

THE CASE OF THE THE TEAM THAT WENT NOWHERE

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One of the assumptions many people make in thinking about team performance is that getting along with each other is the most important thing¹. Using that logic, many team building sessions and interventions focus on soothing issues between people and reducing conflict. If that is achieved, the team will have a firm foundation of trust and will produce positive results.

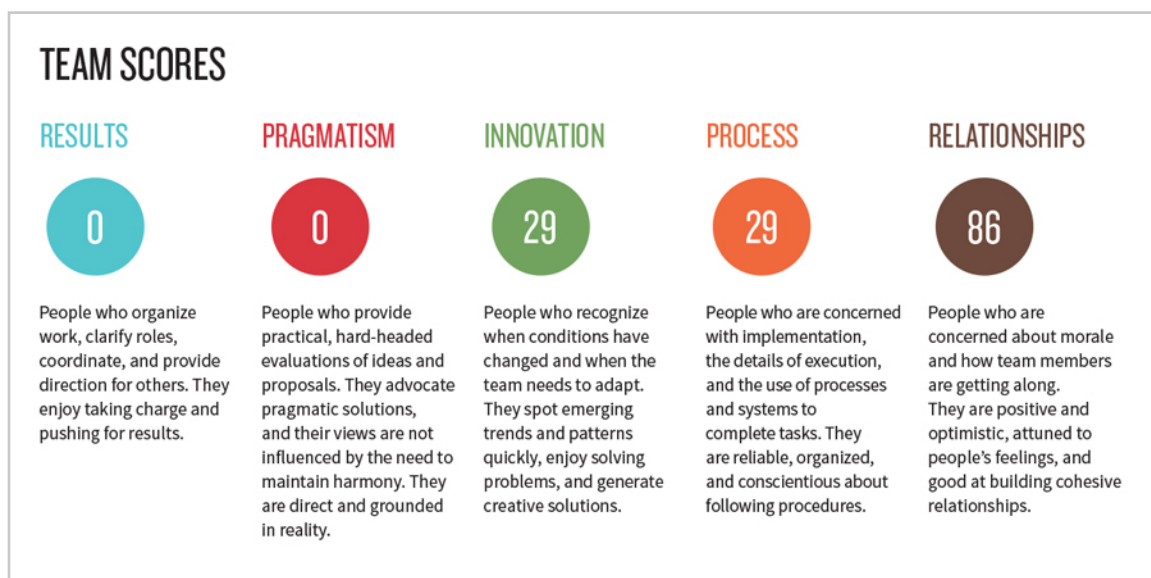
But that's incorrect². What matters more than anything is having a clear mission – a sense of purpose – and the right people to deliver it. Without a mission and appropriate membership, a team is nothing more than a group of people.

Consider the health and safety function of a very large organization. In the face of widespread and systemic safety failures, including worker deaths, they had been positioned as a new group, with stronger policies and powers. Six months into the mission, the team was meandering and hadn't made any impact at all.

THE PEOPLE ARE THE TEAM



We understand that people play two roles: their functional role – such as social media lead – and also a psychological role, which might be their ability to generate ideas, or to hustle and drive results.

Although the mission was really clear, the team consisted of people who were powerfully driven by relationships but with no drive or ambition for results. These were nice and genuine people who reached out across the organization, and who talked a good game but simply didn't deliver.





Their shared derailers exacerbated the tentative, indecisive style. These tendencies often emerge about six months into a role, as people begin to drop their guard and relax, no longer being so concerned about managing their good impression. This team had a high proportion of individuals who wanted to avoid hard calls or quick decisions, out of concern they would get it wrong, or be challenged. Most of the team were keen to go along with the status quo and not challenge existing norms. In the face of push back or resistance from managers – which was exactly the situation they were hired to break through – they tended to acquiesce and fold.

SCALE	IMPLICATION
<p>DUTIFUL</p> 	<p>Teams with a shared Dutiful derailer may respond to stress by becoming excessively ingratiating or conforming to the needs and desires of sponsors or superiors. Such teams often experience difficulties making independent decisions without the express approval of those above them in the organization. In contrast, team members who do not share this derailer may be frustrated by the team's seeming unwillingness to be courageous within the organization. To mitigate this shared derailer, members of these teams should work on thinking independently, challenging assumptions, and pushing back on requests. Carefully considering when to say no or to "push back" on outside demands may be valuable in addition to creating a team position or perspective on key issues. This derailer may be accelerated by the team's having a low proportion of members who fulfill the Results role, especially if they heavily populate the Relationships role.</p>
<p>CAUTIOUS</p> 	<p>Teams with a shared Cautious derailer may seem slow to act because of a fear of negative judgment and a resulting tendency to reassess and rework plans and proposals. To outsiders, such teams may appear indecisive and paralyzed by ambiguity. These teams often need to learn to stop procrastinating or obsessing over what might go wrong. Instead, working to shift the team's perspective towards viewing mistakes as opportunities to improve can help it act quicker and more decisively. These teams often need to focus on making the best, not the least risky, decision, and team members who do not share this derailer may become frustrated by its slow decision-making process and unwillingness to take risks. Teams with high proportions of members who fulfill the Process and Pragmatism roles may experience accelerated impact from this shared derailer.</p>

In this instance, our advice to the CEO was that team coaching was singularly unlikely to change much, and that he would be better off changing the membership, starting with a stronger, more assertive leader.

That was a tough call, and in light of the recent shift to install this group, one he was reluctant to take. He persevered for another 12 months, providing stronger and stronger direction for the team. But personality is hard to change, even more so when unconscious group norms and preferences are shared across the group. Two years later, there was another restructure, and the team went nowhere.

¹Lencioni, P. (2002). *The five dysfunctions of a team: A leadership fable*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

²Curphy, G. J., & Hogan, R. (2012). *The rocket model: Practical advice for building high performing teams*. Tulsa, OK: Hogan Press.