

CHAPTER 18

A Transformative Orientation to Team Development Work

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Introduction

Approaches to team building vary significantly. The different goals, methods and grounds for measuring success of team interventions stem from different conceptions of how to be effective in altering team dynamics. As a result, it is often difficult to know what an organization is actually requesting when it seeks team building interventions for its intact or newly formed work groups. Without thoughtful consideration and discussion of goals and objectives, it is easy to misread what clients expect. It is also easy to draw from established approaches to team building that fail to meet clients' expectations but seem "necessary" because they are so commonly employed. The diversity of team building approaches makes it incumbent upon organizational consultants not only to clarify their purpose in conducting such interventions, but also to make their purpose clear to prospective clients and the teams who are the target of the interventions.

When I began to conduct team building sessions fifteen years ago, I immediately wrestled with the diverse and sometimes ambiguous objectives that are often set for this work. [\[663\]](#) In responding to clients' requests, it was difficult to discern what the expectations were for these group interventions. This stemmed in part from the difficulties associated with a manager or human resource representative speaking for the needs of an entire group. It also stemmed from confusion about what might actually be helpful to a team that was perceived as challenged in some significant way.

Even when objectives were clearly stated, some of the standard approaches to team building seemed not to be responsive to what clients sought. Clients complained about approaches to conducting team building that cast consultants as experts on team process who

are encouraged to convey their knowledge to the team through a range of instructional and simulation methods. The expectation in this work is that the team will discuss and apply this information to help correct or steer itself in more productive or satisfying directions. Although this general approach to team practice is consistent with traditional classroom instruction on team dynamics, it is often not what clients are looking for. It is one step removed from the direct change process that team interventions are expected to deliver. Many clients are skeptical that talking about principles of team effectiveness can translate into actual change in the team's process, decision-making quality, or quality of their communication. These concerns are supported by existing research on the effectiveness of team interventions, which suggests that the effects of the interventions are mixed. [\[664\]](#)

When I pressed potential clients about what prompted their perceived need for team building, or when I interviewed members of a team who were asked to participate in a proposed team building session, the picture became somewhat clearer. What I often heard was that team members needed to talk – that there were conversations or meetings among team members that were not happening on their own. There were many topics and issues that team members or managers of teams felt needed to be discussed, but that were not being brought into the open or were not being discussed in productive ways. The inability or failure to talk about these issues or topics was a key factor in reducing team members' satisfaction with their experience on the team or in limiting productivity of the team as a whole.

There are many reasons why needed conversations on teams do not occur. Some reasons are related to the political and sensitive nature of some discussions (e.g., the risk of challenging a controversial decision made by a manager). Other reasons are somewhat mundane and innocuous (e.g., over-reliance on e-mail or voice-mail rather than face-to-face interaction; difficulties contacting people who work in different time zones or have flexible work schedules). Sometimes these conversations do not occur simply because no one on the team formulates an agenda for discussion or because the

team meets too infrequently to adequately discuss the range of topics that need to be addressed. In other instances, topics are proactively suppressed because someone did not want to risk the change that might result from having a particular conversation or making a specific decision. The tendency for work groups to suppress or avoid discussion of difficult but important issues is well documented in organizational research.[\[665\]](#) What I often heard from those who requested team building interventions was consistent with this known tendency to leave important issues and topics “unspoken.” In short, many requests for team building stemmed from self-perceived deficiencies in the team’s interaction.

The development of my team intervention practice coincided chronologically and conceptually with the articulation of the transformative framework for mediation practice.[\[666\]](#)

Transformative mediation rests on the premise that conflict can be viewed, not as a problem to be solved, but as a crisis in the parties’ interaction. The role of the mediator and the type of interventions he or she conducts follow from this view of conflict. Mediators act as facilitators of the parties’ interaction in an effort to support its transformation. The goal is to help transform negative, alienating, and unproductive cycles of interaction to positive and clarifying ones -- independent of any specific decision or outcome reached by the parties about the issues that may divide them.

This conception of conflict intervention resonated with what I heard in the requests for team building interventions. Those seeking team building interventions were, in essence, recognizing that a team’s interaction was in some way deficient, destructive or problematic and that these interaction challenges undermined the team’s ability to function effectively. Although the team’s issues were not always about conflict *per se*, the issues were always related somehow to a deficiency in the quality of the team’s interaction, as a group or across subsets of team members. As a result, it was useful to rely on the underlying premises of the transformative framework to design and conduct team building interventions within organizational settings.

Although most mediation is designed for a small number of disputants (often two parties), team building work requires that an intervener work with groups of all sizes. [\[667\]](#) As a result, there are unique design considerations that have to be taken into account in conducting team building interventions from a transformative perspective. The various team building sessions I have conducted unfolded differently based upon the twists and turns the team interaction took during the intervention itself. But all of these interventions were guided by two underlying assumptions. First, this approach assumes that the team members themselves have the expertise and knowledge to address their own problems and issues, and create the outcomes that are best for them. The team consultant is not an expert on the content of the team's discussions. Second, the interventions are built on the assumption that the consultant has an important and useful role to play in supporting the constructive transformation of the team's interaction through a focus on empowerment of team members and recognition among them.

The goal of this chapter is to overview an approach to team development interventions based on the underlying principles of the transformative framework. The first section explains why an external consultant – someone outside the organization -- is usually needed to conduct team interventions. The potential risks of not relying on someone external to the organization are considered, providing a rationale for the professional role of a consultant much like that of existing mediator roles. The second section overviews the three main approaches to intervention currently used in conducting team building work. The objective of this section is to clarify how the transformative approach differs from the two other major approaches to team intervention. It also suggests how a transformative approach is consistent with some existing approaches to team building. The third section offers a more detailed discussion of team building practice within a transformative orientation. Specifically, it identifies the central goals of the intervention, the underlying view of constructive interaction on which the approach is based, and the essential conditions that need to be in place for this approach to be effective. Section four provides an overview of the practice steps consultants follow as they conduct work within this orientation. The

final section concludes with a discussion of some of the challenges transformative mediators face in transitioning from conducting practice in traditional mediation settings to intervening, as a consultant, within organizational settings with intact work groups.

Limitations of Internal Team Interventions

There are often specified third party roles within organizations that carry some degree of responsibility for supporting team development and addressing performance-related challenges that teams face. Human resource staff or learning and development specialists are frequently given responsibility to assist with the creation of teams and to monitor and support their performance across divisions of their organizations. This responsibility situates these service professionals in a potential role of team building interveners.

Closer to the teams themselves, managers carry the direct responsibility for all of their teams' performances. If there are issues or challenges a team faces, managers are ultimately responsible for team performance and the satisfaction of team members with their own team experience. Although managers and human resource professionals can have an impact on team performance through evaluation tools and direct feedback to team members, they are often limited in their ability to conduct team building sessions for work groups within their own organizations. There are several reasons why external consultants are often needed to address the team building needs of work groups within organizations. Understanding these limitations is important because they point to the kind of role that external consultants can effectively play and they support the transformative objectives of conducting team intervention processes.

The existing relationships that managers or human resource professionals have with team members often limit their effectiveness as possible interveners in team process or performance. Even in large organizations, human resource generalists or training specialists frequently have substantial contact with members of various teams in their coverage area, through the multiple support roles they play within their organizations. These prior relationships

with team members can easily create perceptions of favoritism or assumptions about their investment in particular outcomes. These perceptions can have a chilling effect on team members' willingness to discuss issues. This limitation is particularly strong for managers. This is in part why managers often avoid intervention efforts in their employees' conflicts or team dynamics.[\[668\]](#) In addition, managers and human resource professionals typically continue to have relationships with team members after a team building intervention is over. This expectation, in itself, can have inhibiting effects on team members, detracting from a willingness to identify team issues in the planning stages of team interventions or to discuss issues during the team building sessions themselves. There may be perceived risks in being heard by someone in the organization who is in a position to influence their performance evaluations or their career paths after the team building intervention is over.

Besides the relationship constraints, available third parties within organizations are frequently seen as representatives of the organization and its policies, much like the role taken by institutional ombudspersons who act as watchdogs within their institutions. As an advocate for institutional policies, internal consultants can be perceived as evaluators of team member behavior and performance rather than facilitators of change. Team members can easily (and sometimes accurately) assume that the third party is there to align team members' behaviors with the organizations' stated core values or behavioral policies and norms. This assumption can create the perception on the part of team members that the third party is not in a position to deal with the personal realities and complexities of team dynamics that need to be addressed. It restricts possibilities for creative interventions that might be needed to promote positive change within a team because team members may assume that their communication during a team building session is itself grounds for personal evaluation and assessment.

Although human resource personnel typically have substantial technical expertise in areas such as employee relations, performance evaluation, and compensation, they frequently do not have the facilitation skills needed to conduct team building

interventions. Working with groups requires a skill set that goes beyond individual coaching or personal development efforts. [669] Many human resource professionals who seek help from consultants are quick to acknowledge that they do not have the personal confidence to conduct team interventions. Many do not have experience in facilitating group interaction, especially interaction that can be tense and conflictual. Even managers who have direct contact with their teams day to day sometimes have difficulty facilitating the team as a whole and supporting the group in addressing issues that are sensitive or potentially divisive. They often have difficulty juggling their leadership role with a more facilitative, change agent role. They also believe that their managerial role can inhibit, rather than prompt, the kind of discussion the team needs to have. The mindset and personal presence that external mediators develop is closely linked to the skills that are needed to facilitate team interaction and these skills are often not part of a manager's or human resource professional's repertoire.

Even when managers or human resource staff have confidence in their group process and facilitation skills, the organizational culture itself can sometimes override their potential effectiveness in conducting team building interventions. Internal efforts to shift interaction dynamics can be severely limited when trust is low in an organization or when a self-defeating culture has emerged that inhibits employee openness, acceptance of responsibility, and motivation for needed change. [670] Climates are created by members' patterns of interaction over time. When adverse or destructive climates exist in an organization, internal third parties, like managers or human resource staff, are themselves often influenced by the organization in which they have been functioning. [671] Because they are contributors to the patterns of interaction that created the organizational culture, their intervention efforts can be unknowingly restricted by their own past behaviors and the behaviors of their co-workers. They may not be able to see beyond the existing patterns that are in need of change. Or their influence attempts may be undercut by overriding interpretations of their behavior by their co-workers. Only someone from the outside who

has not contributed to the established organizational culture may be able to see and support team members in their efforts to change these patterns, although even external consultants' success may be limited if the patterns are deeply entrenched and senior leadership does not support the need for change.

Given these diverse constraints and limitations, internal third parties can actually have negative, counter-productive effects on teams when they design or conduct team interventions. If team building interventions are conducted by internal third parties and team members are inhibited from speaking honestly or openly about the issues they would like to discuss, mistrust can be heightened on the team. The discussions and interactions among team members proceed on false or less than realistic premises. People recognize that what is not being said is more important than what is being put on the table. They sense that people are filtering and monitoring their comments and can easily attribute this lack of candor to the team members rather than the effect of the internal consultant's presence. In addition, if the third party has prior relationships with some of the team members, this awareness can heighten defensiveness in other team members going into the team building process. Assumptions about the internal consultant's motives and biases can create or exacerbate relationship strains among team members.

All of the potential negative impacts of relying on internal consultants create a strong case for turning to external consultants to conduct team building interventions. Many organizational leaders realize this and turn to external sources for team building initiatives that can help the team move forward or enhance productivity.[\[672\]](#) They also realize that team building approaches differ in design and objectives and consider these differences seriously when they employ the services of external team building consultants. Three of the major approaches to team building are overviewed in the next section, including the transformative/facilitative approach.

Three Approaches to Team Building

There are three well known approaches to conducting team interventions. Each approach can be enacted with different styles and variations, but each of the three approaches is guided by its own hallmarks of practice. The three approaches will be briefly described here, with an emphasis on the potential strengths and drawbacks of each of the approaches.

Challenge Activity Approaches

One approach to team building takes teams away from their work setting and asks them to accomplish challenging tasks or to play simulation games that require interdependence among the team members and can be used to elicit principles of effective team process.^[673] Some of the challenge activities require substantial physical dexterity and coordination, such as the commonly used ropes courses. Other challenge activities may simply be tasks that require creativity and cooperation among team members, but not athletic or physical abilities (such as constructing a creative solution to a challenging situation or building and testing a protective package for a fragile object with pre-determined pieces).^[674] It is the external consultant's responsibility to design and lead the team through the challenge activities. After the team completes the activity, the consultant then facilitates a debriefing session that clarifies the team principles that emerged from the team's interaction during the challenge activity. Frequently the consultant also facilitates team discussion about how the principles and practices can be implemented "back home" in the work setting itself.

The strengths and weaknesses of challenge activity approaches to team building are well known. On the positive side, this approach to team building encourages the active involvement of team members in the process. The challenge activities can spark energy and enthusiasm, thereby contributing to a positive sense about the team building process. In a similar vein, this approach offers a "change of pace" from the day-to-day work environment of the team. For those who enjoy the challenge activities, being away from the office or workplace is itself a bonus of participating in the team building event.

One of the most significant advantages of this approach is that it offers the possibility of illustrating team principles and insights without asking team members to delve very deeply into their own issues. This is because challenge activities are largely team simulations. This means that there can be less apprehension or concern about needing to discuss “real-time” issues, while still allowing the opportunity for the team to consider key team deficiencies or problems indirectly. In this sense, the approach can feel safe to the participants.

The advantages of the challenge activity approach to team building are counterbalanced by several potential drawbacks. When challenge activities involve physical activities, some people are reluctant or anxious about participating in them. People have very different levels of confidence in performing tasks that require physical skill. For some, there is potential embarrassment or anxiety associated with involvement in these activities. Even if people see parallels between the various levels of competence across team members and varying levels of competence in completing physical tasks, they can reject the activities because, in the end, they are not what the team is typically required to do. In addition, the more playful and “fun” aspects of the challenge activities can create an impression that the team building intervention is not a serious endeavor. Even if the activities result in insights about the team’s process or needed changes, how the intervention produced these insights -- the challenge activity process itself -- can be perceived as too playful for the seriousness of the team’s work and issues. Finally, although team members may find the simulation activities useful in providing insights about their team process, there may be skepticism about whether these insights will transfer to the team’s actual dynamics and process. The interventions may not be directly connected to the challenges that prompted the initial need for the team building.

Team Member Diagnostic Approaches

A second approach to team building relies on diagnosing the personality or communication styles of individual team members. This approach is built on the assumption that differences in team

members' communication and work styles can create frustration with team interaction and ultimately impede team performance.

Diagnostic assessment tools, such as the well known Myers-Briggs inventory,[\[675\]](#) are used as a foundation for many of these team interventions. The identification of personal styles and communication tendencies allows individual team members to reflect upon their own style and compare it to that of others on the team. This process can encourage people to see how others may approach their work in different, but equally legitimate ways, and to develop ways to adjust to the differences in styles that the inventories reveal.

Like the challenge activity approach, the diagnostic approach has strengths and weaknesses as a framework for conducting team interventions. On the positive side, this approach reveals important insights about communication style differences that may elude even the most talented individuals on a work team. Awareness of communication styles and the sources of style differences is often a key to creating the basis for deeper personal awareness of the responses that people elicit from their own behaviors. It also supports a greater acceptance of communication diversity because the styles framework assumes that no style is inherently dysfunctional or "wrong." In addition, the very discussion of style differences that this approach fosters can set a precedent for future discussions about substantive differences that exist on the team. It encourages team members to assume that differences are inevitable and to work towards the accommodation of differences at many levels on the team. Like the challenge activity approach, diagnostic approaches to team building have the advantage of indirectness. The team may or may not be asked to address specific issues or problems that have arisen during the course of the team's interaction. The team members are expected to link the insights about personal style differences to challenges that team members face in their day to day work interactions. However, explicit discussions of these topics may not occur, even if some or all team members would want to participate in them.

One drawback of this approach is related to the indirectness of the approach. Like the challenge activity interventions, this approach can create clear insights for team members about their own and other team members' styles. But these insights may not translate into changes that are apparent to team members after the inventories are completed, and differences are identified and discussed. Awareness of personality or communication differences does not automatically provide ways for team members to adapt to this awareness or communicate with each other in new or more productive ways.

A second potential disadvantage of the diagnostic approach relates to its fundamental methodology. Identifying personal styles through paper and pencil inventories can create a false sense that communication styles are static or unchangeable. People are labeled as different types of communicators from their responses to the inventories. This labeling process can create perceptual filters that people bring to their future interactions – they come to see each other within the static frame that the inventory has provided. In worst case scenarios, these perceptions can become stereotypes that team members use as explicit labels for each other. These perceptions can be inconsistent with the variety of complex and nuanced ways individuals actually communicate in specific settings or situations. The danger is that the static labels and the perceptions they construct can create less, rather than more, flexibility in the team's interaction.

Transformative/Facilitative Approaches

The third approach to team building is built on the assumption that team members' satisfaction with their team experience or the productivity of the team itself is directly affected by the quality of interaction the team is having. This approach responds to team members' challenges or difficulties with having needed conversations as an entire group or among subsets of team members. In some instances, the team may not be having conversations about certain topics at all, and in other instances the team's interaction may be deficient or strained in ways that challenge the productivity or goal attainment of the team. The possible

deficiencies in team interaction can be explained in terms of empowerment and recognition processes, as will be discussed in more detail below. The role of the team building consultant is to help identify the conversations that team members want to have and to design ways to facilitate those conversations consistent with the identified needs of the team. In some instances, the consultant's role is to support the direct facilitation of needed conversations. In other cases, the consultant helps to find ways for team members to have productive conversations without being directly involved in those conversations.

A major advantage of this approach to team building is that it is more direct than the other two approaches. It supports team members' ability to address their "real time" issues. This approach creates a valued sense that the team is doing its "real work" as the team intervention unfolds. Although some of the team's conversations may be about process, communication, expectations, etc., these discussions are not offshoots of simulations or personal style analyses that the intervener designs and conducts. Rather, they start with the topics that the team members suggest. In addition, when conversations occur in ways they had not previously, the team experience can be a model for future interactions the team can have on their own after the team building intervention is over. This approach also allows the team to address the issues it wants to address at the pace it is comfortable dealing with them. Because the consultant is not in an instructional role, the agenda and focus for discussions are totally determined by the team members themselves.

There are several drawbacks to a transformative approach to team building. Because of the direct approach of facilitating discussions, team members perceive this approach as risky. They can assume that they might be forced to discuss issues that they do not want to discuss or that the outcomes of team discussions may be too unpredictable. This risk is real if the intervener imposes or requires discussions that any of the team members do not want to have or participate in. A commitment to the empowerment of all team members is crucial to allay these concerns. A related drawback is

that the team may raise difficult issues for discussion and these issues may require substantial work by the team after the team building intervention is over. The issues raised may not be entirely exhausted through the team building process itself. Because the process or content is not predetermined by the consultant in the design of the team building intervention, the issues that team members raise are not bounded. Some fear that such an approach can open a “can of worms,” or raise too many issues that are left hanging. This concern can create a reluctance to initiate a team building session that is designed within this approach.

Transformative Team Building: Core Goals and Essential Conditions

Transformative team building interventions are grounded in goals that parallel those of transformative mediation. The core goal of team building within a transformative approach is to *identify and support the conversations that team members want to have in order to enhance productivity and task objectives, support team member relationships, or facilitate communication*. This goal is consistent with other group and organizational interventions that focus on and facilitate the interaction of work group members.[\[676\]](#) In this approach, the identification of needed team conversations is left in the hands of the team members themselves. The consultant proactively follows where team members perceive their interactions need to go and designs team building sessions that reflect these objectives. Ultimately, the team’s conversations can be about a wide range of possible topics including: the clarification of team goals, tasks or member responsibilities; differences in work styles or communication issues; concerns or challenges related to the distribution and use of power and influence, access to information, expectations about participation, or team member accountability. [\[677\]](#) In some instances, when the topics that team members feel they need to address are highly conflictual, they can be tied to the overall development of the life of the team.[\[678\]](#) Throughout the process, the consultant relies on the empowerment and recognition framework to guide his/her approach to identifying and facilitating the conversations that the team might have.[\[679\]](#) That is, this approach

to practice is built on the view that a team intervention might be helpful or needed because the team is experiencing a “crisis in communication.”[\[680\]](#) This crisis is rooted in team members’ feelings of weakness and/or self-absorption. The team’s interaction can be positively transformed if team members experience a greater sense of empowerment and recognition through facilitated dialogue. Fostering empowerment and recognition means supporting greater clarity for team members about what they want to discuss, and what decisions or choices they want to make, regardless of the specific, substantive outcomes that result from the team building sessions (empowerment). It also means that team members achieve greater clarity and decisiveness while, at the same time, developing greater understanding of other team members’ points of view, perspectives, or emotional reactions to the topics and issues under consideration (recognition). New understandings are woven into the decisions that the team ultimately makes.

“Successful” team building interventions within this approach are those in which team members are able to have productive conversations that they were not able to have previously. Team members participate in conversations that create greater clarity and understanding of the team’s issues and each other. Success is not contingent on the consultant’s ability to have substantive influence over the decisions made, but on the opportunity he or she provides for team members to converse about topics or issues in new or productive ways. The consultant’s goal is to help the conversations improve qualitatively, independent of the particular decisions that the team makes. This goal clearly defines the consultant’s role as a facilitator rather than a substantive expert on the topics that the team is addressing. The consultant acts on the assumption that the team members know what is best for themselves and the team as a whole, but that the team’s communication may not allow it to move forward clearly and with adequate understanding of each other.[\[681\]](#)

Reaching the key goals of this approach to team intervention is not feasible unless several essential conditions are in place. First, there must be significant interdependence among the team members.[\[682\]](#) Some work groups can be within the same department or

location and execute *parallel* tasks, but have minimal interdependence with each other. Such work groups usually require minimal communication among the members. As a result, the essential goal of creating positive shifts in the quality of the team's interaction is largely irrelevant. It is only when team members' work requires interdependence – when people have to count on each other to complete tasks – that communication is vital to their success and thus warrants this approach to intervention.

Second, the communication among the team members must, to some extent, be perceived as deficient or challenged by the team members themselves. In some instances, a request for team building can have little or nothing to do with the communicative needs or deficiencies of the team. For example, the productivity of a team could be challenged because it is severely understaffed and, as a result, cannot complete assigned workloads. Focusing on the communication among team members in this instance will not directly address the resource deficit that is creating frustration or morale problems on the team. It may in some instances, however, help the team members clarify the nature of the resource deficiency, consider ways to influence management about the perceived needs, or modify self-defeating perceptions that the team's performance level is linked to individual member deficiencies or accountability. If team members identify these as possible goals for a team building session, the approach may prove helpful.

Third, some degree of openness among team members must exist in order for this approach to team building to be feasible. Most teams welcome the opportunity to discuss issues that they have not previously been able to address. In some cases, however, the issues that are of concern are ones that the team members feel are too risky to address in open forums. There can be various reasons for team members' reluctance to openly discuss identified issues. The fear of retribution for positions expressed about an issue, potential team member embarrassment, or frustration with past attempts to address an issue may inhibit team members from participating in discussions about topics that are affecting the team's performance or relationships.

Occasionally, one key member of a team may not want to participate in the team's conversation, despite the willingness of the rest of the team to discuss key issues. This is particularly problematic if a senior member or leader of a team indicates that he/she does not want to participate, even though other members of the team believe that this person's participation in the discussion is critical to the value of the discussions the team needs to have. [\[683\]](#) Consistent with the premise of empowerment, the team should have the ability to indicate whether or not they want the team conversations to occur if a key member is not willing or able to attend or participate in the team building session. In some instances, this may mean that the team building session will not go forward at all.

Finally, the team must be able to set aside adequate time for the team building interventions. The length of a team building session depends on the size of the team and the range and scope of the topics that the team identifies for discussion. Limits may also be placed on the total time available, depending upon how long the entire team can be "off-line" at one time. Designing team building sessions within this approach requires flexibility and creativity so that the time allotted for a team building session is used to maximum potential by the team. The structure of agendas, the allocation of estimated time to specific discussion topics, and the possibilities for discussions among sub-groups of the team all need to be considered carefully by the consultant in designing the session. Most team building sessions conducted within this approach last one or two full days. The multiple day sessions are sometimes done over time, usually with a one or two week lapse in between the day long sessions.

An Overview of the Team Intervention Process

Figure 1 provides a broad overview of the steps a consultant takes in conducting team building interventions within this approach. The first meeting is the intake meeting that occurs with a potential client – either a member of the team itself or an organizational representative such as a human resource or training specialist. The initial planning/intake meeting is important because it offers the consultant the opportunity to clarify this approach to team building

and to distinguish it from challenge and team member diagnostic approaches.[\[684\]](#) The consultant obtains clear information about why team building is sought and what the expectations are for the intervention. This discussion allows the consultant to decide whether this approach to practice is appropriate, given the client's expectations. In this first meeting, the consultant also clarifies what the steps will be in the process and provides a rough estimate of how much time will be needed to prepare and facilitate the session.

The second step in the process is to conduct confidential, advance interviews with the members of the team.[\[685\]](#) These interviews serve several important functions. They allow the consultant to explain the approach to the team building to each person who will be participating in the team building session. Here again, the need to contrast this approach with other types of team building interventions is crucial. Team members can have fears and misconceptions about what will be expected of them, based upon their previous experiences with different approaches to team building. These interviews also allow the consultant to build rapport and trust with the individual members of the team. Most importantly, these interviews allow each team member to identify the conversations or issues that he/she would like to see happen during the team building session. The consultant is listening for the topics and issues that could form the basis for the discussions he or she will facilitate. If topics are sensitive or have potential negative repercussions for the team members, this time is also used to help each person get clear about what they will and will not want to say during the discussions. (In this sense, these interviews serve a purpose that is similar to a caucus in traditional mediation.) Each person is assured that they will make the final decision about their own level of participation in the discussions and that their confidentiality will be honored.

Figure 1: Steps in the Transformative Team Building Process

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- **Intake/Initial Planning Meeting**
Clarification of third party role

Defining expectations for success

Overview of the process

- **Team Member Interviews**
Defining the goals/purpose of the interviews
Identifying who should be interviewed
Summarizing themes
 - **Design Conversation Formats for Team Building Session**
Agenda Setting
Deciding who needs to talk to whom about what
 - **Facilitation of Team Building Session**
 - **Summarizing Outcomes and Possible Follow-up Steps**
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After the individual team member interviews are conducted, the consultant designs the discussion formats for the team building session based upon a synthesis of the information obtained from the team members. The design of the session becomes increasingly important as the size of the team increases. Based on the information provided in the interviews, the consultant may have to prioritize topics for discussion to fit the available time for the team building session itself. It is also important that the session have some variety of discussion formats so that the session is not tedious or dominated by the most outspoken team members.

Figure 2 lists several important questions that the consultant considers in designing the format and agenda for the team building session. Taken together, the answers to these questions allow the consultant to creatively design a way to support the conversations that the team has identified. Synthesizing answers to these questions is where the “art” of this approach to team building lays. The goal is to proactively follow the team members’ lead in creating forums for needed discussions, while structuring and pacing the session so that the team’s time is used effectively and efficiently and people are comfortable with the unfolding session. When designed well, the team building sessions tend to run themselves, with the

consultant taking a background role as the team converses about the topics it has identified as important.

Figure 2: Key Questions in Designing Dialogue Formats

- **What aspects of the team/organizational culture need to be considered in designing the team building session?**
- **Who needs to talk to whom during the session?**
- **What topics/issues need to be discussed and by whom?**
- **Are there concerns about anonymity that can be addressed through the design of the session?**
- **How should the session be designed to effectively pace the session?**
- **How much facilitation should the intervener plan to do during the team building session?**
- **What advance preparation do team members need to do?**
- **What role will the team leader/manager play in the session?**
- **Will the complete design of the session be circulated before it occurs?**

When the team building session occurs, the consultant plays a range of roles depending on the design of the agenda and the unfolding interaction among the team members. At the outset of the session, the consultant overviews the agenda for the entire group and explains how the agenda reflects what was heard in the interviews. At points, the consultant may be the central facilitator of the team's conversations, especially when the entire team is participating in the discussion. The facilitation of the entire team's discussion can sometimes occur in an open format with the consultant covering the responsibilities of a group facilitator. In other instances, the consultant can rely upon more structured processes for generating ideas, evaluating options, or making decisions with the entire team. [\[686\]](#) Some discussions are not suited to the team as a whole. For

these situations, the consultant may set up smaller break-out or sub-group discussions and act in a listening role as these discussions unfold. Throughout the day, the facilitator is responsible for monitoring time, gauging the pacing of the meeting, and adapting the agenda to unfolding events and unexpected directions the team feels it needs to go. He or she may also take on the responsibility of summarizing outcomes of the discussions, although if the group is large or if the content is complex, recorders are often used to document the outcomes of the session.

After the team building session, the consultant often summarizes and reviews outcomes, and recommends any follow-up steps that emerged from the team's discussion.[\[687\]](#) In some cases, there is a debriefing session with the entire team, the person who commissioned the team building session, or the team's manager. When difficult issues are addressed, there is often skepticism about whether there will be adequate follow-up or implementation of the decisions made or the directions set. As much as possible, the consultant needs to make sure that needed follow-up steps are taken to validate the work of the team during the consultation.

Transitioning from Mediation to Team Building Practice

Transformative mediators have the conceptual foundation for developing team building practice of the type described above. The core conceptual framework for mediation is the same foundation for team building interventions. The concepts of empowerment and recognition and the intervener's sustained focus on the quality of the parties' interaction can guide the practitioner in all aspects of designing and delivering team building interventions. Many of the micro-skills needed for transformative mediation also come into play in conducting team building sessions. There are, however, several differences that mediation practitioners need to consider and address as they apply their skills in organizational team building efforts.

Most mediations involve a small number of people, while team interventions always involve groups of people – sometimes large groups of 15 or more. This difference in the number of “parties”

involved in the intervention requires substantial group facilitation skills and a comfort with being somewhat more “on stage.” Working with a large group can place the intervener in a more exposed position and there are more possibilities for unexpected twists and turns in the unfolding interaction during a team building session – including the possibility that the team will blame the facilitator for its own failures or frustrations. Comfort with considerable ambiguity is an essential skill for conducting this work. The larger number of people involved in most team building sessions does, somewhat surprisingly, make keeping the focus on the interaction somewhat easier. When more people are involved in the conversations, it is more difficult to become substantively involved in the issues or the stands that any one person is taking in a discussion or conflict. The third party, in other words, is somewhat more able to focus on the *inter*-action rather than the communication or action of any one person. This enables the third party to keep his or her attention on the primary goal of the intervention – to support the qualitative shifts in the team’s communication – and helps to avoid a more directive posture.

Team building interventions also require that the consultant have considerable sensitivity to organizational culture and climate. The norms of interaction and expectations for communication differ widely across different organizations and work sectors.[\[688\]](#) To some extent, team building consultants have to adapt to these diverse norms and behavioral expectations. This type of adaptation can be subtle but is critical to attaining adequate credibility with clients. Even the consultants’ personal dress, language, and general communication style will be assessed by clients in the initial intake interviews. This scrutiny usually stems from an attempt to assess whether there will be a good fit between the consultant and the team – whether the team will be comfortable with and trust the consultant throughout the process. This means that the consultant needs to be aware of the kind of organizations in which they can function best as a team consultant. While some adaptation is possible, team building consultants can usually function well in some organizational settings and not as well in others.

Finally, team building interventions requires a sensitivity to the political dimensions of organizational work-life. Sometimes the very act of requesting a team building process is controversial within the organization or team. It may be supported by some team members and be questioned or rejected by others. In addition, relationships between the team and its leader can be highly politically charged. [689] Sometimes a manager will indicate that the team's issues have nothing to do with him or her while the team members indicate that the team's issues are directly related to management deficiencies. Managers may also have fears that information shared openly in a team discussion will leak to other parts of the organization. [690] In other cases, conflict between groups within the organization may complicate team building efforts or limit their ultimate effectiveness. [691] In situations like these, the consultant has to navigate the political dimensions of organizations while remaining true to the core principles and ethics of a transformative approach to intervention. This ability is not always part of a mediator's repertoire but is critical to building a team building practice within organizational settings.

Conclusion

Transformative team building interventions often allow team members to address conflicts, make decisions, and build stronger co-worker relationships. Although there are potential risks to this approach, it is consistent with a line of team intervention theory which suggests that teams often need third parties who stimulate conflict to some degree and then support team members as they engage in constructive confrontations about important topics. [692] This approach to team intervention practice frequently "takes the lid off" issues that the team may not have been able to address. The role of the consultant is to support the challenging interaction as it then unfolds – a skill that transformative mediators hone in their third party practice. One of the upstream effects of the team building process is that team members model for each other the forms of dialogue needed to be successful in difficult organizational settings. Like the potential effects of transformative mediation, the experience and skill of working through difficult interactions can be carried

beyond the team building session, having long term positive impacts on the team and its future conversations.
