



SIX WAYS TO CURE THE DYSFUNCTIONAL TEAM BLUES

by Michael F. Broom, Ph.D. | Apr 5, 2018 | Leadership, Organization Development | 0 comments



The CEO is frustrated! She is the CEO of a major health care organization and, like many other organization leaders, believes in teams. She has project teams, functional teams, cross-functional teams, process improvement teams, etc. A few of those teams work very well and others not so well. She wishes she could clone the leaders of her good teams and rid herself of the others. That so many of her teams are mediocre really bugs her! She's got the dysfunctional team blues.

She is not alone. Her problem is well documented. "75% of Cross-Functional Teams Are Dysfunctional" is the title of a June 2015 Harvard Business Review article by Benham Tabrizi. A 2013 University of Phoenix national survey found that 95 percent of those who have ever worked on a team say teams serve an important function in the workplace, but 75 percent would prefer to not work on teams because they are so often problematic. Teams are seen as important and a problem that needs a solution.

If you followed my past articles, you may have noticed a consistent emphasis on system thinking and here it is again. Teams are small human systems whose behavior cannot be predicted by the intentions and desires of its individual members. They are synergetic in ways that can be positive where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts or negative where the whole is less than the sum of its parts. The latter describes dysfunctional teams. Want to move your dysfunctional teams to positive synergy? After all, teams are the fundamental unit of organizations. Here are six useful tactics for improving team performance:

Utilize a systems perspective. A team is a human system whose behavior is the product of its members' behavior. However, the behavior of a team's membership is most often derived from the norms of the team rather than from their individual desires and intentions. A system is doing what it is doing only because each member is doing what they are doing. Team members who are being silent to avoid contributing to the team's problems, are contributing to the problems by virtue of their not doing anything constructive just like those who are being actively not helpful. No single person is responsible for a team's success or failure. Finger-pointing and fault-finding at individuals simply exacerbate the team's problems. For more on human systems go check out [The Power and The Problem of Organization Development](#).

Create norms that support a sense of safety. A major contributor to ineffective teams is the lack of anyone willing to address the team's ineffectiveness while the team is face-to-face. Speaking to the problem is perceived as too risky or futile. Eliminate that perception through ensuring that each member (particularly, the team's leader) consistently is interested in, curious about, and appreciative of what other members are saying. People often consider silence as consent. Silence more often signals that speaking up is perceived as not safe or is fruitless. Some fear that such a norm will lead to interminable conversations. Move to decision-making when little new information is forthcoming, conversation has become repetitive, or the topic has wandered off course. In the safe group, members will speak when any of those three conditions may have presented themselves. Please notice that being interested, curious, and appreciative need never indicate agreement.

Use Basic Facilitation. Moderate the pace and focus of the team's interactions. Facilitating the pace of interactions involves minimizing members interrupting each other. Interruptions in case of conflicts between team members tend to escalate the conflict. In such cases, interruptions should be eliminated altogether. Moderating the team's focus involves helping the team stick to a single topic at a time. Discussion of one topic can easily generate other topics while allowing none to be concluded unless managed. Topics that are ancillary to the agenda of the team meeting should be tabled for a later meeting.

Make consensus work. I've already mentioned attempts at consensus becoming futile exercises in unanimity. That is avoided whenever a reasonable percentage of the team is leaning toward a particular decision and everyone feels heard, and those who do not agree are asked if they are willing to support their proposed decision even though they do not fully agree with it. I'm

often asked what if they refuse to support the idea? In my forty years doing this work that has never happened

Manage Egos. Our egos have the goal of maintaining our sense of self-esteem and identity. When we perceive some threat to that maintenance, those goals now driven by the emotions of fear and anger can overwhelm our behavior as if our lives depended on them. In such cases our ego-driven behavior will be contrary to whatever team goals may be at hand. Emotional insistence on being right (i.e., not wrong), emotional attacks on other team members, and avoidance of responsibility are typically ego-driven behaviors. The admonition to “leave egos at the door” is fruitless. Here are two tactics which can counteract ego-driven behavior when it is disrupting movement toward team goals. One, allow the person in question to share his/her point of view with little interruption until the load of emotion has been depleted. Two, assure that s/he feels heard. Feeling of being heard is an enormous ego-boost for many of us. Of course, there is more that can be understood about egos and their management. Stay tuned to my next article.

Establish feedback mechanisms. There is much verbal emphasis on teams and teamwork. Rarely are there significant feedback and rewards for team-based performance, certainly not as compared to other performance. Most organizations monitor their production, sales, and equipment performance on a weekly if not daily basis. How often have you seen organizations monitor team performance? Human systems are guided by whatever feedback systems dominate others. Teams are clearly losers in the comparison. Likewise, organizations offer few individual rewards for being on a good team. And, there are no penalties for being on a poor team. Many organizations provide a great deal of training, but team-leader skills training is typically missing beyond Bruce Tuckman’s “forming, storming, norming, and performing,” but no instruction about how to navigate the first three stages to get to performing. In summary, these feedback inequities tell employees that teams are not that important and carry more weight than statements to the contrary.

These six tactics will help you move toward more productive and engaging teams. Still there is much more to learn about creating great teams and organizations. For more go to chumans.com/intensive to checkout my new online program titled “**Creating Great teams and Organizations Intensive**” currently under development for a Fall start. If you want to find out more sign-up for its pilot offering at a significant discount!

MICHAEL F. BROOM, PH.D., CEO, CENTER FOR HUMAN SYSTEMS

Michael is an organizational psychologist with 40 years of experience with all kinds of people and organizations. He is the author of *The Infinite Organization and Power*, *The Infinite Game* (with Donald Klein). His next book, *Creating Great Teams and Organizations*, is in final manuscript form and almost ready for publishing. Formerly of Johns Hopkins University, he



founded the Center for Human Systems and is a Lifetime Achievement Award honoree of the OD Network.

Dr. Broom is available for

- Executive coaching for organizational leaders,
- Coaching in organization development for practitioners
- Consulting for organizational excellence!

Contact him at

Center for Human Systems ~chumans.com~ michael@chumans.com

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