

Three drivers help 'working groups' become true teams

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While all teams are groups, not all groups are *teams*, as three paradoxes make true teamwork rare.

The purpose of a team is to complete tasks that cannot otherwise be achieved by an individual, says team coach and leadership specialist **Bernard Desmidt**.

"I often find that team members interchangeably call themselves the [leadership 'group'](#) and [the leadership 'team'](#)," he says in his new book, [Team Better Together](#).

"Much can be different in a name. When invited to reflect on the differences between a group and a team, most do not see the distinctions. Groups and teams differ significantly and both have a role and place, albeit dissimilar."

This creates the first paradox of a high-performing team, he says.

Teams are key to organisational performance

Where employers often seek to leverage teamwork to drive high organisational performance, Desmidt says a lack of purpose stops a group of employees from becoming a team.

Without a shared purpose or goal, these employees instead form working groups.

"[Groups] comprise individuals who only come together to inform each other of progress in their respective areas of responsibility and to share information that may be relevant to others," he says.

"Teams do not become teams because they call themselves teams or because they have engaged in some 'team building' activity. Team building may help in getting to know people better, but discipline is essential to achieving as a team."

True teamwork is distinguished by a commitment to [engage and relate with teammates](#), as well as *combining* complementary skills, knowledge and perspectives to overcome challenges.

"Working groups function well in certain contexts where complexity is low and the objectives are straightforward. However, they become less effective as the environment becomes more complex and the objectives become more challenging," explains Desmidt.

"When identifying and seizing synergies become a prerequisite for survival and long-term sustainability, a group must evolve into a team or it will drift into oblivion."

Three drivers for powerful teams

Desmidt says the second paradox is that true teams are as rare as they are powerful.

Employees work best when motivated by autonomy, mastery and purpose, and teams provide the space and structure to leverage these drivers.

As a result, these motivators are also the "source of power in teams".

When working with **purpose**, team members will value their collaborative work at least as much as their individual work.

"Teams are at their best when their energy, passion and commitment are ignited by the continuous challenge to add real value to the organisation and its stakeholders," he says.

"Having a clear and common purpose inspires team members to identify why they need each other in order to achieve the critical challenges."

Similarly, teams that [work autonomously](#) exist to "access collective wisdom to bring about new thinking and to create new ways of achieving the best outcomes".

Finally, teams driven by **mastery** provide a depth of resourcefulness by bringing together complementary skills that exceed those of any one person on the team.

"High-performing teams distinguish themselves by the responsibility each member takes for their own and each other's learning," says Desmidt.

"The openness to seek and offer feedback is fundamental to developing individual and collective mastery. Team members commit to learn with and from each other and collectively evolve and grow."



Bernard Desmidt

Collective capacity and capability

Teams have a collective capacity and capability for high performance and knowledge sharing, but "most teams operate at less than the sum of their parts", says Desmidt.

This is the foundation for the third paradox, as "having the brightest and most experienced team members with diverse skills and attributes does not necessarily guarantee access to the power and potential in a team".

To promote high-performing teamwork, Desmidt highlights five "enabling conditions":

- a known mandate from the team's stakeholders;
- a unifying purpose for why the team exists;
- agreed and committed ways of working, including how team members engage with each other;
- common performance goals to hold the team accountable, which "can be achieved only by working interdependently"; and
- commitment to learn with and from each other to evolve the collective wisdom.

"Although the potential and power of teamwork cannot be denied, it can be difficult to measure and achieve. While teams may have access to infinite potential, it's not a given," he says.

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