



Team Learning: The Fourth Discipline of Learning Organizations
By Marty Jacobs
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If you've ever been to a workshop or seminar about teams, you know that the facilitator will inevitably ask you to think about, if not share with the group, a time when you were part of a high-functioning team. You've probably also heard many of the sports or performing arts analogies, and as trite as they may seem, they really are great examples. Why is it that we are more capable of creating great teams on the field or on a stage than in our places of employment? In keeping with this tradition, I'm going to share the most memorable team experience of my life and analyze it with respect to the discipline of team learning.

When I was a sophomore, my high school drama club staged a production of *Godspell*, the most ambitious undertaking of the club's history. Auditions for actors and band members were held in the spring prior to the December production, rather than in September, in order to give the cast and band members plenty of time to memorize lines and learn music. Rehearsals began in earnest in September. The level of complexity was overwhelming at times. The cast needed to integrate a multitude of challenging tasks into one seamless production: lines, stage action, singing in harmony and in time with the band, choreography – the list felt endless.

One week before the play opened, our director arranged to have our first dress rehearsal videotaped. The next day we gathered after school in the library to view the videotape. It was terrible! The production seemed mechanical and flat. We left that day with glum faces, considering that maybe we could avoid humiliation if we all ran away from home en masse. But somehow, that one event created the leverage point we needed to move from what felt like imminent disaster to astonishing success. In a week's time, we performed to sell out crowds for both performances, and each performance ended with standing ovations, sometimes starting before we finished the last song. I still stir with an unbelievable sense of emotion when I recall this experience. It has left an indelible mark on me.

At this point you might be thinking, well, the community was just very supportive of the high school kids and yes, that is true, but it was much more than that. One of the performances was videotaped, and we viewed it after the production was over. The difference between the two videotapes was astounding. So what was it that made it possible for this rag tag crew of high school students to perform at a level they had never experienced before? How was it that we

were able to pull it off so quickly? And what will it take for organizational teams to experience similar levels of growth in performance and productivity?

Let's start with a couple of definitions. A team is "...any group of people who need each other to accomplish a result." (*The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, p. 354). Team learning is "...the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire." (*The Fifth Discipline*, p. 236). In my theater example, the cast and crew were, no doubt, a team, and in that short week, this group of inexperienced teens was able to accomplish an amount of team learning that is enviable in any circle.

There are a number of key aspects to team learning, a few of which were present in my theater example. The crucial factor for my drama club was alignment. Although we never actually articulated it, we all knew the outcome we wanted. Most of us had seen the movie version of *Godspell*, and it was that image to which we aspired. The videotape of the dress rehearsal showed us in no uncertain terms our current reality, and we didn't like what we saw. Seeing the gap between our current reality and our shared vision inspired us to create the alignment needed for a spectacular performance.

We often hear the old adage that in groups the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts, but somehow experiencing that sense of synergy can be elusive. More often than not, our experience in groups is like trying to turn the *Queen Mary* – slow, cumbersome, and unwieldy. Alignment is what will transform the ocean liner into a nimble speedboat. What creates that alignment is a shared vision. It's a bit like placing the magnet close to the iron filings and watching them all move into the same orientation. In addition to a shared vision, it is equally important for teams to have a clear and honest assessment of current reality. Current reality is the foundation upon which to build the shared vision.

Team learning also requires that teams think and act both collectively and systemically. In my drama example, the performance had not gelled, in part, because the cast was still looking at the performance from individual points of view. We were performing our own individual parts rather than integrating the parts into a whole. The videotape highlighted that aspect, and we were able to change our interactions to be more effective. The same is true for work teams. It is not enough to be aligned and hold a shared vision. Thinking from an individual and linear perspective needs to shift to a systemic perspective. Team members need to analyze problems with respect to dynamic complexity and not detail complexity. That means looking at patterns over time rather than taking snapshots at moments in time.

To master team learning, it must be practiced collectively. This is probably the main difference between work teams and sports or performance teams. It would be unheard of to send a sports team to a game, an orchestra to a performance, or a cast onto the stage without practice. Yet we do this continually in organizational life. For some reason, organizations tend to view practicing a skill, particularly one as amorphous as team learning, as nonproductive or frivolous. It is challenging for many to see the connection between the up-front investment in practice and the long-term payoff of more effective teams. Quick fixes are very tempting but they often fail.

Another important difference between work teams and sports or performance teams is that the latter are more likely to have their interactions tightly prescribed. There are clear rules to the game or there is a script to be followed. That is not often the case at work. We typically find ourselves writing the script as we go. The skills of dialogue and skillful discussion and how to balance the two within the team enable teams to ferret out boundaries, rules, and goals. It is these two skills that will create alignment within a team and lead to a shared vision.

Dialogue is the process of exploring complex issues and is expansive in nature. The goal of dialogue is to discover new learning and insights, rather than to come to some sort of conclusion. There are three basic conditions for dialogue (*The Fifth Discipline*, p. 243). The first is that participants must literally suspend their assumptions. That does not mean throw them out but to hold them up for all to examine. Doing so opens possibilities for new learning. The second condition is that all participants must see each other as colleagues. This is often hard to accomplish in hierarchical organizations, but it is essential for the creative process to be able to leave positions and power outside the room. Individuals need to feel comfortable honestly examining assumptions without regard to an individual's status within the organization. The final condition for dialogue is that there needs to be an outside facilitator who holds the context. It would be too easy for any group to slip back into old habits. Ultimately, as the team becomes skilled at dialogue, the facilitator can hand over the reins to team members.

Discussion, on the other hand, is used to weigh options and narrow the focus to the point that a decision can be made. It often takes the shape of two sides arguing a particular point of view, with one side winning and the other losing. The goal of discussion is closure. It is this form of discourse with which we are most familiar. Skillful discussion is a step in between dialogue and discussion. It shares the goal of finding closure on an issue but does so using skills more often reserved for dialogue. Those skills include examining one's own assumptions and balancing advocacy with inquiry. The intent is to come to a win-win decision.

Balancing dialogue and skillful discussion within teams is a continual process. Dialogue is that wide-angle lens that attempts to take in as much of the picture as possible. Skillful discussion is the zoom lens that starts at that wide-angle view from dialogue but then zooms in to pinpoint the best solution. In my practice I find that clients typically want to jump right into solutions without fully understanding the nature of the problem. In doing so, they miss the opportunity to practice team learning and are often choosing from a more limited set of solutions. I am often holding them back verbally by engaging in dialogue with them. Organizations can slow this rush to solutions down by holding dialogue sessions separate from those designed to come up with solutions. This allows participants time to let ideas percolate and is an essential part of the creative process.

Team learning, like the previous three disciplines (personal mastery, mental models, and shared vision), is an on-going practice. Teams never actually "arrive" at team learning. Rather, they are constantly exploring, evolving, and co-creating, a unit moving as one. They build on and

integrate each of the disciplines of learning organizations, and they adapt as circumstances change. They truly are greater than the sum of their individual parts.

In my next article, I will focus on the fifth discipline of learning organizations, systems thinking.

Resources:

The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization, Peter M. Senge, 1990.

The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, Peter M. Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard B. Ross, and Bryan J. Smith, 1994.

Society for Organizational Learning (SoL) (<http://www.solonline.org/>).

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