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Teamwork is a Contact Sport:

Seven Skills of High Performance Teams

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“Teamwork is not a preference, it is a requirement.”—John Wooden

Great perspective from the late, great basketball coach. And for the public accounting profession, truer words could not be spoken. From entry-level accountant to managing partner, CPAs work on multiple teams to achieve both individual and firm goals. An audit team works to provide the highest quality service to its audit client. Or a group of cross-functional CPAs for a specific industry group team up to provide solutions integral to a particular industry niche. A tax department is a team focused on serving a wide variety of clients and individuals over a time-intensive busy season and throughout the year. Or an ad hoc team is pulled together to develop a proposal to land a new client.

Whether you’re a member of a client-serving team, an industry-focused team, a departmental team, a business-development team or quite possibly, all four, effective teamwork is the lifeblood of a successful CPA firm. That’s why Wooden’s words are so relevant to the public accounting profession.

When teams work effectively, you see tangible results. Teams are:

- **More Productive:** no getting sidetracked by behind-the-scenes infighting
- **More Stable:** team members become committed to something greater than themselves, creating a strong bond among team members and loyalty to the firm
- **More Innovative:** we all know that two heads are better than one and better solutions to complex challenges can result from working in a high-performance team
- **More Profitable:** when teams come together with improved productivity, lower turnover and solutions for its client’s tough challenges, there’s a positive impact on the bottom line

So if teamwork is so critical to the success of our firms, what are the skills required of a high-performance team? And how do we incorporate these skills into our daily activities? How can we enhance team effectiveness, knowing that fostering such high performance is one of our most critical roles as a leader? How can we move individuals from “I” to “We”?



The answer to these questions doesn't lie in studying a new technical accounting standard or researching a section of the Internal Revenue Code. They lie in developing the "soft" skills that are an integral part of our ability to connect with others, face conflict head on, communicate effectively and put the needs of the team ahead of our own personal agenda.

A Tale of Two Teams

In his book, *How the Mighty Fall*, (Harper Collins, 2009) Jim Collins identifies the leadership team dynamics of two sets of teams, from companies on the way up and from companies on the way down. See if you can identify your team or teams in any of these descriptions.

LEADERSHIP-TEAM DYNAMICS:

Teams on the Way Down	Teams on the Way Up
People shield those in power from grim facts, fearful of penalty and criticism for shining light on the harsh realities.	People bring forth unpleasant facts—"Come here, look, man, this is ugly"—to be discussed; leaders never criticize those who bring forth harsh realities.
People assert strong opinions with-out providing data, evidence, or a solid argument.	People bring data, evidence, logic, and solid arguments to the discussion.
The team leader has a very low questions-to-statements ratio, avoiding critical input and/or allowing sloppy reasoning and unsupported opinions.	The team leader employs a Socratic style, using a high questions-to-statements ratio, challenging people and pushing for penetrating insight.
Team members acquiesce to a decision yet do not unify to make the decision successful, or worse, undermine the decision after the fact.	Team members unify behind a decision once made and work to make the decision succeed, even if they vigorously disagreed with the decision.
Team members seek as much credit as possible for themselves yet do not enjoy the confidence and admiration of their peers.	Each team member credits other people for success yet enjoys the confidence and admiration of his or her peers.
Team members argue to look smart or to improve their own interests rather than argue to find the best answers to support the overall cause.	Team members argue and debate, not to improve their personal position, but to find the best answers to support the overall cause.



The team conducts “autopsies with blame” seeking culprits rather than wisdom.	The team conducts “autopsies without blame,” mining wisdom from painful experiences.
Team members often fail to deliver exceptional results, and blame other people or outside factors for setbacks, mistakes, and failures.	Each team member delivers exceptional results, yet in the event of a setback, each accepts full responsibility and learns from mistakes.

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The Seven Skills

Embedded in these dynamics are seven skills that are apparent in teams on the way up and absent in teams on the way down. I’ve witnessed these skills (both apparent and absent) in my coaching and consulting clients and in my former role as a practicing CPA and firm partner. Marsha Hughes and James Terrell have studied high performance teams extensively and have published these skills in their book *The Emotionally Intelligent Team* (Jossey-Bass, 2007).

You can enhance your team’s effectiveness by building on these seven interconnected elements:

Skill #1--Team Identity: High-performance teams have a shared purpose. Members know what their team stands for and they are proud to be identified with that team. Each member creates a personal association and sense of unity with the team.

Back when I was a practicing CPA, one of my most favorite audit engagements was when I was an audit senior and the partner on my audit client took great effort to bring our team together when the engagement began. He outlined our goals and identified the role each individual member played on the audit team. Each of us felt a sense of pride in being on this engagement and that helped us focus on our overall goal of providing exceptional audit services on time and on budget.

Ask yourself: For each of my teams, am I clear about our team’s purpose? What do I feel is best about what my team does? What steps can I take as a leader to strengthen my team’s identity?

Skill #2 -- Motivation: High-performing teams recognize each individual’s skills, needs and desires. What has meaning for the team member? Combining these individual needs with overall team goals facilitates everyone moving in the same direction.



Returning to my earlier audit team example, my individual goal was to complete my assigned audit areas efficiently using my technical audit skills, project management skills and interpersonal relationship skills in dealing with both the client and my fellow team members. I believe that the way the lead partner made each of us feel like important, contributing colleagues, motivated us individually to a sense of personal responsibility for our particular area. We took ownership of our roles and were motivated to do our part to meet our challenges.

Skill #3 -- Communication: High performing teams create an environment where open and honest communication is the norm. Constructive feedback is welcome and direct conversations occur when necessary to move the team forward.

Ask yourself: On my teams, do I take time to listen to others? Do I provide feedback and follow up with questions if I don't understand?

Skill #4 -- Conflict Resolution: Let's face it, it's virtually impossible for a group of people to interact on a regular basis and never have a conflict. High-performing teams deal with conflict productively, bringing forth issues that need to be discussed and work to forge a mutually beneficial outcome. Conflict is dealt with and issues are not swept under the carpet.

It is much more productive to work through conflict than to avoid it. I have worked with many leaders who are conflict-averse, not willing to "rock the boat" or take on an issue. Ultimately, this approach will undermine a team. Pretending an issue isn't there will never make it go away and frankly it can encourage passive-aggressive behavior that interferes with a team accomplishing its mission. Some of the practical ways of resolving conflict include building your skills in assertiveness, empathy, or gaining knowledge of different perspectives.

Skill #5 -- Awareness of Individual and Team Emotions: Noticing what's going on with team members and respecting each others' feelings is crucial for a high-performing team. There's no quicker way to shut down productivity than to belittle or ignore team members' emotions. Further, in a successful team, each member is aware of how their own feelings and behaviors play a role in team dynamics.

Emotions actually provide critical data about how successfully a project is progressing. For example, if you notice a team member is frustrated or worried, you can ask about what's triggering that emotion. Proactively addressing the underlying issue can save valuable time and focus efforts on solving the problem. As a leader, being in tune with your team members' emotions is a critical skill and ultimately will lead to building the bonds that high-performance teams require.



Skill #6 -- Handling Stress: High performing teams are resilient. Team members come together and bounce back after setbacks. They balance the effort it takes to get the job done with necessary breaks to recharge energy and refocus efforts.

Stress tolerance is one skill every team agrees is relevant for the team. In our pressure-packed world, developing skills to handle the stress is imperative.

Skill #7 -- Having Fun and Positive Mood: Happiness and optimism are key factors here. Members of a high performing team display a “can-do attitude.” Adding a sense of humor to the challenges we face each day adds to the overall health of a team. When deadlines are tight and delivering results is a mandate, blending in some fun and a sense of positivity can have a powerful impact on team performance.

Teamwork Is a Contact Sport

Discussion of each of the above seven skills confirms that teamwork is a contact sport. In the accounting profession especially, being an island just doesn’t work. Ultimately successful CPA firms over the long term are those that focus on building the effectiveness of their teams.

So, are you a member of a high-performance team? Are there one or two skills you can identify above that require some work? As a firm leader, ultimately the responsibility for building a high-performance team falls to you. And as John Wooden said so aptly, *“Teamwork is not a preference, it is a requirement.”*

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