Be Clear About How Your Team Works

Foster the Right Team Culture

Why Effective Team Management Is Key to Becoming a Great Boss

Excerpted from

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The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader

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1:45 p.m.   After lunch, Jason takes a short walk to think about his conversation with Roberto. Why don't we talk more about Project Emerge's purpose? What we're doing is good for everyone.

Now, as he returns, he again stops by Cavit's office in hopes of talking about getting salespeople assigned to Project Emerge and time allotted at Sales Conference. Cavit is there but unavailable. Jason stays a few minutes and chats with Cavit's assistant about finding a school for his children when (*if*, he thinks) they eventually move to London.

2:00 p.m.   An e-mail arrives from Kathy Wu, the Project Emerge assistant editor in Boston. She wants to set a time to talk next week. Jason reads the two-line message three times. Setting up a formal phone appointment feels ominous. It crosses his mind she may be planning to quit because of her disagreements with Sumantra, who insists Jason is her boss because he's senior editor. Jason replies and offers some possible times.

2:06 p.m.   He picks up the information from Sumantra about the IFTE and begins to look through it.

2:09 p.m.   Cavit's assistant calls and says, "Don't tell Jack I told you, but if you go to the smoking area behind the building, you'll find him there around 4:30. A word to the wise: let him have a puff or two before you interrupt him. He'll be much friendlier if you do."

2:14 p.m.   Jason hears raised voices somewhere across the open office area. He gets up to see what's going on.

The noise is coming from Laraba Sule's cubicle, where a small cluster of people is gathered around her computer: Laraba, Sumantra, Jay, Roberto, and Kim. As he approaches from behind them, he hears Jay's raised voice, followed by Sumantra's.

"You *cannot* use this content," says Sumantra, Project Emerge senior editor. "They have not allowed it. How can we work with the other imprints when you simply steal their content?"

"It's a *promotion* piece, Sumantra," says Jay, the online production manager. "We're not selling it. Nobody's paying for it. It's just information about the course." His rising anger and frustration are unmistakable.

"It's only an orientation piece, Sumantra," Laraba says, her voice both pleading and conciliatory. "It's not the course itself. Why would anyone care? This was due to the Web people yesterday. They're already angry at us, and if we don't give it to them now, we'll miss the revisions they're making in the company site. Why can't we use it?"

"Because in describing the Introduction to Programming course it shows content that we do not have permission to use. It describes a course we cannot offer in the form we're showing it."

"All right, Sumantra," says Jay. "Why don't you tell us why we can't use that content."

"The imprints that own it haven't given their permission."

"And why haven't they?" Jay asks belligerently.

"I don't . . . I suppose they wish to use the content themselves."

"What's stopping them? If we use the content, so what?"

"They think we are competing with them," Sumantra says.

"Really? Our course will only be available to students at schools in developing countries. That's not their market."

"They think we are preventing them from seeking that mar—"

"Look, Sumantra," Jay says, "I'll tell you the real problem. The real problem is you—you won't do your job. You're supposed to design the course *and* secure the material, but you don't have the courage—"

"Stop!" Jason calls out as he steps into the cubicle. Everyone turns and looks at him. "Jay, that's over the line."

Jay's face is flushed, his mouth set, eyes glaring. Sumantra looks at the floor, shocked. Laraba, mouth agape, looks from Jay to Jason and back.

"This discussion is over," Jason says. "Jay, bring the promo and come with me to room A. Sumantra, come to room A in fifteen minutes. The rest of you—please join us in about twenty minutes, and tell the others who aren't here to come too."

Jason stands and waits. Kim and Roberto step away silently. Sumantra slips away without looking at anyone. Laraba turns to her e-mail. Jay follows Jason to the meeting room.

Who can do good work in the midst of confusion about who does what, how the work gets done, how members work with each other, and how the team is doing?

These issues may not seem momentous—purpose and goals may seem more important and are certainly more glamorous—but they matter profoundly because they constitute the culture of your team.[1] Without the right culture, team members are unlikely to take responsibility for their work or commit themselves to it and the purpose and goals around it.

Think of culture as the infrastructure of a team, like the infrastructure of a society—the transport systems (roads, railroads, airports, canals), the education system, laws and regulations, governance structures (government, police, courts), trade agreements, and so on—that guides how that society functions. Infrastructure does nothing productive itself, but it makes everything else possible. Team culture, like infrastructure, *enables* productive work. If you get the culture wrong, nothing else your team does is likely to work well.

Culture is crucial to the trust that links team members because it defines what they expect of each other. Remember, we said trust is counting on someone to do the right thing. Culture defines "the right thing" within a group.

The right culture can reduce conflict and keep it productive. Culture defines how to handle many of the management paradoxes we outlined in chapter 1 that can create conflict—tension between individual and group, for example, or disagreement over work practices.

It can lift from your shoulders the burden of trying to manage by telling people what to do. With the right culture, you can motivate group members through group expectations, values, and practices. Instead of saying, "Do this because I'm telling you to do it," you say, in effect, "Do this because *the team expects it of you.*" Culture is a key system that makes management more than personal interaction between you and those who work for you.

As a management tool that doesn't depend on personal interaction, *culture is a useful way to manage team members who don't report directly to you*. It's a powerful tool of *indirect* influence that extends your influence beyond those in your immediate circle.

But understand that culture is about performance, not keeping team members happy. It's about doing good work. The right culture makes a team more effective at what it does. In fact, the members of an effective team may or may not be "happy" with the group all the time, but they care deeply about its performance and want to contribute to its success.

The Importance of Clarity

There are four critical elements of culture needed to create and sustain a team. You cannot impose on your team the culture you want, but you can influence it strongly. Most importantly, you can make sure the key components of culture are clear. As manager, you must ensure:

Clarity about individual roles—who does what and how each role contributes to the team's purpose and goals

Clarity about how the team does its work—work systems, practices, and processes

Clarity about how team members work together—the values and norms for collaboration that prescribe and guide interaction among group members

Clarity about progress—feedback for the team as a whole and for individual members about both work results and how well the group is functioning as a team

Clarity seldom happens or holds for long by itself. Group relationships and roles, especially in organizations passing through rapid change, tend to move toward confusion. It's no surprise that teams often underperform in spite of the advantages they offer. Preventing that slippage, ensuring ongoing clarity, is an important part of your job.

Clarity is challenging because it embodies another paradox: the need to be clear—"here's how we do what we do"—while remaining flexible in the midst of rapid change. It's a never-ending struggle to strike the right balance between order, stability, and predictability on one hand and flexibility and adaptation on the other.

A team's purpose and goals, the future it's trying to create, are the foundation of culture and must be clear. A team's plan defines the roles needed to do current and future work. Indeed, it defines the work itself and the values and beliefs needed to do it well. And much of the feedback you provide will be about progress against the plan. In working with your team to create and clarify the right culture, refer to the plan often, for team culture and plan cannot be separated.

Team Members Need Clarity About Their Roles

Each of your people needs to know:

What do I do? How can anyone feel responsible and work hard if they're confused about what they do, what results are expected of them, and how much freedom they have to act or make decisions?

How does my work support the purpose and work of the team? Making this connection is critical to ensuring each person feels like an essential and valued team member.

How does my work relate to the work of others on the team? To work effectively, members must understand their colleagues' roles, how their different roles fit together within the team, and what they can expect of each other.

You cannot eliminate all ambiguity or foresee all circumstances that might create role confusion. Nor should you strive for rigid, detailed job descriptions, because you want people willing on occasion to share roles or step outside their regular responsibilities.

Questions to Determine Whether a Job Is Engaging

As you divide the team's work among members, give some thought to the kinds of jobs you create. It's possible to structure a job so it encourages the jobholder to engage personally with the work, feel committed to it, and devote extra effort to doing it well. Here are some questions you can ask:[2]

- Is there a *clear link* between the job and the team's overall purpose and goals?

- Does the work *challenge* the jobholder to use and grow his skills?

- Does the job involve a *whole, natural piece of work*, with a beginning and an end, and an identifiable final product the person can point to and say, "I did that. It's my contribution to the team"?

- Is the jobholder able to *have contact with the "customer,"* the one who will use the product or service produced?

- Does the job allow the person to *exercise some control* over her work—its planning, scheduling, pacing, and so on?

- Does the person have the performance targets and feedback data he needs to *track his own performance*?

- Does the job offer some *opportunity for advancement*?

How do the jobs on your team stand up to these criteria?

Team Members Need Clarity About How the Team Does Its Work

This aspect of team culture concerns how work gets done. It includes all those activities that occur, or should occur, regularly, such as meetings, updates, written reports, plans, analyses, reviews, standard practices, recurring events, work flows, who gets to make what decisions, and processes, such as gathering and analyzing information.

Make these recurring "ways of working" into an explicit but flexible system of activities clear to everyone.

Such a system can help ensure consistency and avoid confusion and conflict. How should customer complaints be handled? How do we communicate changes in project scope to make sure everyone affected knows about them? If team members know, they won't have to figure out the best way to proceed every time, and they can be comfortable knowing what to expect from others.

A system will also ensure that important work actually gets done. Too often, such important but rarely urgent activities as planning and analysis are pushed aside by pressing but ultimately less important problems. Add these activities to your "system" and treat them as urgent.

Which work you standardize will depend on what you do. Resist the impulse to standardize everything. Review and question the system and its various pieces frequently. Take care not to adhere rigidly to processes that need to change or don't apply to the situation at hand.

Have You Identified the Information You and Your Team Need?

Regular reports, analyses, and updates can provide important information and guidance. Identify those your team needs, who will do them, when, and how (what information, how presented).

Do You Hold Regular Meetings?

No group can function as a team unless it routinely convenes, in person or virtually, and members address issues of common

concern. Studies of effective managers show that both individual interaction and group meetings are an important part of how they manage their teams. Neither is sufficient by itself.

Do You and Your Team Make Decisions in an Open, Systematic Way?

A good decision is more than a good response to a dilemma. It's also a choice the people involved are willing to implement, and that often depends on not only the decision itself but *how* it was made.

For that reason, your decision-making process is an important part of how your team does its work. *How* has two components: *who's* involved and *what steps* make up the process.

Are Decision Rights Clear in Your Team?

Do people know and agree about who gets to make what decisions? Which do you make? Which do others get to make, under what circumstances? Are there guidelines or limits on what kinds of decisions people can make?

Do You Involve Others When You Make Decisions?

You and your team can make decisions in a variety of ways:

- *Autonomous decisions* are made by you alone, as head of the team, without consulting or involving anyone else.

- *Consultative decisions* are made by you but after you consult team members and others.

- *Joint decisions* are made by you and team members together by arriving at consensus—that is, everyone involved is willing to support the decision though it may not be everyone's first choice.

- *Delegated decisions* are made by a team member or the team as a whole without your involvement, except that you have specified parameters or boundaries—for example, that cost cannot exceed a certain amount or a new product must retain certain features.

How do you and your team make decisions? If you tend to make autonomous decisions, remember the benefits of inclusion: *better diagnosis* of the problem or opportunity; *early identification* of assumptions, perceptions, and misunderstandings that are best addressed in the beginning; *more trust* in the outcome because those involved feel a greater sense of control; and, not least, *greater commitment* to the final choice and its implementation.[3]

Does Your Team Follow a Reality-Based Decision-Making Process?

People dislike arbitrary decisions. They want to know that a transparent, data-based process will be followed in making important team choices. Such a process might include these steps:

1. *Discuss and define the problem* within the team. Identify stakeholders—people who have something to gain or lose.

2. *Explore the issue* through data gathering, analysis, and discussion that involves key stakeholders.

3. *Generate possible solutions* by discussing, refining, critiquing, and, if possible, testing them. Identify the consequences of each option for stakeholders.

4. *Make a decision,* ideally through one of the more open approaches noted above—consultative, joint, or delegated.

5. *Implement the decision*, taking steps, if possible, to mitigate any consequential harm to stakeholders.

6. *Review/critique the outcome* after some time has passed. What can you learn from the results? How might you do it differently next time? Take the time to debrief disappointing *and* successful outcomes.

Rarely does the process unfold in reality as neatly as it appears here. Steps overlap, get repeated, loop back. But having a process and striving to follow it will improve your decisions. And it will help you avoid the trap of leaping to the first plausible choice without exploring alternatives that may be better.

Talk explicitly in the team about this process, especially in virtual or cross-cultural teams, where it's particularly important to be clear about such things. Follow the process consistently. Expect team members to use it themselves.

Team Members Need Clarity About How They Work Together as a Team

How team members "work together" is about shared values, norms, beliefs, and expectations that guide team members as they interact. These values and norms are the social glue that keeps their interactions productive and any conflict constructive.[4]

Consider, for example, group norms that might develop around attendance and participation at meetings ("Everybody attends, listens, participates, and treats others with respect"), team priorities ("Team goals before personal goals—no competing within the team"), how to disagree and confront colleagues constructively ("Focus on the work, not the person"), quality of work expected ("Are you proud of it?"), expected contribution ("Everybody pulls their weight"), and many other such considerations.

No group can work as a team unless members agree on such "rules of the road." How much would you care about the group and its work if you thought your colleagues cared less than you about the quality and importance of your joint work?

How Do Members of Your Team Work Together?

When you take over an existing group, you need to understand the culture you've inherited. The roles, rules, values, and norms already in place are your starting point. Identify them by watching how people do the work and work together. What's more important to members: the team or individual work? Who has influence and who's ignored? Is disagreement allowed? How do people treat each other when they disagree? What's expected of individual members?

Pay attention because in every team a distinctive culture will emerge quickly and spontaneously. Early gatherings of a new

group—or the initial meeting after you take over an existing group—are especially important. These early moments are the right time to set out the purpose and goals of the team, establish how you will function as boss, and begin to define how members will work with and treat each other.

Do you ever think about these issues? Unfortunately, many managers don't. If you're one of them, you're overlooking a potent management tool that lets you influence members *through* the social dynamics of the group.

Are You Doing What You Can to Foster the Emergence of the Right Team Culture?

You cannot impose culture. It will emerge no matter what you do. But you can and should try to shape it. That will be more or less difficult, depending on the group's existing culture, members' expectations, whether the culture you want matches the culture of the broader organization, and whether members trust you.

Team members do want to know where you stand. Because you're the authority figure, they will look to you for guidance, at least initially. You can foster the values, norms, assumptions, and practices you want by:

Suggesting or *espousing* those you believe will make the team more effective.

Focusing attention and discussion on them (discussion is critical).

Asking for agreement on them.

Expecting team members to follow them.

Enforcing them when they're ignored, abused, or forgotten.

Reminding team members to expect them of each other.

Coaching the team as a group about how to apply them.

Hiring, promoting, rewarding, and recognizing those who exemplify the values, beliefs, and norms you want.

Modeling the standards, beliefs, and norms you want in all your actions and decisions. This is perhaps the most important way you influence culture: you *show* it. It does no good to expect others to accept criticism if you can't receive it yourself. Show what you want not only by your actions but by taking action *visibly*. People need to see that you walk the talk.

Are There Clear Standards Around the Work That You Consistently Enforce?

In an effective team, members want everyone to do the work assigned to them. They expect each other to do their best and, on occasion, to make extraordinary efforts to produce good work. Members need to feel that they and all their colleagues are committed to quality and that a lack of it anywhere reflects on everyone. The team should expect results, not mere effort, and focus relentlessly on team purpose, plans, goals, and priorities.

Members expect you to enforce team standards rigorously. Nothing can destroy a team as quickly as a member who falls short of team standards while you condone his shortcomings. How hard would you work if you thought others were held to lower standards?

Are There Clear Norms About How Team Members Treat Each Other?

Espouse and enforce a culture that encourages everyone to participate, expects members to treat each other with respect, values personal differences, and fosters recognition of each member's contribution. No one can contribute fully if she doesn't feel valuable or valued.

Group values and standards become particularly apparent when members gather, and so it's important to set norms around meetings—both face-to-face and virtual. Expect people to attend, arrive on time, come prepared, participate, allow and encourage others to talk, listen, keep confidential matters confidential, always treat each other with respect, and accept and respond to disagreement about work issues calmly and impersonally.

Participation is important for two reasons. First, research makes clear that the more frequently an idea is stated, the more likely it is to be adopted. Good but rarely expressed ideas tend to be ignored. Be sure the team hears and considers everyone's opinions. Second, members who rarely participate can become angry or frustrated and feel less committed. "People should speak up," you may say. Perhaps they tried and felt they were cut off or ignored, and so they've given up. Some people simply don't assert themselves; they believe saying something once should be enough. That's naive, but it's still your job to get all ideas and opinions on the table and fully considered.

Cultural and language differences can influence the work of a group as well. We know of one international marketing team charged with the introduction of a new line of personal care products throughout Europe. In all the team's videoconferences, the Spanish member said little because he was uncomfortable speaking English, the group language. The manager didn't draw him out during or after meetings. When the line was launched, it quickly became clear the group's plans had ignored some important features of the fastest-growing market for such products in Europe: Spain.

Do You Make Sure the Group Allows, Even Encourages, Constructive Disagreement and Conflict?

Watch for constructive conflict.[5] You want it. If there's none in your group, good ideas are likely to be missed. If that's happening, talk about it and encourage people to express differing points of view.

In group discussions, two actions will encourage constructive disagreement. First, allow questioners and dissenters in the team to speak their minds. These are people inclined to step back and ask fundamental questions: Why are we doing this at all? Why are we *still* doing it? What if we did it a different way? Group members often try to silence such questions as matters already settled or too troublesome to address. Though often irritating, questioners can lead to real innovation.

Second, to foster useful conflict, press adversaries to *inquire* rather than *advocate*. People who disagree often simply repeat their respective positions more and more loudly, ferociously advocating their own points of view. Encourage them instead to make inquiries of each other. Why do you believe that? What evidence do you have? How did you arrive at that conclusion? Encourage a spirit of curiosity. Of course, it will help if you yourself inquire rather than advocate when you disagree with someone.

Do You Talk About Team Culture Explicitly and Often?

Too often, the values and standards that make up team culture are considered off-limits for explicit discussion. But if they can't be expressed, they can't be clarified, understood, modified, or dropped. Talk about them frankly in meetings and general discussions. Be clear and forthright about your expectations. Encourage people to express their opinions about them.

Do You Coach Your Team?

Don't assume that all members know how to function well in a team. For some, it may be a new experience, and so they won't understand even the basics: how to listen, participate, disagree, or deal constructively with disagreement. And don't assume that coaching individuals on the team is the same as coaching the team as a whole. From the beginning and at every opportunity, coach your group *as a team* in the values, norms, and behaviors you support and expect. Talk about such things in team meetings. Your role is pivotal, but be patient. You will need time to encourage the right standards and values. Groups don't become real teams overnight.

Team Members Need Clarity About How They're Doing

Feedback about performance is the fourth type of clarity a team needs. Because real teams serve a compelling purpose and strive

toward challenging goals, members want current, concrete information about progress.

Do You Conduct Frequent Reviews of Team and Individual Performance?

Embed the idea of frequent reviews in team practice and culture. In reviews, it's important to cover *team* performance and make clear it's *everyone's* responsibility. Members need to hold each other accountable.

If your team's purpose is to carry out a specific mandate with a deadline, or your team has launched an important initiative, conduct a thorough review of performance and plans at roughly the midpoint. By this time, plans and direction will be taking shape, but it won't be too late to make significant course corrections.

For ongoing work, alternate quick reviews and in-depth reviews. For example, every month, look for problems that need immediate attention, and then, every quarter, do a detailed review of progress against goals and plans.

Do You Use Performance Metrics?

Numbers—sales, costs, volume—are useful. They lift the answer to "How are we doing?" above the realm of personal opinion. They focus on results rather than effort. They help define where you need to go. Looking at what drives them can provide useful ideas for improvement.

It can be harder to come up with useful metrics in not-for-profit and government work because simple measures, such as sales and profits, are harder to find for the complex problems these organizations address—such as reducing poverty or improving education. But growing evidence in all sectors of society supports the mantra that you only get what you measure.[6]

Use metrics whenever you can, but beware of their limitations, two in particular: first, understand what drives them, because they rarely tell the whole story. Costs are up? Why? A one-off cause is one thing, a chronic problem something else. Second, not everything important can be measured. Don't ignore, for example, team culture and whether the team is living up to its own

standards. Also, some goals in your plan may lack numbers because they're still too general, half-baked, or far out in the future. In these cases, judgment is the only yardstick. Don't hesitate to apply it and ask for others' opinions.

Measure the right things. Many metrics—such as sales and costs—only measure current activity and usually reflect the result of steps taken in the past. They don't let you see what's coming in the future. Find other measures—leading indicators—that let you look ahead. For example, if you track customer satisfaction or competitive pricing, a drop might foretell a coming decline in your sales if you don't respond. Identify such measures that are appropriate for your group and track them too.

Do You Encourage Your Team to Evaluate Itself and Make Self-Corrections?

Providing feedback needn't be a case of your telling the team how it's doing. If purpose, goals, and work standards are clear, particularly if you use key metrics, team members should be able to assess themselves. If they can, your role is to lead a discussion that pinpoints problems, uncovers root causes, identifies possible solutions and lessons, and lays out plans for responding. Also, take time to discuss with the team how it will handle reasonable mistakes or failures. Remember that innovation rarely happens without risk taking and missteps. Develop a team habit of debriefing both successes and failures to identify lessons learned.

Do You Include Yourself and Your Performance in Your Reviews?

How are *you* doing? You're not perfect. Where are you trying to improve as team head? What mistakes have you made? What are you doing to improve your performance as boss? Ask team members for feedback about ways you can make the team more productive. You may find this kind of discussion uncomfortable. But it's important. Don't force your people to carry the burden of your making the same mistakes over and over.

Are You Careful to Note and Recognize
Good Performance?

It's too easy to focus on problems and take good performance for granted—"Well, that's what you're supposed to do." When you see it, stop and take note of praiseworthy work, recognize the people involved, and thank them—all within the context of the team and its work as a whole. Recognition is particularly important when results are down, the organization is going through tough times, the future is uncertain, and you must focus on retaining people's commitment.

The Challenges of Managing
Virtual Teams

Virtual work groups, including groups whose members are both colocated and dispersed, present challenges. Here are some questions that can help you deal with them.

Are You Explicit About Purpose, Goals,
and Team Culture?

Much of what's required by virtual teams mirrors what we've already suggested for all teams, virtual or not—being clear about what the team does, its purpose and goals, and team culture, how members work with each other.[7]

Get agreement early about purpose and goals, the future you're trying to create, and return to those topics regularly to remind members of the significance and context of their work. Talk about how the group will do its work and how group members are expected to interact. Then talk regularly about how the group is functioning. Ask for members' opinions, both in group discussions and in one-on-ones. Confirm everything—understandings, conclusions, decisions, assignments, deadlines, and schedules. It often makes sense to write out the key elements of team culture, just as you write down key elements of your plans.

Do You Understand How Virtual Team Members
Come to Trust Each Other?

Trust among members is a key characteristic of any effective team, and you need to understand that virtual work groups seem to develop it differently than do colocated groups. When there's little face-to-face contact, members base trust on task dependability rather than social interaction. They trust members who are reliable, consistent, and responsive, who meet deadlines, answer quickly, and do what they say they'll do—in short, who perform predictably. These are qualities you may want to stress and incorporate explicitly in the norms for your virtual team.[8]

Do You, If Possible, Bring the Team Together Physically,
at Least in the Beginning for a Launch Meeting?

Even if trust can develop without much in-person contact, work groups still benefit from meeting physically—company-sponsored events are often a good venue for this—especially in the early days of the team or of your tenure as its manager. If you do gather, allow time for socializing. Don't spend the entire time on work. Have each member present pertinent biographical and other background information, as well as any potentially relevant expertise and experience they may bring to the group.

If possible, it's also useful to meet midway through a major initiative—the work has taken shape but it's not too late to make major changes—and at the end of an initiative for a debriefing.

Are You Careful to Foster Interaction Among
All Virtual Team Members?

Pay particular attention to member participation and interaction. Make sure all members are engaged and contributing. If some members seem reluctant to express themselves fully in group discussions, follow up one-on-one to obtain ideas or reactions they may have withheld in the group setting. Never assume that silence means agreement.

Be sensitive to the "out-of-sight, out-of-mind" danger for members who work apart. As team manager, maintain some regular

one-on-one contact with each member by phone or video. It's your job to keep all members connected and contributing.

Don't hesitate to give members feedback about their performance. However, for such one-on-one discussions, use some form of interactive media, video ideally, that allows real discussion and give-and-take, as well as problem solving and counseling.

When Hiring or Selecting Team Members, Do You Look for Interpersonal Team Skills?

It's a common—and fatal—assumption to think that since virtual team members interact less, their interpersonal skills don't matter, and they only need appropriate technical skills. Organizations with extensive experience in using virtual teams have found the opposite—interpersonal skills, including the desire to connect productively with others, are if anything even more important in virtual groups. So when selecting members, look for evidence of interpersonal competence, such as a desire to share information and carry on useful discussions. Give candidates a clear idea of the conditions—working at a distance—that they will find.

Dealing with Differences Among Team Members in Global Work Groups

Just as work groups possess their own values and attitudes, so do different societies. These differences can affect how well a team functions. National and regional cultures differ in their attitudes about formal authority, in their views of the purpose and conduct of meetings, in their styles of communication, in members' need for context and explanation, in their predispositions toward change, in their handling of conflict, and even in what constitutes an individual's identity.

How should you approach such differences? You cannot ignore them, because they can easily prevent your group from working to its full potential. Here are some general but important considerations.

Are You Aware of Specific Cultural Differences?

It's not enough to understand that "cultures are different." If you manage a multicultural group, learn something about the *specific* cultures and cultural predispositions of group members.

In Spite of General Cultural Differences, Are You Careful to Understand and Deal with the Individuals Involved?

There is often as much diversity among individuals within a culture as there is between people from different cultures. The danger is that we treat useful generalizations about cultures—for example, "hierarchy is important in Indian society"—as stereotypes with which we label and prejudge individuals. Use cultural characteristics only as preliminary guides for exploring and determining the actual values and attitudes of the individuals you work with.

Are You Aware of Your Own Cultural Predispositions?

You grew up in a particular culture that shaped your thinking and feeling. Understand it and how it compares with the other cultures in your group. Beware the tendency to view your own culture as the standard from which others deviate. Remember that others will measure you against their own cultures.

Do You Avoid the Subtle Trap of Thinking That Cultural Differences Are Good or Bad, or Right or Wrong?

Don't pass judgment on such differences. One point of view or predisposition isn't better than another. Some work better toward some ends, and others work better toward other ends. Someone is late producing a report. You consider deadlines important and tardiness a sign of laziness or lack of discipline. But the person may hold a less stringent view of deadlines and feel it's more important to devote time to other matters. Consider this not a character flaw but a different way of looking at the world that is neither good nor bad in principle. It's simply a difference you need to recognize and accommodate. If a deadline truly is critical, you will need to make that crystal clear and manage it closely.

Do You Talk Explicitly in Your Team About Cultural Predispositions and All Aspects of Group Process?

Many teams and team managers are reluctant to be explicit about team purpose, goals, standards, roles, and values or about how such differences might affect the way the group functions. Don't be. Talk about them without judging differences or the people involved. Being explicit is good for all groups, but for multicultural groups, it's essential.

You Must Protect Your Team from the Weaknesses Inherent in All Teams

Teams are not perfect. They can fall into subtle but common traps. Here are some to look for.

Is Your Team Insular?

There is a dark side to strong team cultures. They can feed the human tendency to see the world as "us versus them," where "them" is any other group, even groups within the same organization. When this happens, the team shuts itself off from the interests, points of view, and legitimate concerns of others. Your team needs to see itself as part of a larger organization, with its broader purpose and goals. Part of your job is to protect your team from distraction and unnecessary interruption, but you do a disservice to all involved if you always press your team's interests over those of the organization and other groups. Protect your group—but not too much.

Does Your Team Discourage Dissent and Disagreement?

A team that avoids disagreement will discourage new ideas and innovation, which are often the result of constructive conflict. It's a paradox of teams that you must foster both mutual support and constructive confrontation among members.

Has Your Team Fallen Prey to Groupthink?

Here is another aspect of the dark side of a strong culture. *Groupthink* is group pressure to conform to the way group members are

"supposed" to think.[9] It's a more insidious way team culture can stifle new ideas and approaches. In groupthink, innovation isn't openly or obviously suppressed, but nothing new ever comes up because members censor themselves without realizing they've all adopted the same way of thinking. Combat it by recognizing it—you can fall victim to and even encourage it yourself—and proactively fostering new ideas and approaches. Pay attention to how often someone inside the team challenges what it's doing. As you hire new team members, seek people who share your group's values but also bring different perspectives.

Has Your Team Split into Subgroups?

Work will inevitably bring some team members into frequent, close contact and foster the formation of subgroups that can easily become warring factions. Shared personal interests or backgrounds can create subgroups too. Obviously, problems arise when people see themselves as members of a subgroup rather than the full team. So encourage full contact among all members. Create assignments that partner members who normally don't work together. Be alert to the influence of subgroups when the full team meets. This is a particular problem for far-flung teams whose members work in different locations, especially where those locations also represent different cultures.

Creating a team, sustaining it over time, and managing through it is no easy task. Few teams actually match the ideal characteristics we've described here for long periods of time. Too many destructive forces pull constantly on them, not least the tendency for conflict to turn personal, the ongoing struggle between teams and individual members, or the myriad traps just described. Maintaining a team, providing the direction, clarity, protection, and resources it needs, will require from you constant effort and vigilance. It means understanding the social dynamics that can make the whole far more (or less) than the sum of its members.

Once again, management makes the difference between group dysfunction and a high-commitment, high-performance team.

NOTES

Chapter 9

1. See, for example, Jennifer A. Chatman and Sandra A. Cha, "Leading by Leveraging Culture," *California Management Review* 45 (Summer 2003): 20–34; Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership: A Dynamic View* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985); and Robert Simons, *Levers of Control: How Managers Use Innovative Control Systems to Drive Strategic Renewal* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1995).

2. Robert N. Ford, "Job Enrichment Lessons from AT&T," *Harvard Business Review*, January–February 1973, 96–106; J. Richard Hackman et al., "A New Strategy for Redesigning Work," *California Management Review* 4, no. 17 (Summer 1975): 57–71; and Robert L. Simons, "Designing High-Performance Jobs," *Harvard Business Review*, July 2005, 2–10.

3. See, for example, Maria Farkas and Linda A. Hill, "A Note on Team Process (A)," Case 9-402-032 (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2001); David A. Garvin and Michael A. Roberto, "What You Don't Know About Making Decisions," *Harvard Business Review*, September 2001, 108–116; Linda A. Hill, "A Note on Building and Leading Your Senior Team," Case 9-402-037 (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2002); and Victor H. Vroom and Philip W. Yetton, *Leadership and Decision-Making* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973).

4. See, for example, Linda A. Hill and Michel J. Anteby, "Analyzing Work Groups (A)," Case 9-496-026 (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2006), for an illustration of how to analyze your team culture.

5. See, for example, Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, Jean Kahwajy, and L. J. Bourgeois, "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight," *Harvard Business Review*, July 1997, 77–85; Garvin and Roberto, "What You Don't Know About Making Decisions," 108–116; and Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990).

6. See, for example, Robert S. Kaplan and David P. Norton, *The Balanced Scorecard: Translating Strategy into Action* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996); and Robert Simons, *Levers of Organization Design: How Managers Use Accountability Systems for Greater Performance and Commitment* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005).

7. See, for example, Deborah L. Duarte and Nancy T. Snyder, *Mastering Virtual Teams: Strategies, Tools, and Techniques That Succeed,* 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006); Bradley L. Kirkman et al., "Five Challenges to Virtual Team Success: Lessons from Sabre, Inc.," *Academy of Management Executive* 16, no. 3 (2002): 67–79; and Jessica Lipnack and Jeffrey Stamps, *Virtual Teams: People Working Across Boundaries with Technology,* 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000).

8. Kirkman et al., "Five Challenges to Virtual Team Success," 71–72.

9. Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton, 1972).