dynamics that occur.

Dancing with the Stars and the Amazing Race start and end with the same team. Every team loses except for one team. Survivor and The Apprentice, on the other hand, only have temporary teams of competitors that end up dissolving in the end as it is every man for himself.

Dancing with the Stars

The goal of a team is to dance well technically. High scores from the judges and charisma both influence audience calls that vote for a team. The level of coordination amongst the dance team is extremely high. They depend upon one another; they work tireless hours together to ensure that they are on the same page, literally, every step of the way. If one person underperforms, the whole team does bad. If you try to undermine the team by making yourself look better, you actually undermine yourself. Each person on the team has a highly specialized formal and informal role. You have to do your part for the whole team to succeed.



The Amazing Race

The goal of teams on this show is to out-perform your competitors to get the finish line first. You can choose very different ways to accomplish the mission. All the teams are racing against the clock. You have to choose between tasks, difficulty and time. Resources are also an issue in some instances. The Amazing Race has some degree of coordination, but varies depending on the team's strategy. A team may have a dominant team member that downplays the coordination, for example. Though unlikely, an individual can still win in the Amazing race if they have a superior strategy. One person on a team can under-perform and still not lose if their partner makes up for it. Specialization is very important here. Someone has to be good with map navigation, communication, pressure decision making, recovery decision making and critical thinking.

Survivor

The goal of survivor is to outlast your competition, while winning the respect and votes of these same competitors. Survivor has high coordination during the team competitions. People also maintain alliances during their tribal council, so social coordination remains high. If you screw your teammates, you don't get immunity and increase the likelihood of getting voted off. Specialization changes from day to day depending on the task. One may be the most competent for many tasks, but be completely incompetent at other tasks.



The Apprentice

The Apprentice also has a high coordination during the team competitions. Unlike Survivor, coordination on the Apprentice dissolves at the meeting in the Boardroom. At that point, it is about every person for themselves. The Apprentice is more about being out for yourself; even if your team loses, if you conduct yourself professionally, you may still move on if you win the vote of "the Donald".

Summary

	Ultimate goal	Coordination/ Dependency	Specialization
Dancing with the stars	Contestant and professional win	Self & professional partner	High
Amazing race	Both contestants win	Partners	Medium
Survivor	Team does not win; only 1 individual wins	Self and competitors in the beginning; self at the end	Low
The Apprentice	Team does not win; only 1 individual wins	Self and competitors in the beginning, self at the end	High

Common Elements in Reality Teams and Business Teams

We can learn and improve by looking at work performance from a reality team perspective. We should ask the following questions when on a team yourself:

- Who is on the team?
- What role do I play?
- What roles do others play?
- To what degree are we interdependent?
- How much do we need to synchronize as we work?
- What are the rules?
- What is our common goal?
- Are we ‘working’ well together?

Do we always think to answer these questions when joining a team? We should! One usually thinks of the above questions when thinking about how teams function on **reality TV shows**. They are important questions, and they point to some consistent aspects of teams versus groups. Jack Gibb^{1*} (1964) identified several components used to build trust and relationship among groups of people. From this, we summarize the critical success factors (CSF) of a team as:

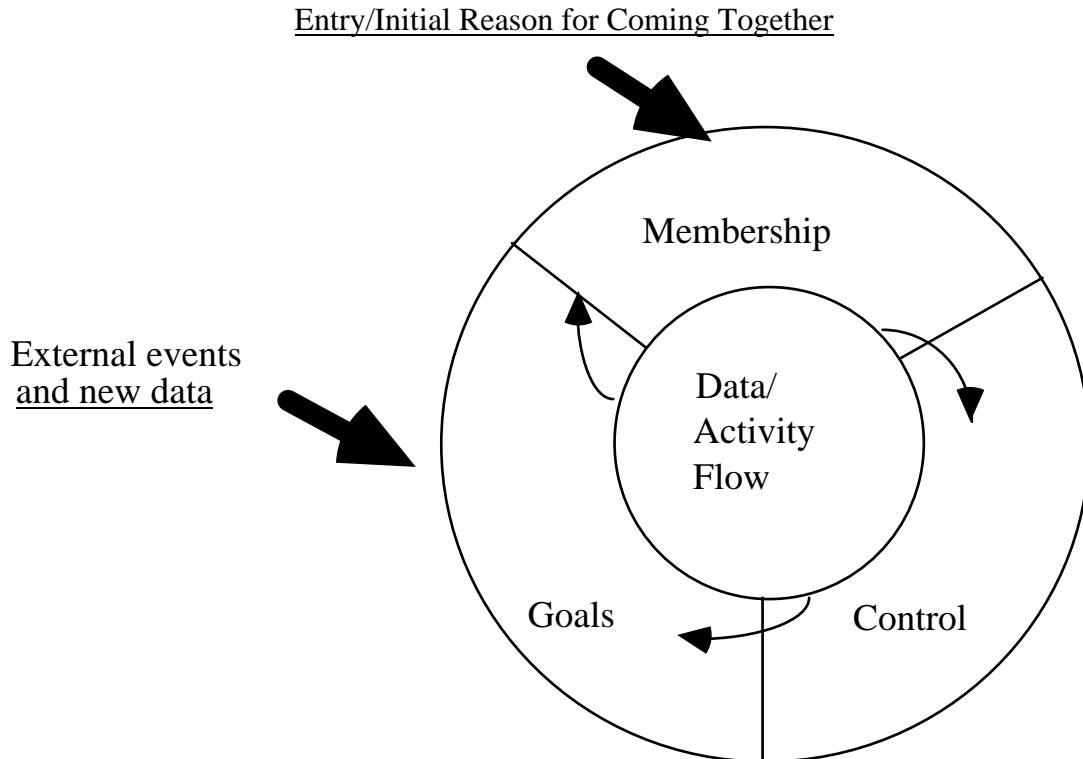
- Membership
- Control
- Goals
- Activity flow

*You’ll notice that for a research report, this one has only one reference. In a nutshell, this one reference is *THAT* powerful; it deserves a whole report devoted to its findings.

These CSFs refer to the key process categories or issues of teamwork.

- Membership: focused on identifying who is on the team, why, and what roles they play
- Control: concerned with how the activity of the members is directed, decided and coordinated
- Goals: identify the purpose(s) toward which team member activity is directed and how well progress is being made
- Activity flow: the energy or motivating force for ongoing team development

The more we do together, the more we know about each other, how we work together, and how well we are at achieving our common goal. To put this in a framework, we plot the model on the diagram below:



It should be noted that this is a model for *functioning* groups. Patrick Lencioni has shed considerable light on the dysfunctions of teams. His work is very commendable. It is worth pointing out that this model comes from the same roots, but provides a different glimpse into teams.

In any group, there is a reason for coming together. Whenever anyone first comes into a group, there are entry issues. This may be determined by the people themselves, or they may be there because somebody else wanted them to be apart of the group. For example, at work some people may get together voluntarily to address a common issue. In another instance, different people may be meeting for the first time as members of a committee to design ways to improve a product. Yet another case is when all members are selected by someone else who assigned them to a committee. In any case, no matter how clear the purpose for coming together is, it is not yet a goal of the group. In a very real sense, the team has not yet come together.

In such a situation, the first issues to be addressed are ones of membership. Membership includes answering such questions as:

- Who are the other people here?
- Why are they here?
- Why am I here? Do I belong here?
- What is my role with this group?

These questions are often not asked out loud, but we do ask them (and similar questions) to ourselves when we first enter a new group. If people are preoccupied with these questions, still needing answers to feel comfortable, then they will not fully enter into a full working relationship on a team with others. They need to establish a minimum level of trust.

Once people are sufficiently comfortable (trusting) of being in the team, the next set of issues that most typically arise are concerns with control. Control has to do with power in the group: how the group makes decision, who leads, how disputes are settled, etc. In most work settings this is fairly clear because the heads of committees may be appointed. In groups that come together voluntarily, there may need to be some sort of clarifying.

Once people are satisfied about membership and control, meaning they are comfortable with who is on the team and that there is “fair” system for power/control, they naturally begin to work on what it is they want to accomplish – goals.

Again, with a mandated group, this may be merely a routine double-check of the assignment given to a committee. Often, however, people have slightly different ideas about what they think the group should accomplish. “Are we just supposed to come up with recommendations, or are we supposed to do some research on product improvement, or are we supposed to actually develop the product?” may be one type of question.

For membership, control, and goals, the questions and issues are real and important. This does not mean that a lot of time needs to be spent addressing them, just enough so the members can proceed to work together well. Often knowing the names, job titles, or responsibilities of the other people is enough for beginning to feel comfortable with whom they are on a committee. In other cases, we need to ask for, or give, more information to build the common data that are required to work smoothly with each other.

For any group to come together as a team, it is critical that everybody be clear about what the team's goal is, and that members of the team share that goal. They may have other goals, as well. If people have differing goals, or have individual goals that are counter to the team's stated goal, these need to be aired or they will result in "hidden agendas" that inhibit the success of the team.

Beginning to work on a goal leads to membership issues again, only at a "deeper" level, thus starting a new cycle. For example, a group might say, "Now that we've agreed what will be accomplished, we need to decide who will do what parts of the work (role / membership and control)."

Complicating issues

This is all fairly straightforward so far. In well functioning teams these issues are part of the healthy process that emerges when people work smoothly together, and often need no special attention. There are, however, some complications. It is the complications perhaps that make this model useful because it can serve as guide for "corrective" action.

The first complication is that this process of Membership, Control, and Goal is a continuing cycle as long as the team continues to function. Once a goal is mutually understood, and it is agreed who will do what to achieve it, the process of working to achieve the goal leads to the "deeper" level. It is "deeper" because people are familiar with the surface issues, but as they work together they will inevitably need to:

1. Know more about each other (dependability, work habits, strengths, weaknesses, etc.)
2. Have effective ways to deal with differing burdens of work assignments (especially if "what you do affects my work"); and
3. Check whether the continued work is sufficiently on track with the stated goal, or if the goal needs to be changed.

As this is going on, each member is constantly adding new information (not "internal data flow" in the diagram) about the others, and about the common effort.

A second complication arises when a group is mixed -- some members of long standing, and some new ones. If we still desire to build an effective team of everyone, we must attend to the social factors that tend to reinforce two groups: "old timers" and "new people." The newer members will have different entry membership issues than ongoing members, especially because the others have gone through a number of "data flow" cycles. Some time in the course of working together must be spent bringing the new people "on board," both with work information and in terms of recognizing that there is now a new group formed (or forming).

There may be immediate control or goal issues as well. Take, for example, the situation of a long standing office team that gets a new manager. This new member is also a key

player in terms of control, authority, etc. that needs to be recognized; at the same time s/he may need to learn a lot about the previous work of the team, about the people themselves, and about how the team has worked together in the past.

A third set of complications arise when teams are not working well. We've all seen it. Being able to identify which issues are impeding the team (as opposed to shortcomings or obstacles that affect individuals) can help bring the team on track. (This can also help get it on track if it has never functioned well.) As the above diagram and discussion indicate, the normal flow is:

1. Come together (or join) for external reason/purpose;
2. Establish comfort, trust, and other entry/membership needs;
3. Clarify power/control rules and procedures;
4. Address goals and work toward achieving them.
5. Continue cycling through deeper in stages 2 through 4

As a general rule, an apparent breakdown in one of these areas usually means that the previous set of issues is not sufficiently resolved for all members of the team.

For example, if a team member consistently questions how decisions are made, somebody else's right to make a decision, or wanting to do somebody else's job, it indicates a breakdown in the control area. What is usually called for, therefore, is to "back up" and clarify or establish some membership issue. In this example it might be that the team members feels that s/he is not recognized as having become more competent or professional than before (a new definition of role), and therefore expecting his/her views or responsibilities to be given more weight by others. Unless this is resolved as a membership/role issue, there will continue to be a breakdown in the control area. The same idea of "backing up" applies to trying to resolve any breakdown in the team development or team maintenance process.

Conclusion

Successful teaming need not be a mystery in organizations. With all the consultants and trainers creating their own models over the years, things have become a bit confusing. The model we presented in this article is based on the very first documented model on teams in business. Strip down any other model that you work with and you'll see that it fits with this model. Teams really can be as easy as 1-2-3, M-C-G.

References

- ¹ Gibb, J. R. (1964). Climate for trust formation. In L. P. Bradford, J. R. Gibb, & K. Benne (Eds.), *T-group Theory and Laboratory Method* (pp. 279-308). New York: Wiley.