

Chapter One

Teams Made Well

Class project.

When you read those words, what emotions and memories are evoked? While it depends on your actual experience, my guess is you can relate to some of the following situations. There is that one dominant person who tries to tell everyone what to do. They have an opinion on every single thing. They might even formally “appoint” themselves as the leader. Perhaps there are two who want to be dominant, and a power struggle breaks out from the start. Much of the conversation and group energy goes to figuring out who will have the final say on what happens.

Or maybe you are the only responsible person in the group. No matter how you split up the work, every time you get together you end up taking on a little bit more. Eventually you end up doing the project by yourself because you want to make sure you get a decent grade—even if that means getting no help from the group. Maybe you have one person who is never “available” for a meeting. You spend the entire time leading up to the project deadline just hoping they are pulling their weight.

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Or maybe if we're honest about things, you are the one free-loading on someone else. You might justify things in a variety of ways. "The group will get a better grade if he/she does most of the work. That's what we all want, right?" Or maybe you think, "I'm so busy right now, I'll just have to lean on everyone else. I'll make it up on the next project." Whatever your rationale, you know deep down you are not pulling your weight.

Whether it is the class project scenarios described above or something different, many of us have bad team experiences from the past that can color our outlook on the idea of working closely with others. Teaming is not easy, and unfortunately, for many, being asked to join a team often brings to mind more dread than anticipation. "I'm going to be embarrassed." "This is going to be more work than the project alone." "I could do this quicker on my own." "Am I really going to be judged on the basis of someone else's work?" "Do I have to be on *their* team?" To many, teams feel like a chore. They are just one more thing to endure on top of the work that already has to be done. An initiative put in place by a boss who wants to pat him or herself on the back for introducing a team approach. They are slow moving, full of conflict, and induce a lot of frustration. And for what? To produce a mediocre result no one is really satisfied with. They are a "necessary evil," we think, and life would be better if they would just go away. These thoughts are not unfounded.

Teaming is tough because it involves bringing multiple personalities, perspectives, and approaches together. It requires us to put aside the freedom that comes from doing everything our own way and instead invest relational effort in creating alignment and moving forward together, which can be a heavy lift. It's true teams made poorly are a train wreck of frustration, stress, and angst. But it doesn't have to be that way; teams can be

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made well. They can be a source of immense fulfillment, opportunity, and potential. Teams done right are life giving, but they have to be done right.

What Is a Team?

Before we go any further, let's be clear on what exactly a team is. One reason teaming is so hard for so many is because what we often call teams are not really teams at all but just groups of individuals working alongside one another. I believe this is actually the root of many people's bad experiences. In their book *The Wisdom of Teams*, Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith use the term "working group" to describe a group of people who do not have all the characteristics of a true team. A working group doesn't have a team purpose or goals to bind them. A working group may need more time, understanding, or cohesion to make the jump to a real team.

So what exactly is a real team? There are almost as many ways to define the word "team" as there are teams in existence. An online search will give you well over eight billion results. Most of those definitions tend to involve the same ideas. A group of people. A diverse set of strengths or skills. A common goal. For the purposes of this book, let's put those three ideas together. A team is a small group of people with a diverse set of strengths or skills who pursue a common goal.

When you can start with a clear understanding of where your team is currently, you can form more appropriate expectations. Many times the conflict we experience in working with others comes from the gap between our expectations and reality. This gap is where conflict lives. We should not expect a group that is not a true team to automatically act like a team. While

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we advocate that a healthy team is often the best approach, there are definitely times where a team approach is not needed. You can still collaborate and work with other people, but your expectations can be much different. A clear perspective on your current situation may help you deal with any frustration that might be caused by your coworkers.

The core of this book, however, is directed to members of teams as we defined above—those small groups of people with a diverse set of strengths or skills who are pursuing a common goal. We want to see all teams become healthy teams, and we believe the principles in this book can help any team become more successful.

Purpose Accomplished; People Fulfilled

Having clarified what a team is, let's go a step further and define what we mean by a healthy team—a team made well. Healthy teams are different. They accomplish more than any one person ever could. In order for teams to be sustainably successful, two things must occur: the team must be accomplishing its purpose, and the people on the team must be fulfilled. Teams are not formed, or at least shouldn't be formed, simply for the sake of having a team. Teams are a tool, and tools have a purpose. So, a key measure of success for any team should be to what degree it is accomplishing that which it was formed to do. But this is only part of the equation. A team focusing only on performance may accomplish its goals in the short term, but if the team experience is not fulfilling for the members, this success will be short lived. Team members will either burn out, leave the team, or become disengaged and give less than their best. No matter how skilled the team members are, if they burn out, leave, or

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disengage, the team will never be high performing. Many teams struggle in one of these two areas. Really unhealthy teams struggle with both.

If you define success as accomplishing the team's purpose, most teams aren't all that successful for a variety of reasons. In our experience, many teams don't actually know, specifically, what they are trying to achieve. They show up to work each day and put in a lot of effort (maybe), only to see no tangible positive result at the end of the week, quarter, or year. People show up and do their jobs because that's what they are supposed to do. These teams have no measure for whether they are successful or not.

For other teams, though they may know the goal, they are just not able to accomplish the desired outcome. They complete lots of tasks, but their best efforts never lead them to the end result they wanted at the start. Other times, a team is just plain dysfunctional. These teams can't get anything done because they spend all their time dealing with relational, structural, or strategic problems. When they do complete tasks, it happens in spite of the team rather than because of the team. In each of the aforementioned cases, the common thread is none of them accomplish the purpose for which the team was assembled.

An even bigger issue for most teams is the unhealthy environment they create for their members—the people are unfulfilled. In these teams, everything feels like a struggle. These teams get labels like toxic or difficult or draining. These are teams where the team members work hard all day yet go home feeling even more empty, tired, and stressed than when they began. No one is happy. No one is satisfied. No one feels like their hard work is recognized or valued. Team members end up taking on a “me first” mentality.

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A great example of this can be found in the movie *Remember the Titans* starring Denzel Washington. It is the true story of the T. C. Williams High School football team, the Titans. After years of school segregation in Alexandria, Virginia, T. C. Williams is formed in 1971 as the town's first integrated school. The movie tells the story of that first year through the eyes of the football team and its head coach, Herman Boone, played by Washington.

During the preseason, Coach Boone takes the team away for a mini-camp to learn the Xs and Os and build relationships within the team. At camp, the team's two best players, Julius Campbell and Gerry Bertier, who both play on defense, have several run-ins. While both players recognize the other's talent, they cannot get past their perceived differences. In a climactic conversation between the two, the tension boils over. Bertier calls out Campbell's selfish play. Campbell calls out Bertier's lack of leadership as captain. Campbell ends the conversation by saying,

Nobody plays, yourself included! I'm supposed to wear myself out for the team? What team? No, no, what I'm going to do is look out for myself, and I'm going to get mine.

And there it is. When team members sense a lack of accomplishment, success, and support from the team, as Julius Campbell did, they default to self-preservation. And while team members in other settings might not verbalize their feelings this passionately to the team, the attitude Campbell adopted is a common response for the dissatisfied team member. Rather than working *with* others, they work individually with their own goal in mind, regardless of how it impacts the overall success of the team or the organization. Feeling no connection to the team

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and its common objective, dissatisfied team members see no personal benefit in sacrificing for the team, especially when no one else seems to be intent on sacrificing for them. In Campbell's situation, he thought he could focus on his role, work hard, and still see a path to stardom and a college scholarship. He shifted to an individual mindset, even though he was still technically a part of the team. Unfortunately, this happens frequently and can often spell doom for a potential team.

Better Teams Are Possible

My other favorite scene from *Remember the Titans* comes at the end. The team has overcome many challenges to bring together the divided town. This is most apparent in the relationship between Bertier and Campbell. Once at odds with each other, the two have become inseparable friends. Their mutual respect and care for each other serves as a significant catalyst for changing those around them.

The scene occurs in the locker room during halftime of the state championship game. The team is losing and the future looks grim. There are several factors going against the team as they come into halftime. The team's captain and best player, Bertier, was injured in a car accident earlier in the week. He is currently lying in a hospital bed, paralyzed from the waist down. Many on the team are struggling with the thought of their friend and leader back at the hospital. The team is facing their most difficult opponent of the season.

The team's play has been inconsistent in the first half as well. Their usual sharpness just hasn't been there. The most difficult challenge of all may just be a conspiracy to ensure they lose. Several from the state athletic association don't want to see an

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integrated team win the championship. As a part of the fix, the referees are clearly calling the game to ensure the Titans' opponent wins. All these factors contribute to the mounting despair and frustration of the team.

Coach Boone tries to encourage them to give their all and play their best. He tells them that whether the team wins or loses, they will be champions in his eyes because of how much they have overcome this season. Campbell, having taken the role of team leader for his injured friend Bertier, speaks up. He is not looking for moral victories. In response to Coach Boone's "do your best" offer, Campbell wants more.

No, it ain't Coach, in all due respect. You demanded more of us. You demanded perfection. Now, I ain't saying that I'm perfect, 'cause I'm not. And I ain't gon' never be. None of us are. But we have won every single game we have played—till now. So, this team is perfect. We stepped out on that field that way tonight. If it's all the same to you Coach Boone, that's how we want to leave it.

The team went back out on the field for the second half, and their attitudes and play completely changed. The team went on to win the school's first state championship, and the first championship by an integrated team.

This scene shows how far Campbell and the team have come in their understanding of how a true team really works. The young man who was focused on promoting self now rallies the team to give their all—for the team. He understands the ultimate objective is the common goal of the team. Whether the team achieves "perfection" by winning the game is irrelevant. The team has been formed. Relationships have been built and deepened. Challenges have been overcome. The teammates truly care

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about each other, and their satisfaction is found in attempting to do something great together.¹

And as is often the case, high performance on the field followed, and the team won the championship. When we focus on our own goals, our own desires, and our own benefit, the team suffers. But together, the team can accomplish more than the individual ever could. When all the players serve each other and the common purpose of the team, everyone wins. Teams can be healthy and life giving. Teams can accomplish their purposes and be fulfilling for their members. Whether your previous team experiences have been positive or negative, healthy teams are possible and they do exist. But they take hard work to build and hard work to grow. The beauty in the end is everyone benefits from healthy teams. Everyone shares in the success. Everyone partakes in the fulfillment.