

RESTORING BROKEN TEAMS



What really works to guide teams from
troubled to high performing.

BY STEVE GLADIS AND CONNIE WHITTAKER DUNLOP



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ina is the leader and newest member of a troubled business development team at a Washington, DC-based government contractor. She has noticed silos forming across her team and suspects that at least two of her team members are planning to leave. She doubts that her team will be able to deliver the next major proposal on time. Somewhat panicked, she calls Manoj to ask for his help.

Manoj is Nina's talent development business partner and helps her connect the business development strategy to people processes and outcomes, including talent acquisition, learning, and performance management. This is not the first time that Manoj has been on the receiving end of a panic call like this one. Over the years, he has developed and deployed a three-part strategy for troubled teams: personality, communication, behavior change. First, Manoj helps the team understand team members' personalities. Then, he teaches the team how to best communicate with each other. Finally, he leaves it up to the team members to change problematic behaviors. Problem solved. Or is it?

In more than 200 studies conducted during the span of 40 years, Richard Hackman, Ruth Wageman, and other organization development researchers at Harvard University uncovered a surprising truth about teams: The process of building awareness of personality types, teaching communication, and delegating behavior change rarely improves team performance. They encouraged leaders to take a different, yet proven, approach that involves designing, (re)launching, and coaching teams.

Designing the team begins with an assessment of team performance (focus 60 percent of team leadership efforts here). Launching or relaunching the team establishes the team's mission, vision, values, norms, goals, and objectives (30 percent). Coaching gets the whole team working as one (10 percent). Hackman and Wageman's 60-30-10 rule suggests that team leaders should first focus their energy where they can have the greatest impact on team effectiveness: designing the team.

Designing the team

Effective teams are not born; they are designed. Indeed, that is precisely what Harvard organizational development researchers Wageman, Hackman, and Erin Lehman discovered. In fact, Wageman often says that "Structure [design] drives behavior." Thus, when people on a team start to act out—form silos, talk behind backs, or are disgruntled—look first at the team structure. The Harvard research reveals six design conditions—three essential conditions and three enabling conditions—that collectively account

for 80 percent of the variance in team performance. Let's first look at the three essential conditions: real team, right people, and compelling purpose.

Real team:

- **Bounded.** Everyone knows who is on the team, which for overly large teams is often not the case. Also, it is clear how each person on the team is critical to the team's mission and strategy.
- **Interdependent.** Team members are working and focused on the same goals and objectives. Their success depends on each other. No silos.
- **Stable.** Talent turnover is minimal. Teams need to be together long enough to know and depend on each other's strengths and perspectives.

Right people:

- **Diversity.** Team members have different perspectives and cognitive strengths, and they understand those valuable differences.
- **Skills.** People have all the skills required to meet the team's challenges—including experience. Those skills include technical and professional skills, plus teamwork skills.

Compelling purpose:

- **Clear.** Team members must be able to visualize the purpose with real clarity.
- **Challenging.** The team's purpose must push team members but not break their spirits.
- **Consequential.** The team's purpose must have an impact on others' lives, not just on the team itself.

The three enabling conditions are sound structure, supportive context, and coaching.

Sound structure:

- **Task design.** The problem requires a team to solve it, and each member's experience and skill are required to solve the problem.
- **Team size.** Often teams are too large. The research favors teams with fewer than 10 members—ideally four to seven people.
- **Team norms.** Teams need rules of behavior—how teammates work with and treat each other. Spell out norms at the start of a team.

Supportive context:

- **Rewards and recognition.** Focus pay and recognition primarily on team, not individual, results.

- **Information.** Team members get data on time and in the manner they need it and can use it.
- **Education and consultation.** The team has support and technical help when needed.
- **Resources.** The team gets the resources—space, technology, vehicles—that it needs to operate successfully.

Coaching:

- **Available.** Coaching is available whenever needed.
- **Helpful.** The coach is specifically experienced at team coaching.

An informal team-assessment exercise that any team can perform consists of the following: Ask team members to rate each of the six conditions from 1 to 5 (with 1 being low and 5 being high). Then look at which ones are rated 3 or below as good places to start redesigning. Note that while such an informal exercise may be directional (allows leaders to immediately focus), it is neither highly valid nor reliable as is the more formal survey developed at Harvard.

Nina decided to assess her team using the Team Diagnostic Survey (which Hackman and Wageman developed) administered by a trained assessor, and she was surprised by the results. Nina’s team members reported mediocre performance on the essential conditions. Some team members did not feel that the team was stable or that their work was interdependent. Others reported that the team lacked cognitive diversity and a clear purpose. With the team’s assessment in hand, Nina and Manoj were ready to consider the four critical elements of a team: people, leader, culture, and strategy.

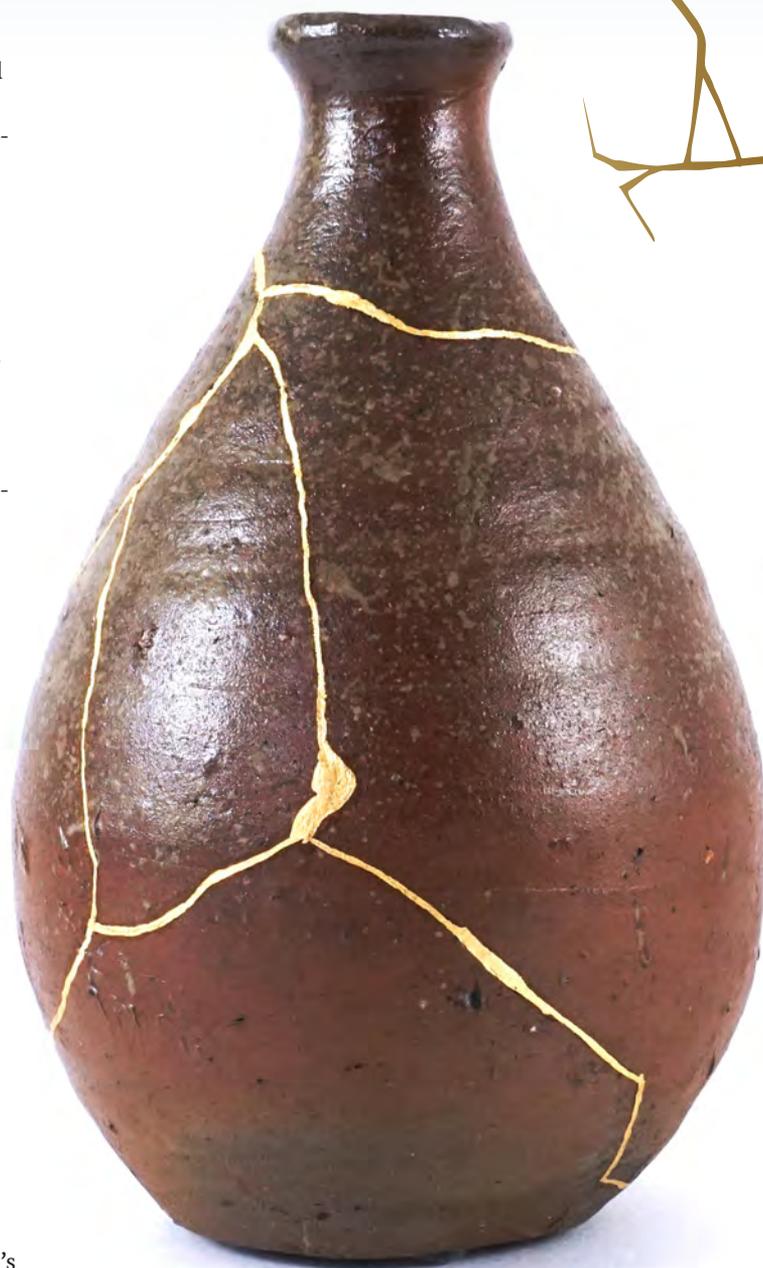
Researchers Steve and Kim Gladis uncovered those elements following an extensive review of leadership literature. More specifically, they found that the people on a team must be diverse, engaged, and autonomous. The team’s leader must be trusted and have character, competence, and compassion. The team’s culture must feel safe, connected, and purposeful. And the team’s strategy must answer questions about why, what, and how.

Manoj and Nina talked extensively about the four critical elements of Nina’s team. They decided to start with the team’s strategy, bringing team members together to answer key questions and relaunching the team.

(Re)launching the team

A team relaunch occurs when an existing team undergoes change, such as adding a new team leader or member. Conversely, a team launch occurs when a new team forms for the first time—for example, during the initiation of a new project. Launching or relaunching a team involves defining or redefining the team’s mission, vision, values, norms, goals, and objectives.

Team mission. The team mission defines the team’s purpose. During the relaunch workshops, which Manoj facilitated, Nina and her team members drafted this team mission statement: “Our team exists to develop, deliver,



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and capture large-scale infrastructure and technology deals with federal government clients.”

It is important to recognize that the team’s mission reinforces, but is distinct from, the organization’s mission. The organization’s mission statement answers one question: Why does the organization exist? Conversely, the team’s mission statement answers a different question: Why does the team exist?

Team vision. The team vision points to what the team aspires to be in the future or what it will deliver in the future. Guided by Manoj during the relaunch workshops, Nina’s team crafted this team vision statement in support of its team mission: “To be considered the gold standard for business development in government contracting by our clients.” The team vision statement focuses on the group’s future and how the team supports the organization’s vision.

Team values. Even though the team’s vision may change over time, team values are more enduring. The latter are shared principles that help team members determine what is good or bad. Through a team values exercise that Manoj facilitated, Nina and her team learned that they collectively value transparency, collaboration, and trust. Team members agree to live the team values and to hold each other to the same standard.

Team norms. While values provide general guidelines for team member behavior, team norms are more specific. They are the agreements that define how team members work together. Manoj helped the team establish norms by asking such questions as “How should team members act toward each other?” An example of one of the norms that Nina and her team agreed upon is “to protect the team.” Effective teams set expectations about how team members should and should not behave.

Team goals and objectives. These detail what the team needs to do to fulfill its mission and achieve its vision. Like a good GPS, team goals point the team in the right direction (north) and team objectives provide detailed instructions (take a right on Main Street). Manoj led a discussion with Nina and her team about team goals, including the need “to establish a Capture Center of Excellence by July 1.” These objectives supported that team goal:

- Conduct research on existing centers from similar organizations by February 1.
- Complete an internal assessment of best-in-class business capture efforts by March 31.
- Design a Capture Center of Excellence and test design elements by June 15.
- Review with senior management by July 1.



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Following the relaunch workshops, Manoj documented the team's mission, vision, values, norms, goals, and objectives in a team charter. With the team charter in hand, Manoj was ready to focus on the third and final step.

Coaching the team

The International Coaching Federation defines coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.” Team coaching takes that definition one step further—to maximize the team's potential, in addition to maximizing individual team members' potential. Team coaching involves checking team progress and solving team problems.

Team progress check. Team coaching starts with tracking the current status against the goals and objectives that the team defined during the team launch or relaunch. Team coaching for progress includes looking back at what team members said they would accomplish, as well as looking forward to setting future priorities. Team coaching conversations may reference a team dashboard or scorecard, which tracks progress on team objectives. Team coaching for progress should occur at least once a month.

Team problem solving. Team coaching for problem solving uses the coach-approach model: problem, present state, possible, and plan. First, the team coach identifies a problem that a team member faces and asks open-ended questions, such as: What is the most important issue that the team or a member of the team is facing? Second, the team coach examines the present state or the “as is” as it relates to the problem by asking more questions, such as: What are the underlying issues and what impact are they having on you, the team, or the team's goals and objectives?

Next, the team coach explores what is possible by considering the “to be” and encouraging the team to describe the ideal future state. Finally, the team coach makes a plan by determining what actions the team or specific team members will take and when they will take action. Team coaching for problem solving should also occur at least monthly.

A month following the team relaunch workshops, Manoj brought the team together for its first team

coaching session. The first half of the two-hour session focused on the team's progress against goals and objectives that team members had defined together during team relaunch workshops. Manoj reviewed the team charter and asked the owner of each goal to report their progress, share any roadblocks, and confirm or renegotiate the agreed-upon timeline. In this part of the coaching session, Oscar, owner of the goal to establish a Capture Center of Excellence, pushed his timeline from July 1 to August 15 and described how he struggled to find good benchmarks for studying centers of excellence.

The second half of the session focused on solving problems that cut across the team. Manoj began this part of the team coaching session by asking team members to write down one or two problems that they currently faced or anticipated facing that may impede the team's ability to reach its goals. Then Manoj called on team members, asking them to describe the problems they had identified.

Oscar's benchmarking issue resurfaced. Nina asked: “How are you defining the term *center of excellence*?” Oscar responded, “Well, that's the real problem. Different organizations seem to define it differently.”

Manoj jumped in, saying, “Do others agree? What's your definition of a center of excellence?” With answers to those questions, Manoj uncovered the present state—that the team lacked a shared definition—and that the absence of a shared definition had potential negative impacts for multiple team goals. Nina also surfaced the possibility that senior leaders in the organization may not agree upon the definition.

Manoj guided the team in formulating a plan to research definitions that are being used inside the organization, in academia, and across the industry. Manoj closed the session by setting the expectation that next month's coaching session would include discussing progress on that important research. Manoj's coaching helped the team check its progress and begin to solve a significant problem.

Answer the call for help

Leading a team will challenge any leader. The next time a talent development professional is on the receiving end of a “help” call from a troubled team leader, remember that the model of personality, communication, and behavior change rarely works. However, the model of designing, (re)launching, and coaching teams does.

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