Drivers of team performance
Do you have a team? Do you want a team?

By Ajit Kambil

EVERY C-level executive transitioning to a new role is critically dependent on the leadership team to successfully execute his or her role. Just as ineffective individuals drain your time, an ineffective leadership team can drain your time and diminish your standing in your company.

When I ask executives transitioning to new roles if they have inherited a team and if they want a team in the first place, most say yes. But executives often have a fuzzy definition of what a team means to them. For some the team is like a relay team—with high-end runners who deliver the best possible performance in their leg and cleanly hand off the baton to the next runner or team member. Others want a team that is more like a basketball team—where people play their positions but also mutually adjust to changing situations on the court. Sometimes the team must operate in both ways, a relay team for structured situations, a basketball team for unstructured ones.

When a new leader takes over, it can be an unsettling time for existing teams, with disruptions to agreed-upon norms and patterns of work, problem solving, and decision making. Without care, this transition at the top could affect team performance. Sometimes, a new leader may need to reboot and reshape the inherited team to improve performance and upgrade the organization's brand. New executives need to understand key drivers of team performance and interventions to deal with these situations and improve how their teams work.

Drawing on personally delivering over 220 CxO transition labs in the last five years, as well as a literature review, I provide here a simple and practical framework to diagnose your inherited team, framing a few focusing questions and assessing key team attributes. Building on the work of Richard Beckhard, a founder of the field of organization development, and the more recent work of Alex

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Pentland at MIT, the framework lays out six key areas in which to assess a team: brand, shared goals, clear roles and responsibilities, clear processes, interpersonal relationships, and the communication dimensions of energy, engagement, and exploration (see figure 1). For those familiar with the literature on the subject, I have added brand and communications to augment the GRPI model credited to Richard Beckhard.1

Figure 1. An extended GRPI model for team development
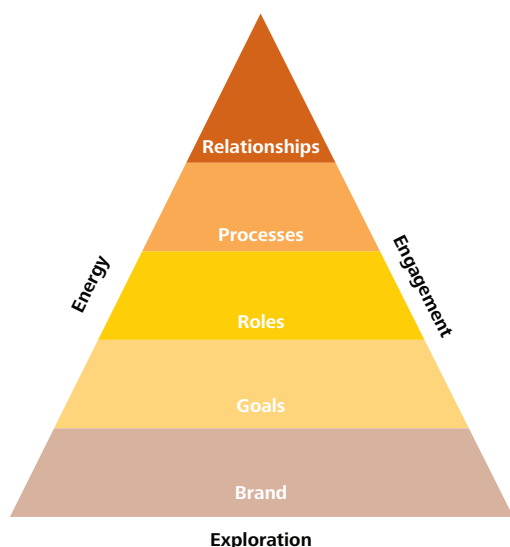
Source: Deloitte analysis

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Brand: The brand you inherit is a snapshot of how your team interacts with its external environment and how it is shaped by that environment. After a honeymoon period, the team's brand becomes your brand, regardless of what your own qualities are. How is your team and organization perceived by your clients and peer executives? Is it viewed as a well-functioning organization that delivers quality work on time? Is it perceived as a group whose members are mutually supportive? Or is it perceived as one where people pass the buck to others? The team's brand could be the single most critical attribute to begin with. If your organization is perceived poorly, the buck stops with you and your "team of leaders," and you all have to collectively fix it.

Asking your team's clients and stakeholders to rate your team on several chosen attributes can go a long way in assessing your organization's brand. My favorite

approach is to adapt the basic question underlying the Net Promoter Score.2 For example, if you are a CFO, you might ask your clients to score your team from 1 (absolutely not) to 7 (absolutely yes) on the question, "How likely is it that you will recommend finance to your colleagues in our company?" Depending on the score, you can delve deeper to understand where your organization meets client expectations or falls short. If it falls short, is the score driven by a particular area of your organization or leadership team, or is it driven by an individual?

Assessing the team's brand as a starting point helps clarify how the team's environment is likely to shape its performance in the future. If you find that your team's brand is not good, then the issues discussed next—goals, roles and responsibilities, processes, and interpersonal relationships—may be the underlying reasons.

Goals: Every team needs to have a set of shared goals. Do the members of your team have a clear set of shared goals or a common purpose that they can articulate and are working toward? Are these shared goals also your goals? Are team members committed to the goals?

You could ask your leadership team members just two questions to help you test the extent of goal alignment:

- What is the shared purpose or goal of this team?

- Do you believe the team is aligned to these goals?

The greater the variation in responses across the leadership team to the two questions above, the less likely it is that the team has clear shared goals.

Clarity of roles and responsibilities: In high-performing teams, each team member has a clear grasp of his or her roles and responsibilities in achieving the shared purpose. Responses to the following diagnostic statements can help assess clarity of roles and responsibilities:

- I clearly know my role and responsibilities in helping my organization (for example, finance) accomplish its goals (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

- My peers on the team know their roles and responsibilities in accomplishing our collective goals (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

Team processes: Processes can include rules for communication, problem solving, conflict resolution, and decision making among team members. As an incoming executive, you can assess processes by observing teams in action. Two useful questions you can ask team members are:

- Our team has clear processes for solving routine problems and issues (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

- Our team is effective in creating new processes to handle ambiguous problems (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

Interpersonal relationships: How do team members interact with each other? Are they tolerant of diverse viewpoints and mutually supportive? Can they handle conflict and resolve it among themselves? Do they have a foundation of mutual trust? Again, in addition to direct observations, responses to the statements below can help diagnose the state of interpersonal relationships:

- There is a high level of trust across the leadership team (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

- I perceive that team members generally have a strong foundation of mutual respect (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

- I am not aware of interpersonal conflicts in my group (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

Communication—energy, engagement, and exploration: Alex (Sandy) Pentland of MIT undertook a series of studies on teams and their performance on different tasks. He found that communication within and outside the team was the single biggest predictor of team performance.3

The three critical dimensions of communication are energy, engagement, and exploration. Energy is the number of communication exchanges among team members. Engagement is the distribution of communications across team members (for instance, engagement would be low if most team members are quiet and only a few

team members interact, even if it is with high energy). Exploration is the extent to which team members communicate outside the team to gather information to solve problems or share solutions—in effect, it is the energy outside of the team.

Three questions to explore your team's communication patterns are:

- I observe a high frequency of communications within the team across formal, informal, and back-channel meetings and exchanges (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

- I observe a broad group of team members actively interacting and communicating with each other (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

- I observe my team members actively communicate with non-team members to seek out solutions or inform others about team progress, challenges, and solutions (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

Pentland's work found high levels of communication to be a good predictor of team performance, consistent with prior literature on team communications and boundary spanning.

There is an extensive literature on teams4 and many diagnostic tools for their assessment. For example, an online search for "GRPI" will likely find numerous assessments and tools. However, the addition of brand and communications, and the few questions framed in each of the six areas above, should give you a practical way to quickly assess your inherited team and focus your team improvement efforts.

The takeaway: As an incoming executive, you inherit a leadership group that may or not function as team. As a new leader, you will need to decide if you want a team committed to a shared purpose and a brand going forward. If so, the six areas of brand, goals, role clarity, processes, interpersonal relationships, and communications can provide a practical starting point for team assessment and focus your attention on the areas that must be addressed to develop a higher-performing team.

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