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Leadership in Work Teams

"The meeting to give feedback from our research to the members of the Omega Systems management team had been postponed twice, due to last-minute changes in the top executives' agendas. In the end, the meeting started forty five minutes late. During the meeting, several managers who did not belong to the team came in to see if they could use the room, and some stayed for a couple of minutes talking to the managers in the team. One member of the team left halfway through the meeting to take a phone call that was supposed to last only five minutes. She never came back. Often, the managers interrupted one another, and sometimes there were two discussions going on simultaneously. Our attempts to make the team see what was happening, so that they would become aware of the dynamic of the meeting and decide whether they wanted to behave differently, were listened to but had no noticeable effect."

Groups That Work (and Those That Don't), 1990

This technical note was prepared by Professors Pablo Cardona and Paddy Miller. January 2000. Revised in July 2004.

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There are many objectives in business that do not depend on how well an individual performs, nor even on how well several isolated individuals perform, but on a specific phenomenon that includes relationships, rules and feelings, as well as individuals. That phenomenon is what is known as a team. A team is a social organization with an identity of its own that has a dynamic and that produces effects that cannot be reduced to the sum of its members. Consequently, leading a team is rather more complex than leading a group of people. To start with, not all teams are equal. Some perform below expectations, and others do not perform at all. Some teams perform well for a while but then start losing their punch and creativity. Others, by contrast, become real teams, capable of unsuspected achievements. What makes a team perform well? What role does the team leader play in that process?

Sometimes, it is said that it is a matter of "chemistry", that some teams "gel" while others don't. Other times, great stress is laid on the selection of team members and the make-up of the team, as if the team's future depended on that alone. Experience tends to demonstrate the opposite: "chemistry" is not the cause but the result of the way a team works, which explains why a team can get better or worse without there being any major change in its composition. A team is not a given, but a living entity that needs to be properly nurtured. That is why the role of the leader is so critical. Leading a team is no trivial task: it demands an understanding and a practical command of the various processes that take place in teams, so that the factors that build the team are continually reinforced, while those that weaken or destroy it are detected and corrected. That is why the first step in leading any team is to understand what constitutes a team, and how it can develop or deteriorate.

What Makes a Team

Not all groups of people meeting regularly at work can be called teams. Although all teams are groups, not all groups are teams. Committees, for example, are groups of people who meet in order to share information, negotiate, and make certain work-related decisions. However, group members do not take responsibility for the results of the whole that is affected by their decisions, and so groups cannot be considered teams.

A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose and certain shared goals, for which they hold themselves mutually accountable (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993). Teams are not big collectivities such as a company or a country. Teams can range from 2 to 25 people at most, but an advisable size is between 5 and 7 members (Rodríguez Porras, 1988). Very small teams may lack sufficient complementary skills or points of view, while large teams may have trouble interacting and working together as a team.

A team requires collective work products for which all members are accountable. This collective product is the result of the joint contributions of the team's members working together toward a common goal. That is true of project teams or new product development teams. It may also be true of top management teams, but only if their

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members are accountable for common results as well as departmental ones. A group of sales representatives who meet fairly regularly to review strategies and results, and even seek synergies, would not be a real team (even though they may sometimes be called a team) if subsequently each sales representative acts on her own account and is accountable only for her own results.

Team Composition

In creating a team, the selection of team members is a critical, albeit not a decisive, factor. Hence, the first concern of the team leader should be to surround herself with people who have the right mix of technical, decision-making, and interpersonal skills in order to accomplish the team's mission. What constitutes the right mix of people and skills is not self-evident, however. Several researchers have argued that cultural, functional, and trait diversity increases the amount and variety of information and views available to the team, thus improving its overall potential (Clark and Fujimoto, 1991; Brown and Eisenhardt, 1995). Others, however, have found that team performance depends on a team's common framework, and shared goals (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Walsh, 1995). Diversity produces divergent interpretative schemas and unshared interests, increasing the probability of conflict and political activity (Dougherty, 1992). These problems may result in a poor team decision-making process.

In order to solve these problems, Cohen and Levinthal proposed an effectiveness curve where there is an optimum level of diversity. Too little diversity may lead to inbreeding and lack of complementary skills, whereas too much diversity may produce a lack of common understanding and shared interests. This theory has been challenged by Earley and Mosakowski (2000), who studied different multicultural teams and found an effectiveness curve that is the inverse of Cohen and Levinthal's. In their study, both very homogeneous and very heterogeneous groups were more effective than groups with an intermediate degree of variety. While in the two extreme cases the groups established a common framework and shared objectives, the intermediate ones split into different coalitions that slowed down the team decision-making process.

The proper mix may also depend on the team's project or mission. In cross-functional new product development teams, the degree of involvement of marketing, engineering and manufacturing members may vary in different phases of the project. At Honeywell, for example, even though the team remains the same from beginning to end, the bulk of the responsibility and work load is assumed by marketing people in the initial phase of concept development and product requirements definition, by engineering people during the design phase, and by manufacturing people in the manufacturing phase (Bailey, 1991).

In summary, we can say that a team benefits from the complementarity of its members, while more diverse teams require a greater mastery of the basic team processes, which we will see in the next section. The leader must take the people she has at her disposal and their diversity into account when leading the team.

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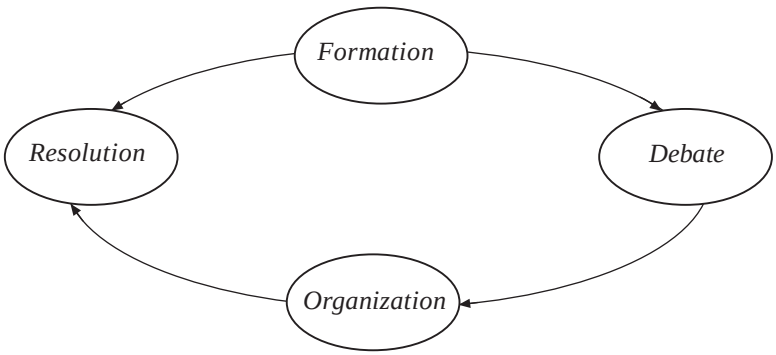
Team Development

There are four classical stages in team development: forming, storming, norming, and performing (Tuckman, 1965). In the *forming* stage, individuals get to know each other and try to establish membership criteria within the team. There is insecurity and anxiety until people feel they are accepted by the rest of the team members, and reach a basic level of mutual expectations. In the storming stage, individuals start responding to the team's challenges from their different viewpoints and interests. There may be bids for power and influence, and emotional arguments, until certain decision-making processes allow the team to proceed. In the *norming* stage, members decide on some rules and processes for accomplishing the task. Also, unwritten norms of acceptable behavior arise that help the team work as a coordinated unit. Finally, in the *performing* stage, people work together in a collaborative way. They cooperate with each other in order to accomplish the team's objective. The experience of accomplishment of objectives unites the team even more closely, reinforcing its identity as a team. This way, the team is built up and becomes more capable of tackling new projects and challenges.

These four stages constitute a cycle through which the team develops (see **Figure 1**). With each new project or challenge, the team starts a new cycle, whose forming stage is the end result of the previous cycle. After the experience of team work in the first cycle, the individuals learn to recognize and value other members' efforts and capabilities. This deeper knowledge of the other people in the team also boosts the level of affection and trust among team members. The team is now ready to face a new storming stage, which will be more effective thanks to the greater expertise and unity of the team. The decisions will be more realistic and will facilitate a more effective norming stage than the previous time around, and so on. The team develops and matures through these cycles until the tasks require a different type of team, or the membership changes abruptly enough to alter the team's identity.

Figure 1

The phases of a team's constructive cycle



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In each stage, the team goes through a basic process which produces an output that is necessary for the team's success. The team leader needs to reinforce those basic processes, so that the team continues to obtain results as expected. The process of the forming stage is trust building, and its output is cohesiveness. The process of the storming stage is communication in team meetings, and its output is the team's decisions. The process of the norming stage is organization, and its output is an action plan. Finally, the process of the performing stage is collaboration, and its output is the results of the teamwork (see Table 1).

Table 1

Phases, processes and results

Stage	*Forming*	*Storming*	*Norming*	*Performing*
PROCESS	Trust building	Communciation	Organization	Collaboration
OUTPUT	Cohesiveness	Decision	Action plan	Results

The process of trust building starts with environmental safety. Team members need to feel a minimum of security within the physical setting and surrounding circumstances. Then, they will look for a personal fit with the other team members and the team's mission. It is important that the team leader or coach help team members to learn about each other, going from the most formal to the most informal issues that are relevant for their work and relationship. The process needs to include ways for team members to gain mutual respect and a sense of interdependency to accomplish their mission. This can be done through simple exercises or projects, analogous to the warm-up session for a soccer team. The output of this process is a cohesive team that is emotionally ready to make decisions relating to its mission.

The process of communication is the decision-making process that the team needs to go through in order to solve a problem or a challenge. It consists of the following steps: seeking information; defining the problem; clarifying relevant criteria; generating alternatives; evaluating those alternatives, and making a decision. To manage this process effectively, the leader must make sure the team follows the proper sequence, without jumping to the next step until all members have contributed to the previous one and understand each other's views on that step. In some cases, it may be advisable to appoint a facilitator or secretary to take care of this. Communication is the most critical process in team work, and we shall discuss it in greater detail in the section on roles within the team. For the time being, suffice it to say that the leader must be very alert to the roles played by the team members at this stage, because the outcome of the process will depend on it. To complete the process successfully, the leader must foster the greatest possible commitment of the team to the decisions agreed at the team meeting, and generate a sense of urgency to put them into practice. This sense of urgency is not to be confused with the pathological, stressful behavior of some managers who are more concerned about getting things done quickly than about where they are actually heading. Rather, a team's sense of urgency should arise from a

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deeper understanding of the significance of the decisions taken, highlighting their priority over other issues.

The process of organization consists of elaborating the action plan to implement the decision. The plan will generally incorporate several tasks that team members should perform in coordination with each other. The leader must see to it that the team considers both the hard elements – such as the definition of specific responsibilities, resources, and deadlines – and soft elements – such as rules and procedures to establish acceptable and expected behavior. She also may specify, if she considers it necessary, the consequences of not accomplishing the responsibilities or not respecting the team's rules, such as penalties and alternative plans for accomplishing the tasks that need to be done. The output of this process is an action plan that is realistic and clear to all the team members.

The collaboration process starts with securing the required resources: human, financial, and technical. The leader may have to negotiate with other departments, or call on help from inside or outside the company, to obtain those resources. Then the team members need to work with a holistic view, knowing that their work affects the other members' effectiveness, and that their own effectiveness is, in turn, affected by the other members' work. In order to coordinate efforts, team members usually need to interact frequently during the execution of the action plan. The leader should promote such interaction through physical proximity whenever possible, or, at least, adequate channels of information, such as e-mail or video conferencing facilities. The leader must conduct regular progress reviews to measure how the tasks are being accomplished and deadlines are being met. If necessary, she will have to adapt the action plan to changing circumstances. The output of this process is the specific result the team wanted to accomplish. The leader must be sure to recognize and celebrate the team's accomplishments. This reinforces team identity and cohesiveness, preparing it to face more difficult challenges.

The Carmill Model of Team Development

In the previous section we saw the constructive cycle of team development. In this cycle, teams go through a series of stages that make them stronger and more mature. Unfortunately, in real teams development is not always so positive. Teams may experience crises and negative behavior that weaken their capacity to accomplish their mission.

The Carmill model (Cardona and Miller, 2000) distinguishes two cycles: constructive and destructive (see **Figure 2**). The heart of the constructive cycle is the shared objectives (or team mission). Those objectives are the foundation of the team's identity and permanently influence its basic processes: trust building, communication, organization, and collaboration. The processes, in turn, influence the shared objectives. For example, if the members of a team are deeply committed to a set of shared objectives, they will be more likely to develop mutual trust. Conversely, if the members of a team have a high degree of mutual trust, they will be more likely to share

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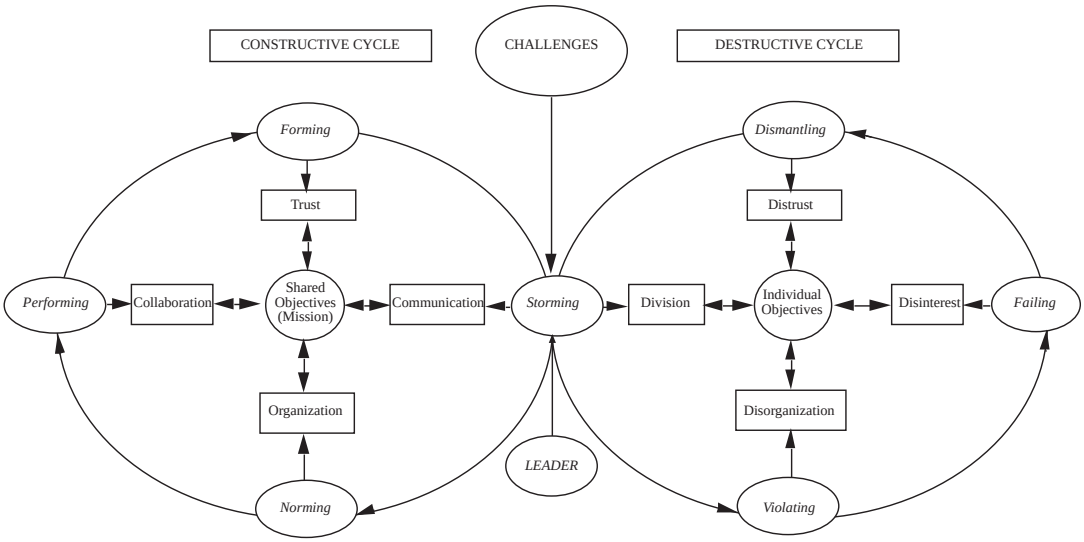
objectives. The heart of the destructive cycle is individual or private objectives. Both these cycles are found in the storming phase. The storming phase is critical for the team's development. It is the moment of truth for the team, since the members need to commit to a specific decision. Team members must choose between the objectives they share as a team (the team's mission) and their own individual objectives. If the team members put their individual objectives before the shared ones, the team will enter the destructive cycle. As we will see later on, it is also the moment of truth for the leader, as it is in making decisions that the different types of leadership that can arise in a team are formed.

Figure 2
The Carmill model



The leader must learn to detect early on when the team is entering the destructive cycle, in order to be able to take corrective measures in good time. The first symptom is the formation of coalitions in the communication process, leading to division and lack of commitment to the team's decisions. Coalitions appear when the leader does not control the communication process and allows the storming process to degenerate into confrontation. Although there may have been opposing views in the decision making process (which is not a bad thing – on the contrary), the leader must keep order in the process and control the emotional aspect of the debate, so that the team focuses on the issues and not on the personalities or the subgroups within the team. When discussions degenerate into hostile coalitions at an emotional level, the losing subgroup will refuse to accept the solution imposed by the winning subgroup. As a result, the leader will have great difficulty in securing the commitment of the *whole* team to the team's decisions.

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The team then enters a destructive cycle. This destructive route is followed by the disorganization that arises when some team members violate the team norms or do not follow the action plan wholeheartedly. If the leader does not act in time, the team will continue in the destructive cycle until it enters a "failing" stage, where it is extremely difficult to get anything done, because people do not accept responsibility. Instead of collaboration among team members, there is disinterest in other people's responsibilities, and each person confines herself to doing the absolute minimum to avoid getting complaints from the boss. When at last the foreseeable results are obtained, a process of mutual recrimination begins, which effectively pulls the team apart. In this "dismantling" phase, trust between team members is undermined, and the team loses the capacity to face new challenges successfully.

If the leader detects a slide towards the destructive cycle in good time, she may try to guide the team back to the storming stage and orient it toward the constructive route (a strategy of *going back*). However, if the team is already at an advanced stage of the destructive cycle, the leader must try to use the next project (or create a new challenge) to change the cycle (a strategy of *moving forward*). Even a seriously weakened team may switch from the destructive to the constructive cycle if it is presented with a sufficiently important challenge. Some teams do not react against their destructive behavior until they are faced with a very major challenge, such as the survival of their team, or even of the company itself. In these cases, the new challenge is really a new opportunity: an opportunity to confirm shared objectives and start working as a real team.

Given the importance of the storming stage in team dynamics, in the following sections we will focus on the communication process, and more specifically on the dynamics, roles and conflicts in team meetings. In this stage, the team's effectiveness in current and future projects is at stake.

The Dynamics of Team Meetings

The dynamics of team meetings are crucial to the effectiveness of team work. Very often, it is possible to deduce how well a team is working and what results it is capable of achieving just by observing the dynamics of its meetings. The management team of Omega Systems, described at the beginning of this note, is an example of how the dynamics of a meeting may reflect the progress of the team as a whole. The way Omega Systems operates shows us some of the problems that may influence the dynamics of team meetings. The first symptom of trouble in the team is the low priority given to meetings in the team members' agendas. Finding time to speak to a manager is difficult enough already. Finding a time that suits all the members of a team (particularly if they are senior executives) is next to impossible. If meetings are not given the right priority, they will tend to be put off time and again. A team that wants to work as a team must start by fixing the dates of its ordinary meetings, at the appropriate intervals, and stick rigidly to those dates, unless there is a very good reason to change them.

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Given the amount of time taken up by meetings (the duration of the meeting multiplied by the number of participants), it is important that they be used to best effect. If the team members feel that their meetings are a waste of time, it is a sign that something is wrong. Many teams suffer from too many meetings, when the members are brought together indiscriminately to solve any and every problem. The leader has a serious responsibility to consider how often meetings should be held, and how long they should last. Although it is impossible to lay down any definite rules, there are some obvious common sense guidelines. The first guideline is that team members should spend at least as long preparing the meeting as actually at the meeting. If people come to the meeting with an attitude of "Let's see what we can talk about today", the meeting is clearly going to be a waste of time and the team work will be inefficient. In order not to succumb to this dynamic of ineffectiveness, all the team members must have the information necessary to prepare the meeting sufficiently in advance (at least 24 hours).

The second guideline is that meetings should start and end at a set time. Although this may seem superfluous, not all teams give it the importance it deserves. Many meetings do not start on time. The meeting at Omega Systems started forty five minutes late, with all the disruption and time wasting that entailed for so many people. Some teams agree on a rule (a more or less symbolic penalty) to encourage everyone to arrive at meetings on time. On the other hand, some meetings do not have a set time for finishing. That can be very dangerous, because meetings have an incredible tendency to stretch out to fill all the time available, however unnecessarily. If a team agrees to meet "starting 3 o'clock", there is a danger it will be kept busy all afternoon and evening. Hence the importance of fixing the duration of the meeting, even though in some circumstances it may have to be extended to deal with some important or urgent matter.

The third guideline follows from the second. In order to cover all the issues in the agreed time, there has to be a clear, well thought out agenda. For each meeting, the leader must decide what issues are to be discussed, in what order, and for how long, so that they all can be dealt with in the necessary depth without taking up more time than necessary. In some cases, the leader may delegate this task to a secretary (especially if there are recurring topics), provided that she checks the agenda before it is sent out to the team members. During the meeting, the leader must make sure that the timings on the agenda are adhered to. This task may usefully be delegated to a person specifically charged with monitoring the timing of the meeting, so that the leader is able to give her full attention to the content of the debate.

The fourth guideline concerns the presence and attention of the team members during the meeting. For a team meeting to be as effective and productive as possible, it is vital to avoid interruptions as far as possible. The case of Omega Systems is a clear example of what should not happen in a meeting. To start with, it is important to choose the right physical meeting place for the number of people attending, one that is sufficiently isolated against possible interference or interruption. Every time a person enters the meeting room, she effectively steals the time of several other busy people. And the isolation must be maintained as far as possible, avoiding phone calls or other issues that may distract attention.

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Lastly, the leader must see to it that people take turns to speak (asking before they talk), keep to the point, and at all times maintain an attitude of respect, both the person who is talking and those who are listening. It is also important that the secretary keep minutes of the conclusions and decisions taken in the meeting, as also of the individuals responsible and the deadlines for implementation. Besides following these guidelines, the leader must also take into account her team members' spontaneous behavior in meetings. These spontaneous patterns of behavior are known as roles, and the success of the team meetings will depend largely on the leader's fostering the right roles for each person. In the following section we shall see what those roles are, and how they can influence team meetings for better or worse.

Roles in Teams

According to research conducted by Glenn Parker (1990), for a work team to be effective its members must spontaneously share out among themselves a number of roles. After asking senior executives from a hundred or so companies about those roles, Parker identified four that seemed crucial[1]. These roles are complementary, and make up a coherent system. We shall call them *constructive roles*. They are: *contributor*, *communicator*, *questioner*, and *collaborator*. Each of these four roles reinforces one of the key components of the decision making process. These components are: information gathering, discussion, evaluation, and action planning. Every so often, the leader must check to see that each of the four roles is being adequately performed by at least one of the team's members.

Just as there are constructive roles that strengthen the team, there are also types of behavior and attitudes that weaken it. We shall call them *debilitating roles*. They are: *doubter*, *distracted*, *diplomat*, *dominator*, and *defeatist*. The debilitating roles are the opposite of the constructive roles: the *doubter* is the opposite of the *contributor*; the *distracted* participant is the opposite of the *communicator*; and the *defeatist* is the opposite of the *collaborator*. The *diplomat* and *dominator* roles are the two extremes of a continuum in which the *questioner* role represents the midpoint (see Table 2). Below is a summary of these roles.

Table 2
Roles in a work team

Elements of the decision making process	Constructive roles	Debilitating roles
Information gathering	Contributor	Doubter
Discussion	Communicator	Distracted
Evaluation	Questioner	Diplomat/Dominator
Action plan	Collaborator	Defeatist

[1] Other systems use a larger number of roles. Belbin (1981), for example, distinguishes nine roles that are necessary for team work.

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Constructive roles

To guarantee the fullest possible communication, the leader must ensure that all the constructive roles are represented in her team. If any one of them is missing, there will be a tendency to avoid or bypass some of the basic elements of the decision making process. In some cases, all the members chosen by the leader have certain personality traits in common and tend to adopt the same roles. For example, a team may have a lot of questioners and no communicators, or vice versa. If that is the case, the leader and her team must make an effort to identify the constructive roles that best fit each team member. Having roles duplicated is less of a problem than having a role that is not represented at all. If a particular role is found to be absent, the leader must encourage one or more members of the team to adopt the role that needs to be covered.

Contributor. The contributor *enjoys providing the team with technical information and data*, encouraging the others to set themselves high performance standards and use their resources intelligently. Most people see her as a person who inspires a sense of security, although sometimes she seems to get too caught up in details, to lose sight of the big picture, or not to appreciate the need for a positive climate in the team. People describe her as responsible, reliable, efficient and organized. This is a key role for achieving efficiency in information gathering.

Communicator. The communicator *facilitates team discussion, involvement by team members, and conflict resolution.* She listens to the others, seeks consensus and feedback, and does her best to establish a relaxed atmosphere. Most people see her contribution as very positive and necessary, but they also feel that at times she puts too much emphasis on the process, as if it were an end in itself, inhibiting healthy discussion among team members. People describe her as considerate, relaxed, lively and tactful. This is a key role for achieving efficiency in the decision making process.

Questioner. The questioner *questions the team's objectives, methods, and even its principles.* She is prepared to disagree with the team leader and encourages the team to take calculated risks. Most people value her for her spontaneity, but think that she sometimes pushes the team too far or fails to see when it is time to retreat. People describe her as honest, frank, ethical and enterprising. This is a key role for achieving efficiency in the evaluation of data and action alternatives.

Collaborator. The collaborator is always willing to get down to work and share successes with others. For her, the team goal or mission is primordial, and yet she is flexible and open to new ideas. Most people see her as someone who has a clear grasp of the project as a whole, but who sometimes needs to put aside that broad perspective and pay more attention to the team's basic tasks or the personal needs of other team members. People describe her as someone who looks ahead, is goal-oriented, flexible, and imaginative. This is a key role for achieving efficiency in working out and implementing action plans.

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Debilitating roles

The team leader must be constantly alert to detect any debilitating roles in her team, and find a way to limit their damaging effects. Debilitating roles tend to appear most commonly at times of exhaustion or tension, and are based on the spontaneous tendencies of the team members. At such times, the team members should tactfully but honestly support one another, so as to continue in their constructive roles and avoid acquiring habits or emotional reactions that may seriously damage the team. It may sometimes be advisable to call a break or postpone the meeting until the next day. Normally, however, it will be enough just to treat the debilitating role in question appropriately. Below, for each debilitating role we suggest steps that may be taken to steer the person concerned back in the right direction. Although the leader bears ultimate responsibility, she may appoint another person to detect and rectify these roles.

Doubter. The doubter *does not know her own mind and prefers to let others make the decisions for her.* She tends to be the last to volunteer an opinion and to stand on the sidelines during discussions. She only ever takes part when she is explicitly asked for her opinion. Most people see her as reserved and insecure, although she no doubt has some interesting views to contribute. People describe her as introverted, reserved, quiet, and insecure. This is a role that weakens the team's efficiency in information gathering. The leader should encourage the doubter to formally voice her opinion, and take it into account in decision making. It is important that her contribution be recognized. She may also be asked to open the debate or present her views in writing.

Distracted. Distracted *tends to leapfrog over the agreed schedule of business.* She finds it difficult to focus on the matter at hand. Most of the time, she is extroverted, and tends to interrupt the meeting at odd times to talk about things that have nothing to do with the agenda. Most people see her as spontaneous, and even fun, although she can waste a lot of the team's time with her interruptions. People describe her as spontaneous, fidgety, extroverted, and superficial. This is a role that weakens the overall efficiency of the decision making process. The leader must gently but firmly cut short her digressions, leaving them for the breaks (breakfast, coffee, etc.). Then, she must guide the discussion back to the matter at hand.

Diplomat. The diplomat *wants to reach a consensus as soon as possible, avoiding argument as far as possible.* She tends to escape disagreements by looking for majority solutions, without fully examining the causes of the problems. Most people see her as attentive and polite, but too impatient to endure constructive criticism. People describe her as polite, organized, pleasant, and calm. This is a role that weakens the team's effectiveness in evaluating data and action alternatives, through a lack of engagement. The leader must question her apparent acceptance of the majority opinion. If necessary, to keep tempers calm, she may call a break and ask the diplomat for her opinion in private. If there is no time for that, at least she should ask the diplomat to explain the reasons for her decision.

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Dominator. The dominator *tries systematically to impose her views.* She has no qualms about breaking the team's rules in order to win an argument. She does not listen and often monopolizes the discussion. Most people see her as rigid, authoritarian, and sometimes aggressive. People describe her as extroverted, spontaneous, ambitious and tenacious. This is a role that weakens the team's effectiveness in evaluating data and action alternatives, through overengagement. To prevent the dominator from monopolizing the meeting, the leader should enforce a team rule that promotes participation. For example, before an issue is taken as settled, she could ask each member of the team to give her opinion, encouraging the dominator to actively listen to the others' views.

Defeatist. The defeatist *constantly airs her pessimistic view of the team's proposals.* She is not very proactive and tends not to volunteer for projects. She needs constant encouragement to prevent her from falling by the wayside. Most people see her as being sincere, but too negative and discouraging, to such an extent that she can become a burden for the team. People describe her as sincere, pessimistic, passive and reactive. This is a role that weakens the team's effectiveness in specifying and implementing action plans. The leader must help the defeatist to see the positive side of the team's proposals and ask her to come up with solutions rather than concentrating exclusively on the problems. It may also be a good idea, when sharing out the tasks among the team members, to team her up with a collaborator.

Conflict Management in Teams

Teams are social groups with an added complexity: joint responsibility for a collective outcome. If the risk of conflict is implicit in any interaction between people, all the more so in a relationship that is based on interdependence and collaboration, and that requires a certain unity of opinion and action. Sometimes, conflict between team members is open and accepted. Very often, however, it is masked and difficult to recognize. The leader must be very sensitive to different tones of voice in conversation, and even to body language (facial expressions and gestures), in order to detect incipient conflicts before they mature and crystallize.

Conflicts take many forms and can be classified in many different ways. However, it is important to distinguish at least two dimensions: the rational dimension and the emotional dimension (Rodríguez Porras, 1995). Rational conflict tends to be explicit and usually involves disagreement on a particular *issue* (a decision, a goal, a decision criterion, etc.). Emotional conflict tends to be implicit and usually involves disagreement with an *attitude* (of a person or group of people). Emotional conflict tends not to be expressed openly, because it is a feeling rather than an opinion. However, it manifests itself in the rational dimension: in a person's tone of voice, and in the intensity with which issues are discussed in meetings. Combining these two dimensions, we get four possible states of a team meeting: conformity, confrontation, disagreement, and unity (see Table 3).

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Table 3
States of a team meeting

EMOTIONAL	RATIONAL: Disagreement	RATIONAL: Agreement
Agreement	**Disagreement**	**Unity**
Disagreement	**Confrontation**	**Conformity**

Conformity is a deceptive state, because although the team members appear to be formally in agreement on the main issues, they are not wholeheartedly committed to the decisions. It is the state that we find when the boss asks, "Do we all agree on that?" and everybody says "yes", doing their best not to look their boss in the eye. But then, after the meeting, and behind their boss's back, they voice their disagreement with the decision that has been taken. In some cultures or teams, there is such resistance to conflict that people tend to conform to the decisions of the majority, or of whatever group dominates the team. The state of conformity is most characteristic of teams that tend to move in the destructive cycle.

Confrontation occurs when the discussion of specific issues on which people disagree is colored by personal judgments. The various groups or coalitions that have formed start a heated argument, putting more emphasis on accusations against individuals or groups than on the facts of the matter. A typical expression in this type of argument is "You lot always..." Expressions such as this reveal an emotional attitude towards a group in general, rather than a specific judgment of the matter at hand. If the state of confrontation is not skillfully handled, it may open serious wounds at an emotional level that will break up the team or, at least, push it down the route of the destructive cycle. Faced with this threat, the temptation is to avoid conflict at all costs, and even to forbid argument, which will lead the team to the state of conformity.

Disagreement arises when different members of a team disagree on some particular issue, but nevertheless respect the positions of their opponents and try to understand the strengths of their opponents' views. A person who disagrees tends to ask questions and listen. When it is her turn, she puts her point of view respectfully and forcefully, and yet she is always ready to change her opinion, rather than obstinately sticking to it come what may. Disagreement differs from confrontation in the respectful tone of voice adopted, the attitude of active listening, and the focus of the discussion on facts rather than on people. This state is sustainable only if there is sufficient trust and respect among team members. If it is not skillfully managed, it may easily deteriorate into confrontation. The team members will then switch to the emotional plane and stop listening to one another.

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Unity is the state that arises when the team members have reached a final consensus on an issue and are genuinely committed to the solutions adopted (even if they are not the decisions they themselves would initially have preferred). A team is unlikely to find itself in this state for very long. In fact, any normal team will always have people with complementary viewpoints, which will enrich the discussion, leading the team to a state of disagreement. The important thing is to move on from the state of disagreement by finding points of agreement where the team can act as one. If the leader insists on crystallizing a state of unity on all issues, she runs the risk of dragging the team towards a state of disagreement from which it will have great difficulty escaping.

One of the leader's most basic tasks is to manage conflict in such a way that agreement is maintained at an emotional level. Then the team will alternate between the states of unity and disagreement, which is healthy and creative. If the team is in a state of conformity, the leader must cut through the false equilibrium by pushing the team into a state of confrontation, where people's views become explicit and the need to address the underlying problems becomes apparent. This is a very difficult and risky step to take, and so calls for extreme tact, so that the team members react positively and maturely to their differences. This process must include an effort to understand the points of view of the other subgroups or individuals and, sometimes, an exercise in catharsis that will help team members to forget the not always very positive history of their mutual relationship. This is the most delicate step in the whole conflict resolution process, and sometimes the leader will need external help to carry it through (especially if the leader is herself involved in the conflict). If it is done well, however, and in good time, it can serve to resolve the emotional conflict and lead the team to a state of disagreement, from which the team members can start to work together as a real team.

Leadership in a Work Team

The fundamental mission of a team leader is to create and strengthen the team's identity. To do that, besides managing all the processes that we have discussed in the preceding sections, the leader has one basic responsibility: to foster the shared objectives, which essentially are the heart of the team and the foundation of its identity as a team. A manager who masters the art of managing team meetings effectively, but who is unable to make continual progress in whatever it is that turns a group of people into a team, is not a true leader, but a mere team administrator.

Just as in relational leadership we can distinguish three types of leaders, depending on the type of relationship the leader is able to build with her subordinates, in teams, too, we can distinguish those same three types of leadership. In this case, the important thing is the type of objectives that the leader is capable of persuading the team members to share. Depending on the quality of those objectives, the leader will be a transactional leader, a transforming leader, or a transcendent leader.

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A transactional leader unites her team around certain extrinsic objectives, that is to say, the rewards that the team can expect to obtain for accomplishing its mission. Those objectives may include a group bonus, or beating a rival team. Extrinsic objectives generate what we might call *instrumental* cohesion. Instrumental cohesion consists of a union among people that is sustained by the conviction that, without those other people, I will not be able to achieve my own objective (my share of the group bonus, for example). Instrumental cohesion is the most fragile type of cohesion, as it rests on a balance of various individual objectives. The transactional leader will only be able to keep her team united so long as that balance is maintained, which often will be difficult, especially if the link between effort and reward or punishment is unclear or not well justified. Also, the leader must be constantly on the alert against opportunistic behaviors on the part of team members, who may try to achieve the team's objectives with the least possible sacrifice of their own private goals.

A transforming leader unites her team around certain goals that include not only extrinsic but also intrinsic objectives, that is to say, objectives where the internal benefits flow from the mere fact of working in a team. Those objectives might be, for example, the learning or the comradeship that comes from working in a well matched team, or the feeling of triumph that comes with accomplishing a mission (even if the team receives no extrinsic reward for its success). Intrinsic objectives generate a deeper kind of cohesion than extrinsic objectives, a cohesion that we could describe as *emotional*. Emotional cohesion consists of a union among people that is sustained by the fact that, without those people, I would not obtain the same intrinsic benefits (learning, comradeship, satisfaction of meeting a challenge, etc.) as I would if I worked on my own or in another team. Emotional cohesion is not based on any balance of private goals, but on a balance between the positive and negative feelings and emotions that each team member experiences as a result of working in this particular team. If the friction, the arguments and the frustration are stronger than the sense of achievement and personal satisfaction, then the balance will become negative and the team's emotional cohesion will be damaged. A transforming leader is able to keep her team united only so long as a positive emotional balance is maintained, which may depend on many factors, such as the personalities of the team members, their moods, or their interpersonal relations. Hence, a transformational leader will know how to handle the emotional aspect of meetings and will try always to foster a climate of improvement and comradeship in relations within the team.

A transcendent leader unites her team around objectives which include not only extrinsic and intrinsic goals but also transcendent objectives, that is to say, the benefits that working in a team can bring to others. Those objectives may be, for example, giving good service to customers, resolving problems for the company or for society, or helping to develop other team members. Transcendent objectives generate an even deeper type of cohesion than the previous sort, one that we could call *structural* cohesion. Structural cohesion consists of a union between people that is sustained by the fact that, without those people, it would be impossible for me to contribute to a mission that has a meaning in itself. In fact, it is called structural cohesion because the principle that produces the cohesion is not extrinsic (such as a team bonus), nor intrinsic (such as comradeship), but comes from the team's own structural contribution,

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that is, the mission that gives the team its identity. For example, for a new product development team, the structural contribution is the new products that the team develops. The transcendent leader unites the team members through the value that those new products have for the company and for society, not only through the money they may earn if they do their job well, or how much they will develop professionally by working in this particular team.

Structural cohesion is based not on a balance of private objectives, nor even on a balance at the level of feelings and emotions, but on the shared motivation to accomplish the team's mission. The transcendent leader gives great importance to the mission, and the team members' sense of mission, and is able to convey her conviction to them. She puts herself to the test particularly in the toughest moments, when the tasks demand sacrifice and both extrinsic and intrinsic gratifications disappear or fade into the distance. Those moments are critical, as they can make or break the team, if the cohesion is not deep enough (that is, if it is not structural). On the other hand, those moments may enhance the team's cohesion still further if they are used to reinforce the members' identification with the mission they have come together to serve.

A transcendent leader must try as far as possible to bring the three types of cohesion – instrumental, emotional and structural – into line with one another. Alignment produces synergy, as the different types of cohesion reinforce one another. For example, if the leader creates a healthy desire for victory (emotional cohesion), she is more likely to be able to convey the sense of mission (structural cohesion), and vice versa. Conversely, a lack of alignment among the three different types of shared objectives may seriously weaken the team's cohesion. For example, it will be difficult to maintain structural cohesion if disunity is fostered at the instrumental level through incentives that value only private objectives.

It is often said that a leader needs to be able to communicate well. That is true, and yet the most important type of communication takes place when decisions are made. A message that is well communicated and repeated time and again will be completely ineffective if, when it comes to the crunch, the decisions that are made contradict it. That is why one of the best ways for the leader to align the shared objectives is through the decisions she takes in the team, much more than with speeches or written communications. Through the criteria and judgments she applies in her decision making, the leader creates, strengthens or destroys the team identity, an identity based on extrinsic, intrinsic and/or transcendent objectives shared by the team members. If the leader is unable to create a core of shared objectives, the team will have no identity and does not really deserve to be called a team at all. Therefore, the fundamental mission of the team leader is to make decisions in such a way that the team's identity is constantly deepened and its cohesion reinforced.

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Conclusion

A team is a complex social phenomenon that must be tended with great care if it is to develop satisfactorily. Leading a team, therefore, is no easy task. The leader's work begins with choosing the right team members, so that the team has the right mix of complementary skills and the right unity. The leader must be an expert in various key processes which every team must go through: trust building, communication, organization, and collaboration. Depending on how these processes are managed, the team will either enter a constructive cycle, in which it emerges strengthened from each project, or a destructive cycle that weakens it and may even threaten its survival. The most critical phase in team building is the storming phase, in which team decisions are taken. The leader must prepare the agenda and environment of each meeting in advance, and control the dynamics of the discussion, especially the roles and any conflicts that emerge, which may greatly assist or jeopardize the successful outcome of the meeting. The leader's most important role, however, is to create, maintain and strengthen the shared objectives of the team members. Depending on the type of cohesion that the team leader is able to create in her team, we can distinguish three types of leader: the transactional leader, the transforming leader, and the transcendent leader.

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