

The 5 Top Reasons Business Teams Fail And What You Can Do About It

You've taken the high road to business success, following the guidance of management gurus and industry experts. You've adopted the philosophy of the ancient sages. Now, you have an organization comprised of teams. Congratulations.

Now what?

Are your teams performing as well as you had hoped? It's not surprising that when it comes to crunch time, management turns to their top performers to bail them out of project delays, miscommunication, and conflict that seems to be inherent in teams.

Teams are supposed to be a better way to go. They're hyped as the solution to keeping up with the ever increasing pace of doing business, shortened production cycles, and a finicky customer base who wants more for less money. Are you wondering if teams are really all they're made to be by consultants and management experts?

Rest assured that in most situations teams are indeed the best way to attain high levels of performance, innovation, and even employee satisfaction.

Creating a High-Impact Team – a team that makes a solid, positive impact on the bottom line of your organization – takes a lot of hard work and dedication. If it were that easy to do, everyone would have high-performing, high-impact teams. But they don't, and there is a chance you don't either.

“A High-Impact Team is an energetic group of people that produces high quality, planned results in a defined period of time despite difficulties.” – Cynder Niemela, from Leading High Impact Teams.

If you're finding that despite well-defined team processes, your projects are still late, people aren't holding each other accountable, trust is an ongoing issue, and you're spending more time resolving conflicts than you'd like, you're not alone. Creating a high-impact team isn't just about having a corporate team concept or well-defined roles and responsibilities. Business teams fail to produce the desired results for many reasons. If you'd like to learn about five of the top reasons teams fail, and what you can do about it, then read on. Here they are in a nutshell:

1. The team lacks a clear and compelling vision and purpose.
2. Team members do not hold each other accountable for their work.
3. The team does not have shared leadership.
4. Team processes are ineffective or not well established.
5. The team has too much, or too little autonomy.

The Top 5 Reasons Business Teams Fail And What You Can Do About It

1. The Team Lacks a Clear and Compelling Vision and Purpose

A major reason any team fails, whether it is a management or project team, is the lack of a clear, overriding, and compelling vision or purpose.

Like a team racing a sail boat, business teams have to know not only their destination, they have to have a compelling reason for getting there as quickly and efficiently as possible. Otherwise, they'll do whatever it takes to get by, and they'll make sure nobody on the team does any more than necessary.

A team works best when everyone holds the same understanding of the purpose. A purpose answers the question, "Why does our team exist?" It provides meaning and direction to the daily team activities.

For example, an Information Technology (IT) department was concerned with the low level of enthusiasm their staff had for their projects. Staff tended to keep to themselves. Team members said the meetings were mostly irrelevant to their work, and often bogged down with needless arguments or irrelevant discussions. They had neither an IT vision, nor any team vision or purpose statements.

What you can do about it

"The real value of creating a team vision lies not in the product itself, but in the conversations and results it generates."

A vision or purpose is a statement of what you want your world to look like in the future. If you want people on your team to take concerted, creative, and effective action on a consistent basis, you have to give them a good reason to do so. One way to do this is to discover what inspires the individuals on the team, and include these in the team vision.

Here are five keys to creating a strong vision and purpose for your team:

1. **Make the vision or purpose specific to the team.** Even if you have subgroups within a team, they should spend some time talking about their purpose, making it relevant to each individual and appropriate to the organization's mission.

CLUES/SYMPTOMS

- Apathy
- Increased conflict on how to achieve goals
- People working in isolation
- Teams go in different directions
- Performance well below potential
- Unfocused meetings
- Slow decision process and momentum
- Arguments over insignificant items

2. **Make your purpose clear and easily understood** by those within, and outside, your team
3. **Describe each team's unique competencies within the organization**, indicating the special talents they bring to the company that no other team brings.
4. **Provide an inspiring, meaningful reason for working together** for team members. Find out what motivates *each* person on the team.
5. **Make your team vision forward looking**. Look out into the future and see what is possible for the team.

RESULTS OF A CLEAR VISION

- Greater excitement
- More personal involvement of team
- Focuses team energy on future state
- Creates opportunities for collaboration
- Aligns team tasks to purpose/vision
- Provides direction
- Identifies required competencies
- Matches team outcomes to customer needs
- Provides basis for conflict resolution

2. Team members do not hold each other accountable for their work

Accountability is a difficult issue to address because you can't normally hit it head-on.

For example, if you penalize people for delays or mistakes, you'll directly impact their desire to hold each other accountable. "If I don't hold you accountable, you won't hold me accountable" is a common unspoken rule.

When team members, and the team leader, are not accountable to their team, it means project delays, internal or external conflict, bad feelings, and an eroding of any team spirit you might have gained from a strong vision or purpose statement. The bottom line is that they end up avoiding and distrusting each other, and avoiding the problems until they become too big to ignore.

CLUES/SYMPTOMS

- Bad feelings expressed or not
- "Backstabbing"
- Scapegoating
- Not taking responsibility for actions
- Big problems suddenly crop up
- Meetings veer off into irrelevant topics
- "Off the record" conversations
- People are too quiet in meetings

Lack of accountability shows up in two forms:

1. Individuals are not accountable for their own actions.
2. Individuals do not hold each other accountable for team-related work

For example, a manager at a distribution company complained that members of her team were not holding each other accountable for completing their tasks on schedule. At status meetings, people gave their report, then tuned out. There was no accountability for delays. Team members worked alone, and any conversation between them was cordial, polite, and superficial. Conflict was avoided, but their meetings tended to veer into long discussions about inconsequential items.

What you can do about it:

Lack of accountability in an organization can be a symptom of distrust. People become so busy that all they have time for are their own issues and responsibilities. Consequently, they don't know what others are doing, including other managers, other departments or other people on their project team.

If you notice isolation of team members or lack of open communication, it may be because they fear rejection, humiliation, conflict, or reprisal if they deliver bad news. It's a good idea to talk with your team and not assume there is a "problem". You never know what levels of distrust people bring *with them* to a job from previous experiences.

Four keys to creating accountability are:

1. **Good accountability must be demonstrated by management.** Don't expect your employees to be accountable if your management team isn't accountable to each other.
2. **Building relationships must become a primary goal,** not a benefit of working for the company. If you're not holding a team member accountable because you're not sure what she does, then go find out. If there's distrust, talk to each other to uncover and resolve any issues, past or present. Get to know and like each other by building personal relationships. Most distrust dissolves when people open up to each other.
3. **Establish norms of accountability and trust.** If you put trust-building into your team charter, you'll go a long way toward creating a culture of accountability and trust.
4. **Create effective team processes.** Create good working agreements and practices for the team that fosters open communication and develops trust.

RESULTS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

- People are a more informed about each other and their common goals.
- Issues don't get brought up as often at meetings, and are handled outside.
- People start sharing their feelings as well as the data.
- People ask for support more often and celebrate each other's successes.
- Decisions happen more quickly and are supported by more people.
- Individuals more easily meet their commitments.
- People take more responsibility for their actions and decisions.
- They hold each other accountable in more supportive and positive ways.

3. The team does not have shared leadership

If your team appears out of control or off course, it may be because they lack adequate direction from a strong leader, don't have good internal leadership within the team, or both. For example, if one of your self-directed teams is doing well, and another isn't, it is probably because one has strong internal leadership, and the other doesn't.

Like any athletic team, a business team needs to be agile and decisive. A strong team leader provides the overall direction with the help of the team's sponsors. You may be doing this, but if you don't also develop the internal leadership capacity of the team, you'll find it difficult to change course when you run into problems or difficulties.

- Team members go outside the team for help
- Members compete for resources or training
- Mistakes are covered up or blamed on others
- Duplication of efforts
- Too much time on unimportant tasks
- People feel slighted by "team" decisions
- Decisions making seems arduous
- Team becomes divided

You may be experiencing an adversarial relationship between several teams, as one hospital IT staff discovered. Mistakes led to finger pointing, and nobody felt they could make a move without first checking it out with the department managers. The staff worked mostly independently, and what little collaboration occurred was used by one person or another for their personal gain.

You may notice symptoms show up in self-directed teams, as well as more traditional teams with a designated leader. People will naturally vie for the power positions in any group, so if you notice any power plays going on, you might evaluate how leadership is distributed and followed.

What you can do about it:

Even self-directed teams need direction. If you cultivate a model of shared leadership, you'll find all your teams performing much better. Shared leadership isn't necessarily easy to develop, and it is even more challenging to maintain. Shared leadership does, however bring greater success in handling problems, threats and change. It encourages idea sharing, and uses mistakes to discover valuable new approaches.

Here are six keys to developing an effective model of shared leadership:

1. **Include shared leadership** in your team vision and purpose statement.
2. **Create the model for shared leadership in your team charter.** If you've never evaluated the concept of shared leadership before, get some help in creating the model for your organization. Shared leadership is about finding the best path by tapping the expertise, ideas and effort of everyone involved.
3. **Include the practices of shared leadership** in your roles and responsibilities.
4. **Reward shared leadership** practices equally with individual achievement.
5. **Provide your teams with a clear direction.** Lead with vision!

- | RESULTS OF SHARED LEADERSHIP |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• People feel like their opinions matter• Team members think about how they can make their own jobs more efficient• Team members look for ways to help each other• They utilize each person's strengths• Mistakes are used as a way to improve• More people contribute to decisions |

6. *Practice, Practice, Practice* shared leadership. Business teams are the *only* teams who don't practice regularly.

When a company adopts the concept of shared leadership, they usually find the going a little rough at first. People don't trust these kinds of changes, and it can feel like just another management fad. This kind of change has to start at the top of the organization, and it starts with a clear direction from the leadership. Done well, you'll notice the results the above hospital had when they began implementing a shared leadership model.

4. Team processes are ineffective or not well established

The lack of these four foundational practices will hurt a team:

1. **Having a lack of measurable performance objectives that fit the current environment.** Every team must have performance objectives that can be easily measured, and measured for the team, not just individual tasks.
2. **Having unclear group norms and codes of behavior.** The team must establish how it works as a group, including meetings, decision making, problem solving, and integrating new members. Then, it must decide how it will best handle the inevitable changes that occur during their time together.
3. **Having unclear roles and responsibilities.** Everyone needs to know his or her roles and responsibilities. Ideally, these also offer project and task-dependent flexibility.
4. **Recognizing and rewarding individual performance alone.** Organizations often set up team structures, but still reward and recognize people based on their individual performance alone. This can create intense competition within a team, and when things are changing quickly, can cause quite a bit of friction.

CLUES/SYMPTOMS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Confusion among team members about priorities• Meetings don't stay on task• Drawn out conflict or recurring issues• Frequent overwhelm and/or low morale• A lack of urgency about what they are doing• Uncertainty about how to address issues• No personal ownership of problems

What you can do about it

Here are five keys to creating effective team processes:

1. **Have measurable performance objectives:** Create measurable performance milestones for the development and execution of the team strategy. Identify the customer expectations, the key measure of those expectations, and the method of measurement. Then, identify where your current performance is, and set a performance target that is measurable, attainable, and compelling.

2. **Create effective team agreements.** Have the team, even if it is a transitory team, decide on their approach to their work, and then revise these agreements as necessary (due to changes in the team dynamic as the makeup of the team changes).
3. **Establish clear group norms.** How does the team handle conflict? If you want your meetings to go smoothly, what are your codes of behavior and conduct for the meetings? Discuss how you want to make decisions as a group, and how you want to integrate new members.
4. **Identify clear, but adaptable roles and responsibilities.** Have some formally designated roles, and make sure everyone knows what is expected of them. Value the natural roles and life experience each individual brings to the team.
5. **Recognize and Reward the Team.** This can be done by having the team members recognize and reward each other. As they develop, mature and collaborate, note the way they work as a group, and reward and recognize them for their accomplishments as a team.

RESULTS OF EFFECTIVE PROCESSES

- Faster decision making
- Fewer, more easily resolved conflicts
- People feel more engaged in their work
- More effective meetings
- Performance targets more easily met
- Customer satisfaction increase
- Improved inter and intra team cooperation
- More adaptability to change
- Team handles problems more easily

5. The team has too much, or too little autonomy

Far too many organizations have team leaders who don't lead, but spend their time generating reports. Far too many others have team leaders who lead too much. The High-Impact team creates a strong balance of Shared Leadership. They are able to balance the amount of direction and leadership provided teams.

This is a difficult balance for many organizations, and it comes down to mutual trust. The degree to which you trust your team, and they you, is the degree to which you take or give authority. Strike the right balance, and your teams figure out exactly what needs to be done and the best way to do it. Lean too far one way or the other, and you end up with either disempowered workers who slog through the day, or off-target, delayed projects.

CLUES/SYMPTOMS

Too much autonomy or weak leadership

- Teams unclear of purpose or direction
- Frequent project delays
- Poor decision-making
- Fights for control of resources
- Mistakes hidden or overlooked
- Power struggles within team (conflict)
- Poor team performance

Too much authority

- Lack of accountability
- People unwilling to take risks
- No innovation or new ideas
- Acceptable performance at best
- Low morale
- High turnover rate of staff

Knowing whether or not your leadership style is effective can be challenging. Sometimes, however, it can be obvious. For example, a national company with local headquarters has a general “empowerment” policy in which the president gives his staff the right to make their own decisions, as long as those decisions are the same decisions he’d make. He micro-manages everything that happens in the organization, looking over everyone’s shoulders while talking about empowerment. This results in poor or no decisions, low morale, and lack of direction.

What you can do about it

To get optimum performance of your teams, you’ll have to keep monitoring and examining how you’re leading those teams. It’s a delicate balance, and requires more work than most managers are willing to put in. However, done well, you’ll have your teams thanking you for your outstanding leadership.

Here are four keys to creating effective leadership:

1. **Clearly define the ends**, provide structure and guidelines, and allow the team to define the means as much as possible. Let them figure out the best way to do their jobs.
2. **Have team members openly discuss their expectations** for each other, and agree on their relative roles and responsibilities. Allow them to adjust these as the focus of the team’s work shifts. Work with them to identify each person’s unique skills and help them find ways to utilize each other’s strengths.
3. **Develop your team leaders.** The team leader sets the direction and holds the vision. Then, leadership can be distributed depending on the nature of the work and strengths of the team members. The team leader is a master of Self, a developer of people, and a manager of strategy execution.
4. **Adopt a model of shared leadership** as you build trust, and you’ll find it much easier to balance autonomy and authority.

RESULTS OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

- Higher levels of integrity and honesty
- Faster rates of learning and growth
- People feel more engaged in their work
- More effective meetings
- Performance targets more easily met
- More open communication
- Projects kept on target
- More powerful and flexible strategies
- Team develops more effective processes

The bottom line. A model for High-Impact Teaming

We have identified **20 practices of High Impact Teams**, and these practices fall into 5 categories:

- **The Team Leader.** The first group category of practices are the Team Leader practices, which includes the leader's emotional intelligence, ability to develop people, strategy and mastery of informal systems.
- **The Team Focus.** The High-Impact Team is focused on a shared purpose and vision, appropriately shares leadership, has measurable performance objectives, and works actively with their sponsorship.
- **The Team Discipline.** Discipline is critical, even (and especially) with self-directed teams. The High-Impact Team has effective team processes, is competent in executing strategy, agile with change, and innovative.
- **The Team Balance.** Balance is important for any organization to thrive. We must have periods of renewal, and be able to handle periods of extreme success as well as failure. The High-Impact Team is highly inclusive, and recognizes and rewards each other regularly.
- **The Team Communication.** Good communication is essential. High-Impact Teams regulate their emotions, manage communications with each other and those outside their group, and have consistent communication with their external networks.

High-Impact Teams focus on a compelling, provocative, and interesting vision. They share positive values, a high level of integrity, and an optimistic, positive attitude about themselves, the team, their leaders, and the organization.

And, they take action. Albert Einstein said that “Nothing happens until something moves.” Your teams won't change, and you won't get the performance you want from them unless specific actions are taken to master the practices of a high-impact team.

Your Next Action

If you really want to improve the performance of your teams you have to take action. Begin with the team leader, and with an accurate measurement of the team's strengths and what I call the “areas of promise”.

Coaching helps the leader understand what needs to be changed, and the High-Impact Teaming Scorecard™ helps the leader and team realize how they can grow. We get a 360-degree view of the team leader and a clear understanding of the strengths and areas of promise

for the team. While training and team building often addresses the weaknesses of a team, we focus on their strengths and the practices in which team members have a difference of opinion. These are the “caution zones”, and are indicative of conflict and uncertainty. They are the practices with the greatest promise for creating a High-Impact Team.

Why Team Coaching?

Team coaching works the way you and your team work – step by step. You wouldn’t expect your projects to miraculously be completed after providing the team with information and instructions on what needed to be done. Why, then would you expect your teams to master the practices of a High-Impact team after a single team building exercise or training class?

Training and team building are provided as an adjunct to coaching, not the other way around. Through coaching, we determine what training and team building would best suit the needs of the team leader and team. And, through coaching, everyone has an opportunity to grow and change *with* their mastery of the 20 practices of a High-Impact Team.

Start now, and start with your leadership team. The view from the top is quite spectacular.

Since 1991 Sid Smith has helped leaders create high-impact teams and fulfilled lives in the midst of rapid change and increasing demands. He holds a Masters in Counseling/Psychology and has been extensively trained and certified as a business coach. Sid brings his clients over twenty five years experience in technology, project management, diversified leadership, team development and business coaching.

Please call Sid to share your vision for your teams, and your challenges.

Call him at 503-287-0246, or visit the Team Junction web site at www.team-junction.com.