



# Most teams talk magnificently

## but only deliver modestly

**ASK ANYONE WHAT** makes a star team and they will give you a list like this: agreed purpose, clear tasks, defined roles, great leadership, sound trust, good commitment and cohesion and so on. It is easy! Then ask the same person to rate their own management or sports team against these criteria and you will get a thoughtful look and maybe a wry smile – it is not so easy for a team to live by these characteristics.

In practice teamwork is a challenge. Teams are often not able to tap into the full capability of each member. The most extravert and outgoing members often get most of the airtime, even if they do not have the most expertise. The most

capable members often sit back unsure of the level of trust and therefore of how much to contribute. When conflicts arise many team members are unsure of how to clearly express themselves and if their opinions will be heard and accepted. Most teams talk magnificently but only deliver modestly. There is often little effort put in to holding team members accountable by reminding each other of their agreed commitments or to confront gaps between promises and the reality of performance. Too often great team performance is sacrificed for self-interest or self-preservation.

The management gurus Katzenbach and Smith in the book *The Wisdom of*

*Teams* suggests that a high performance team is “a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable”.

When it comes to creating a high performance team most agree that it takes a considerable amount of time and effort. There are lots of different approaches to building teams from taking members on a cross-country race guided by GPS, or on a team skydiving adventure or white water rafting. All can be great fun.

A different approach was taken by the professional services consultancy Beca in Christchurch. The Regional Manager for

the South Island, Craig Price described their approach, “After the earthquake we had an office of courageous people with huge amounts of work to do and with fatigue becoming very evident for some. As a strategic leadership team we understood that it was up to us to set the firm culture and that to step up our own performance as a leadership team.” They embarked on a two-year high performance team development programme. The senior team met four times a year for one day of team development and one day of executive coaching. The team development included sessions on further building their cohesiveness by developing a common commitment to achieve objectives and by developing sound working relationships across business units. The team learned more about shared leadership where everyone in the team was encouraged to step up into a leadership role rather than just leaving it to the most senior person. They received feedback on their ability to robustly debate issues, to build common enduring consensus and to hold each other accountable. Considerable time was spent on further building trust and understanding between team members. They learned about being adaptive leaders and how to build engagement and commitment from team members.

The executive coaching element of the programme started with a joint agreement that anything said to the coach could be shared with any of the team unless it was explicitly highlighted as confidential. During this day the coach first worked with the Regional Manager, then coached each of the senior team then finished with the Regional Manager. This opened up the communication between the team members in a way that was impossible in a normal busy day serving clients. It also allowed individuals to work on more personal and sensitive issues away from the team spotlight.

During the programme the team developed a Charter that clearly spelled out a list of sound team behaviours, then on a regular basis they took time to hold each other accountable for their own performance against the standards set out in the Charter. This work set the tone for other activities where the team provided each other with direct clear and at times critical feedback about their own performance.

To assess how they were progressing they used the High Performance Team



**“Learning shared leadership meant everyone in the team was encouraged to step up into a leadership role rather than just leaving it to the most senior person.”**

Inventory. This is a 32-item assessment that covers a wide range of team factors. The results are set out in the above graph and clearly show that the team rated themselves as making huge progress over the two-year period. Large gains were made in developing shared leadership and in developing team climate which included being positive in the way they tackled challenges, being open and honest, developing trust and having great team morale. In addition, other areas such as being more open to innovation and change were also shown to have made large gains.

Like all human endeavours the rate of progress is rarely linear or the process simple. About half way through the process Craig wrote, “The senior leadership team is going okay, really pretty well actually, although it does feel like we’ve been a bit scattered with the team so focused on projects and working from multiple locations. We have now all drafted our next 12-month objectives

– it took a reasonable amount of effort. Personally I am feeling good but demands on my time mean I feel thinly spread. I feel like I am providing more leadership but I am concerned about the shared leadership model and the expectations on each of us to step up.”

However towards the end of the programme Craig wrote, “I think we have made great progress and are well set for the future, but no doubt need to keep working hard at being a high performance team.”

Most of us would agree that a great team has a common purpose, defined roles, great leadership, and so on. It is easy to say but to achieve it takes time, effort, courage and dedication, as the senior leadership team of Beca Christchurch have demonstrated. **M**

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