

## Towards a pragmatic model of team function and dysfunction

Either explicitly or tacitly, definitions of team coaching tend refer either to performance, as the primary aim of the intervention, or to an improvement in team awareness and collaboration, from which performance benefits may subsequently emerge. Amongst the former are Thornton (2010, p122) Clutterbuck (2010) and Hawkins (2014, page 80). Amongst the latter are Kets de Vries (2005, p68), Hackman & Wageman (2005, p269) and Hardingham et al (2004). To illustrate the contrast and complementary, I choose here one example of each, extracted from:

Clutterbuck (2010, p271) *A learning intervention designed to increase collective capability and performance of a group or team, through application of the coaching principles of assisted reflection, analysis and motivation for change*

Hardingham (2004, p165) *Enabling the team, and also the individuals within it, to “develop”... the focus of development tends to be on development itself, rather than on success.*

In an MSc thesis Williams (2016) interviewed coachees about their definitions of team coaching and found little consensus, but common themes were again achieving understanding and improved collaboration, and overcoming obstacles to performance.

The various models proposed to explore team function echo this duality. Lencioni's deficit model proposes five key dysfunctions of a team: absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. Aptly sub-titled a fable, it provides insightful accounts of how failure in one aspect of a team's inter-relationships and dynamics may lead to failures in others. It is, however, limited on several accounts:

1. As a deficit model only, it provides few clues as to what a genuinely high performing team does (absence of a negative factor does not necessarily make a positive)
2. The assumption that the direction of causation is fixed (i.e. that each layer in the model leads to the next) is highly questionable – it is not difficult to find examples, where inattention to results, at the top of the pyramid, may lead to lack of commitment, or avoidance of accountability. Lencioni's model is essentially a linear approach to a complex system
3. It assumes that all performance disrupting factors are internal to the team, yet this is clearly not always the case -- Hackman and Wageman (2005) have demonstrated the importance of structure, size and resources, for example

The other commonly cited model is Hawkins' (2011) five disciplines of team coaching – Commissioning (what our stakeholders require of us), Clarifying (what the team is there to do), Co-creating (how the members work together) Connecting (what they do when they

are not together) and Core learning (how the team as a whole develops and learns). Hawkins emphasises the position of the team as a system within systems – and hence the need for team coaching to take a multi-dimensional, systemic perspective. Feedback from our students is generally positive about this model, especially in terms of its intellectual scope. However, many also report that they find it difficult to apply to the practical issues they encounter in their team coaching, especially in the context of teams lower down in the organisation. (It is probable that the problem lies less with the model than with the team coaches' ability to bring it to life for the team.)

Less well quoted by far is a thoughtful paper by Champoux et al (2015), who identified from their own literature analysis six characteristics of high performing teams, and interviewed leaders from eight organisations in different sectors to understand how the six characteristics were reflected in their organisational cultures. The six characteristics were: high level of trust; high level of respect; commitment to a clear and common purpose; willingness and ability to manage conflict; focus on results; and, alignment of authority and accountability. They offer a model of behaviours that may have a significant impact on these characteristics. The four quadrants of behaviours are: directing, primarily focusing on results; influencing, primarily focusing on people; supporting; primarily focusing on relationships; analysing, primarily focusing on quality, accuracy and perfection. They conclude that individuals' behavioural tendencies can provide an essential component for team success; however, differences can create unproductive conflict if not proactively managed.

Over the past 10 years, I have introduced a stream of trainee team coaches to these models across the world. In their feedback and presentations on practice, their feedback has been overwhelmingly a mix of positive and negative about the two models. Clients and coaches like the simplicity of the Lencioni model. However, it only reveals the limited set of problems contained within the model; and the deficit focus makes it harder to apply strengths-based coaching approaches. Clients and coaches like the intellectual integrity and comprehensiveness of the Hawkins' model. However, they find the language and concepts difficult to apply for teams in middle and lower levels of organizations. (It was designed for *senior* leadership teams, as the title of the book suggests.) Neither model places great emphasis on the role of the leader.

Based on this feedback, I began to explore with colleagues in my international network the possibility of generating a model of team performance and dysfunction that addresses these weaknesses in the existing models; and have begun to test against real cases provided by trainee team coaches. In particular, the new model addresses the requirements to be comprehensive, both in the issues it covers and the teams, to which it may apply; and to be circular, that is to recognise that in a complex adaptive system, every factor may influence every other factor. We also wanted to take the concept of leader-member exchange more firmly into account as a factor for performance and dysfunction.

In a study funded by the European Community in 1998, for Exemplas, and described in chapter four of *Coaching the Team at Work* (Clutterbuck, 2007), I proposed that effective teams maintained a constant focus on three core areas -- Task, Behaviour and Learning – supported by interacting processes. The analysis of my interviews with teams showed that

high performing teams constantly shifted their attention between these foci, so that they did not let the emphasis on one dominate the others. The importance of shared team goals (Hackman et al, 2005) I subsumed within the area of task, with goal setting and management being among the team's core processes. The complexity of goal management within teams and within coaching generally was further exposed in the many diverse contributions to *Beyond Goals* (David et al, 2013).

More recently, the cases of team coaching brought to training suggested that team strengths and weaknesses tended to fall into one of five contexts, which I originally named as 'pillars'. These contexts were:

- Purpose and motivation
- Externally facing processes
- Relationships
- Internally facing processes
- Learning processes

These five contexts largely reinforced the earlier model, the differences being that processes tended to be either internally or externally focused, that goal management appears to be part of a wider context (purpose) and that goal clarity in itself is ineffective without motivation to achieve the goal.

Since *Beyond Goals*, I have continued to test the logic and evidence for this five-context model. In 2015, I was commissioned by a large global dot.com to investigate the characteristics of its highest performing teams. This stimulated another extensive search of the literature on teams and performance, using Google Scholar and various other reference sources, to develop a template for focus group interviews. The literature searched was all in English language, although input was sought from pioneers of team coaching in France and elsewhere. Permission has not yet been granted to publish the results of the research within the company.

The literature analysis provided hundreds of factors, which I gradually combined into the themes in Table 1. It is quite probable that some potentially significant themes were omitted, because they were only mentioned once or twice. The table below represents the *recurring* themes.

**Table 1: Proposed characteristics of high performing teams**

Characteristic	Examples
Purpose and goals	A clear sense of purpose Clear goals Goals that motivate Everybody is working toward the same goals. Everyone understands both team and individual performance goals and knows what is expected of them
Role clarity	Defined roles

	<p>The mission is broken down into meaningful performance goals for each team member to pursue.</p> <p>Commitment to individual and team roles</p>
Performance focus	<p>“Relatively more ambitious goals than the norm”</p>
Skills	<p>Complementary skill set, and at times interchangeable skills.</p> <p>High levels of emotional intelligence</p>
Task processes	<p>Team members are clear on how to work together and how to accomplish tasks.</p> <p>Authority to decide or act</p>
Relationships processes	<p>Team members actively diffuse tension and friction in a relaxed and informal atmosphere</p> <p>Operate like a strong family</p>
Decision-making	<p>Disagreement is viewed as a good thing and conflicts are managed.</p> <p>The team makes decisions when there is natural agreement -- in the cases where agreement is elusive, a decision is made by the team lead or executive sponsor, after which little second-guessing occurs.</p>
Trust	<p>People have solid and deep trust in each other and in the team's purpose -- they feel free to express feelings and ideas.</p> <p>Mutual support and trust</p>
Communication within the team	<p>Multi-Directional Communication</p> <p>Listening</p>
Psychological safety	<p>Criticism is constructive and is oriented toward problem solving and removing obstacles.</p> <p>The team engages in extensive discussion, and everyone gets a chance to contribute -- even the introverts.</p> <p>Balanced participation</p>
Collaborative processes	<p>Each team member carries his or her own weight and respects the team processes and other members.</p> <p>Mutual accountability; acknowledgement of their joint accountability towards a common</p>

	purpose in addition to individual obligations to their specific roles. High-performing teams are unselfish.
Leadership processes	The leadership of the team shifts from time to time, as appropriate, to drive results. No individual members are more important than the team.
Conflict management	Conflict is encouraged when it is constructive; people focus on conflict of ideas rather than relationship conflict
“Requisite diversity”	Reliance on diverse talents
Ownership	Taking responsibility for self and colleagues

One of the key results of the study in 2015 was the role of the leader in these high performing teams, for which we coined the phrase *the secure leader*.

The recurring characteristics of the secure leader, regardless of national culture, were as follows:

1. Leaders, who are secure in themselves, don't feel the need to control. It is relatively easy for them to trust others, because if mistakes happen, they have big enough shoulders to share responsibility.
2. They recognise that trying to manage a large team is an impossible and fruitless task. Rather, they aim to support team members in managing themselves.
3. These leaders don't expect to be keep informed about everything, or to re-route information between members of the team. Instead, they expect team members to ensure communication happens between them and to tell the manager, when there is something he or she needs to know.
4. These leaders see part of their role as protecting the team from distractions from outside; equally important is ensuring that everyone understands and is aligned with the overarching team goals.
5. Their self-security makes them open to (and welcoming of) feedback from team members. They have a “growth mindset” – focused equally on their own development and that of the team.
6. They *care* – both about the team goals, but also about each of the team members as individuals. They make time for human interaction.
7. They are aware that they, too, are a work in progress and they are fully comfortable with that perception.

In further developing the model, therefore, it appears that a key moderating factor may be the role of the leader. There is an extensive literature on leader-member exchange and numerous studies establish the link between, for example, the leader's communication and relationship-building skills and team performance. (e.g. Lee et al, 2010).

Overlaying all this data into a pragmatic, yet sufficiently evidence-based model takes time and it is fair to say that validation is still an ongoing activity. Along the way, the model has formalised itself into PERILL, reflecting each of the contexts plus leadership.

Let's look briefly at each context in terms of indicators of high and low performance/dysfunction:

### **Purpose and motivation**

Purpose is about what the team is there to do. It is the mission in Hawkins' commissioning. The team purpose may be a subset of a wider organisational purpose or one generated from within. From purpose flows the collective energy that makes "the whole greater than the sum of the parts". Indicators include clarity of shared vision, goals and priorities.

### **External processes, systems and structures**

These are about how the team interrelates with its multiple stakeholders – customers, suppliers, shareholders, other teams within the organisation, more senior levels of management and so on. Indicators include reputation, performance against targets, environmental awareness (evolving markets, technology, competition etc). They also cover the team's access to resources, such as information and finance.

### **Relationships**

These are about how people work together – whether they enjoy each other's company, respect each other's ability, are honest towards each other and so on. Indicators include the level of psychological safety.

### **Internal processes, systems and structures**

This is the internal mirror to the external and includes how the team manages workflow, supports each other, and maintains high quality of communication (both task-related and affective). Indicators include role clarity and decision-making quality.

### **Learning**

This relates to the team's ability to respond to its changing environment and maintain continuous improvement and growth. Indicators include whether it is ahead or behind the curve in terms of change in its environment and the clarity and relevance of members' learning objectives.

### **Leadership**

The literature on leadership is vast, with well over 200,000 citations, often contradictory. The GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness Studies – [globe.com](http://globe.com)) demonstrate that perceptions and expectations of leaders vary extensively between cultures. The link between what leaders do and how the team performs is very hard to pin down, because it is not just about the leader and what he or she does. It is about the system, of which the team and the leader are part. So, models that rely solely on a set of leader competencies miss the point. One of the most powerful exercises in team coaching is to ask the team (with the leader's agreement) to specify what kind of leadership behaviours they need to be able to perform at their best, both individually and collectively. (The two

lists are not necessarily the same!) Then the team discusses with the leader their responsibilities in helping him or her become the leader they need.

One of our planned studies is to explore the systemic factors affecting leadership in teams, where the leadership role is not fixed.

The table below illustrates the indicators in more detail. (Some indicators appear more than once, as they may be symptomatic of more than one issue.)

**Table 2: Indicators of team dysfunction and high performance**

Context	Dysfunction indicators	High performance indicators
<b>Purpose and motivation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose too vague/ People interpret it in different ways</li> <li>• Purpose not endorsed from above / inadequate direction from above</li> <li>• Little or no connection with people's strongly held values (so low energy for achieving it) / Conflicts with other strongly-held values</li> <li>• Conflict about priorities between goals</li> <li>• Personal agendas predominate over the collective agenda</li> <li>• Low individual and collective resilience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High clarity of mission, linked with wider (often societal or environmental) purpose</li> <li>• Goal clarity</li> <li>• Role clarity</li> <li>• High levels of collective and individual energy</li> <li>• High alignment on goal priority</li> <li>• Willingness to put team priorities before personal priorities</li> <li>• Ability to review and change goals rapidly</li> <li>• Engagement of stakeholders with the mission</li> <li>• Strongly shared values</li> <li>• Rapid recovery from setbacks</li> </ul>
<b>External processes, systems and structures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reputational issues</li> <li>• Lack of key resources</li> <li>• Operating within a political environment</li> <li>• Failure to establish clear expectations with stakeholders</li> <li>• Environmental / market change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong radar for threats and opportunities</li> <li>• High reputation amongst stakeholders</li> <li>• Clarity of stakeholders' needs and aspirations</li> <li>• Strong communications (listening and informing)</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural influences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customers and suppliers have easy access</li> <li>• Strong attention to quality</li> </ul>
<b>Relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conflict is not addressed/ is denied</li> <li>• Lack of psychological safety</li> <li>• People feel undervalued / unsupported</li> <li>• Cliques and sub-groups</li> <li>• Lack of willingness to share responsibility for collective performance (blame)</li> <li>• Communication problems (relational)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right people with right skills</li> <li>• Complementary strengths and weaknesses</li> <li>• High levels of honest feedback</li> <li>• Understanding each other's strengths and weaknesses</li> <li>• Positive conflict encouraged and valued</li> <li>• High level of support for colleagues</li> <li>• Psychological safety</li> <li>• Valuing diversity</li> </ul>
<b>Internal processes, systems and structures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recurring quality problems</li> <li>• Lack of clarity about tasks and roles</li> <li>• Inadequate systems of review</li> <li>• Lack of clarity about what constitutes good (high) performance in this context</li> <li>• Unclear decision-making processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication problems (systemic)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarity of who is in the team and not</li> <li>• Appropriate team size</li> <li>• Distributed leadership</li> <li>• Strong decision-making processes</li> <li>• Working to everyone's strengths</li> <li>• Strong attention to quality</li> <li>• Rapid innovation</li> <li>• Role clarity</li> </ul>
<b>Learning processes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Too busy syndrome" (no time for reflection)</li> <li>• Individual and collective learning insufficiently valued</li> <li>• Lack of sources of external perspective and/or ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team development plan for collective learning</li> <li>• Positive attitude towards mistakes</li> <li>• Learning objectives linked to evolving environment</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low learning maturity/ differences in personal maturity</li> <li>• Resistance to change</li> <li>• Mistakes are repeated (not learned from)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Habit of reflection – time to step back from doing</li> <li>• Asking for feedback</li> <li>• Co-coaching/ coaching mindset</li> <li>• Seeking to be ahead of change</li> </ul>
<b>Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Absentee or over-controlling leadership</li> <li>• Poser concentrated in the leader</li> <li>• Lack of open conversations between leader and team</li> <li>• Politics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leader provides moral direction</li> <li>• Role model for learning and values</li> <li>• Leadership is distributed</li> <li>• Leader is “secure”</li> </ul>

The diagram below illustrates ways in which these contexts interact to affect team performance (light grey) and dysfunction (dark grey). The white boxes indicate the moderating effect of the leader's qualities and behaviours (LQB).

#### **PERILL: The contexts of team performance and dysfunction**

<b>LQB</b>	<b>Purpose &amp; Motivation</b>	<b>Externally facing processes</b>	<b>Relationships</b>	<b>Internally facing processes</b>	<b>Learning</b>
<b>Purpose &amp; Motivation</b>	<b>LQB</b>	Alignment of values between the team and its key stakeholders	Working enthusiastically together towards shared goals	Clarity of priorities; putting collective priorities before personal	Actively seeking ways to leverage and expand team strengths
<b>Externally facing processes</b>	Stakeholders unclear what you stand for	<b>LQB</b>	Strong collaborative relationships with stakeholders	Rapid and effective response to quality issues	Rapid product and service innovation

<b>Relationships</b>	People pursue their own agendas	Conflict with stakeholders; disrespect for stakeholders	<b>LQB</b>	High level of psychological safety leads to constant questioning of what we do	People take active responsibility for supporting each other's development
<b>Internally facing processes</b>	Duplication and waste of effort	Quality issues not acknowledged or addressed	People avoid "interfering" in each other's territory. Large "elephants in the room".	<b>LQB</b>	Culture of continuous process improvement
<b>Learning</b>	Learning focused on the individual not the collective	Slow to innovate	People "hoard" knowledge and expertise	Resistance to change	<b>LQB</b>

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We have developed a diagnostic, currently in trial, that addresses each context with 20 penetrating questions. As we have observed that teams sometimes struggle to be honest in completing questionnaires of this kind, we have added an extra dimension – we ask them to rate the confidence, with which they make each answer.

## Conclusion

As we learn more and more about how teams and groups function, the need for a more balanced perspective on assessing performance and dysfunction increases. Team coaches will need to take increased care not to distort their interventions with partial snapshots of the team's dynamics. Using a diagnostic questionnaire will often be part of the solution, but equally important, if not more so, will be the interviews the coach conducts with team members at the beginning of the assignment. Questionnaires only assess pre-set issues and may miss key dynamics that can only be identified by listening to the stories of the team members and how they make collective sense of the team and their part in its success or failure. In listening to those stories, it is important to work within contextual models that are sufficiently broad and well-evidenced to capture these dynamics. Otherwise, the team coach may unwittingly collude with the team to address one part of the team system, while ignoring other parts, on which that part may be dependent.

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