Leadership and Teamwork: Two Sides of the Same Coin

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Abstract

The symbiotic relationship between leadership and teamwork can hardly be overemphasized. In an increasingly knowledge-intensive world, the most competent leader could be staring at the face of failure if the team that is led fails to measure up to the leader’s objectives and get derailed. Indeed, teams can be rudderless without effective and wise leadership. There has been significant debate as to the styles and characteristics of leadership that engender optimal team performance. Similarly, the constituents of teams that are remarkably effective have been studied and emulated. Obviously, leadership and teamwork cannot exist without each other. They have to be balanced, coordinated, and synergized for optimal organizational performance towards successful outcomes. This paper will therefore explore and propose the best practices that would enable an optimal balancing of leadership and teamwork towards successful outcomes in a competitive environment.

Keywords: Leadership; Teamwork; Best Practices

Introduction

Leadership and teamwork are the warp and woof of the dynamic fabric of organizations. One cannot exist without the other in an organizational environment activated by a constellation of teams. These teams are essentially temporary organizations with specific objectives, resources, and timeframes. This is because both the tactical objectives and strategic goals of the organization are accomplished largely through team effort—and this cannot happen by accident. Both leadership and teamwork are driven by critical soft skills that need to be exercised prudently, and in a balanced manner. This balance between leadership and teamwork is imperative to ensure that both are executed not only in tandem—as two sides of the same coin—but with symbiosis as they draw inspiration for success from each other. Poor leadership cannot pull a motivated team to
success; similarly, strong leadership cannot hope to achieve success with an incompetent and unmotivated team. In this conceptual paper, a concise analysis is made of both leadership and teamwork—vast subjects in themselves—as a balanced endeavor. A framework is made for best practices to accomplish the two complementary phenomena with synergy, sagacity, and success.

**Organizational Leadership**

Organisational leadership is a composite of skills and behaviors enabling a person to exercise an interpersonal influence on a group of people. The leader’s vision and purpose are thus achieved by directing and motivating the team to accomplish the desired set of goals envisioned by the leader. Indeed, leadership itself is a focused exercise in influencing and empowering people—individually and in teams—and having clear expectations of these followers. Invested with their innate and acquired skills and empowered by the leader with delegated authority and responsibility, the team facilitates the translation of the leader’s vision into reality. The ultimate accomplishment of a leader is to persuade followers to do seemingly impossible feats. Indeed, the best leaders motivate their followers to accomplish tasks and goals well beyond their own expectations (Bass, 1990).

The concept of leadership carries many different connotations and is often viewed as synonymous with other, equally complex concepts—such as power, authority, management, administration, and supervision (Lim, 2001). It is regretted by researchers that neither scholars nor practitioners have been able to define leadership with adequate precision, accuracy, and conciseness (Javidan, et al., 2006; Rost, 1993). This need not be surprising, because where definitions differ is in their connotation, particularly in terms of their implications for the leader-follower relationship (Maak & Pless, 2006). Indeed, the mode of definition of leadership incorporates normative assumptions
of a relationship between leaders and followers (Ciulla, 2004).

**Definitions of Leadership and Teamwork**

Definitions of leadership seem to vary according to the underlying ontological assumptions used to examine the phenomenon. For example, trait theorists define leadership as a set of traits, while behavioral theorists identify it as a set of skills; and, researchers from a social constructivist perspective tend to define leadership as a process and relationship (Kezar, 2004). The main approaches to leadership research may be crystallised into groups as: theories of trait, behavior, power, and influence (reciprocal leadership theories); these reciprocal models of leadership view leadership subjectively as a dynamic process with reciprocal relationships with followers (Barker, 2002). Other leadership theories incorporate contingent, cultural, social constructivist, critical, and post-modern approaches (Grint, 1997). The most widely recognised leadership theories today incorporate visionary, charismatic, laissez-faire, transactional, and transformational leadership (Bass, 1990).

Considering the wide-ranging definitions of leadership (Gardner, 1995), its operational definition will depend to a great extent on the purpose of the researcher (Yukl, 1994; Bass, 1990). To align with the aim of this paper with essential symbiosis between leader and followers, Yukl’s (1994, p. 5) definition of leadership has been adopted for this study:

Leadership comprises influence processes affecting the interpretation of events for followers; the choice of objectives for the group or organization; the organization of work activities to accomplish the objectives; the motivation of followers to achieve the objectives; the maintenance of cooperative relationships and teamwork;
and, the enlistment of support and cooperation from people outside the group or organization.

The term “influence processes” reflects the idea that the expected effectiveness is primarily dependent on the leader’s influence upon followers as underscored extensively in the literature (Northouse, 2004; Buchanan & Huczynski, 1997). Undoubtedly, leadership is a role, mindset, and a set of behaviors—and it takes all these aspects to build, maintain, and nurture a culture that will embody a vision while representing the best interests of stakeholders. This approach is to be focused on performance toward successful tactical and strategic outcomes. The ideal role of both leader and team is to ensure quality, integrity, accountability, fairness, and balance to satisfy the stakeholders.

A team can be defined simply as a group of individuals united in pursuit of a common mission or goal, often sacrificing personal agendas for the sake of team accomplishment. Thus, teams have several characteristics: diverse individuals, a common goal, a sense of community, knowledge-sharing, and, concerted effort. The best teams are those composed of individuals who are keen opportunity-seekers, indefatigable problem-solvers, and incorrigible optimists. Such teams develop high team dynamics and a strong track record, while enhancing their own professional development. Effective leadership is needed to accomplish these laudable goals.

Indeed, strong leaders build strong teams: groups of people who work together in cooperative, goal-oriented effort. In the knowledge-intensive world of today, leaders influence and motivate teams. They do not coerce. They achieve results by developing a shared vision and communicating it to the team whilst influencing with passion. We can say that leaders discover challenges, and teams help to resolve them. Building teams, managing conflict, leading positive change,
empowering and delegating, and creative problem-solving—all these are critical concurrent activities for effective team dynamics. Astute leaders adapt their style to suit any given situation and create an environment wherein the team flourishes. They also know their own strengths and weaknesses, and those of their teams. Effective leaders play to their team’s strengths, and neutralise weaknesses. Indeed, teamwork requires collaborative problem-solving and action-oriented decision-making to meet objectives.

Teams consist of different people who bring diverse attributes to the project. Kelchner (2013) points out that maximizing the diversity within a team is important to allow for different skill-sets to come together and to share ideas for the best solution possible. If we suppress the natural dynamic flow of a team—with possible conflicts—self-induced barriers are created within that team. Therefore, the leader should strive to understand the culture of each team and find ways to strengthen the natural dynamics of that team and each of its members. A creative approach needs to be taken to drive the strategic vision of the organization through effective leadership.

For a team to have wholesome success there is no substitute for effective leadership. In the military, the difference between a good unit and a bad unit is leadership. In sports, the difference between a successful team and an unsuccessful team is leadership. By this token, organizational leadership is essentially the wise exercise of leadership behaviors with a view to accomplishing organizational goals by motivating competent teams. The balancing of effective leadership with a competent, motivated, and synergised team is doubtless imperative for successful outcomes.

**The Five-Dimensional Leadership Competence Model**

Globalization has increased the need for leaders with a multidimensional background to handle the variety of actions needed to drive the strategic plan to completion. Environmental complexity has
greatly increased stakeholder expectations beyond the obvious. Indeed, today’s leaders are expected to be fully competent and ready to handle both known and unknown risks. From a host of possible leadership competencies, a few can be extracted that are most pragmatic for application to a global environment. The capabilities that can prepare a well-rounded leader can be distilled into a composite, Five-Dimensional Leadership Competency Model consisting of the following (Cameron & Whetten, 2011): (1) Transformational; (2) Transactional; (3) Organic; (4) Contemporary; and, (5) Ethical.

(1) **Transformational** leaders are charismatic individuals who have the ability to influence a team to meet the organization’s strategic goals. These leaders encourage and enable the development of an organization that is characterized by a culture based on integrity, transparency, and genuine respect for others. Such leaders inspire followers to perform beyond their expectations. They also foster healthy working relationships. The net result is a continual empowering of motivated team members to accomplish goals with visible enthusiasm.

(2) **Transactional** leaders transact work with team members in exchange for tangible and intangible rewards for delivering the assigned tasks. Under transactional leadership, followers are impelled by rewards made by the leader rather than from fear of consequences (Patterson, 2011, p. 75). Transactional leaders set the stage for positive results that are achieved by communicating the strategic goals, which are equally matched with the team’s talents and capabilities. The project leader reinforces to the team that “high performance is linked to valued rewards, which leads to satisfaction.” (Whetten & Cameron, 2011, p. 332).
The ability to manage a high-performing, unified team is evidence of the effectiveness of “an engaging style of leadership.” (Alban-Metcalfe & Alimo-Metcalfe, 2009, p. 14).

(3) **Organic** leadership enables greater interaction among team members, and greatly strengthens the working relationships among the team members. Individuals collaborating or working in an organic structure are thus bonded together by a shared vision and values (Patterson, 2010, p. 75). A leader using this style empowers and mentors motivated team members to cultivate their own leadership skills.

(4) **Contemporary** leaders are essentially democratic in their approach, and use influence and persuasion rather than fear to lead the team. To ensure successful outcomes, contemporary leaders manage ambiguity and paradox: spearhead change and manage stability; establish vision and accomplish objectives; break traditional, outmoded rules, and, monitor conformance (Whetten & Cameron, 2011, p. 17). The contemporary leader utilizes structure to guide the team effectively to meet the organisation’s strategic objectives and stakeholder expectations. Contemporary leaders also view existing difficulties as an opportunity for development is most needed; they utilize the opportunity to nurture and retain talent in order to gain competitive advantage in the longer term (Graham, 2012).

(5) **Ethical** leaders inspire respect by setting a fine example of integrity for team members and stakeholders. Ethical leadership focuses on how leaders responsibly use their social power in the decisions they make, actions they engage in, and in the ways they influence others
(Resick, Hanges, Dickson, & Mitchelson, 2006, p. 346). This form of value-based leadership can indeed be contagious if it is a standard practice of the organization as a whole. A leader modeling integrity at all times is an invaluable role-model, both for the parent organisation, and for their teams.

It should be noted that the Five-dimensional Leadership Competency Model incorporates a complex of complementary leadership styles that can be used individually as the situation demands, as well as simultaneously because they do not conflict with each other. As a result, these styles balance the personalities, capabilities, and needs of the project leader and the team members. This composite model implies that in today’s complex world, a cookie-cutter approach of ‘one size fits all’ will not work: a balanced and ‘many-hatted’ approach to leadership and teamwork is needed. This is especially poignant in the often high-intensity environment of the team as a temporary organization—riddled as it is with complex communication lines and diverse personalities!

**Successful Leadership and Teamwork**

Teams are an essential component of successful organizations today—and building and motivating teams are necessary pursuits to attain that success. Teams require continuous nurturing and interaction to maintain high performance throughout their temporary lives. Leadership must now concentrate on motivating and supporting teams using tools that were not previously considered, but have become crucial in a globalizing environment. In order for a team to be attuned to success, a combination of attributes are required that include: clear objectives; shared leadership; clear roles and responsibilities; interdependent members; mutual encouragement; and, trust between the leader and the team. Additionally, Whetton & Cameron (2011) point out a few factors that
contribute toward effective team performance. These are: a heterogeneous team composition; increasing familiarity among project team members; team motivation which sharpens competence; team goals and overall feedback; cohesion among team members; and, decision-making processes within the team.

Two main skills associated with a successful team are: playing advantageous roles, and providing feedback to others. Advantageous roles such as that of task-facilitating enhance performance of a team through direction-giving, urging, and summarizing; and, they influence the behaviors of team members to facilitate task accomplishment and group cohesion. By providing feedback on the other hand, a team can move forward with accomplishing tasks while building relationships with each other. Focusing feedback on the behavior—rather than on the person—is one way team members provide effective feedback to build positive relationships, rather than destroy team unity. This balance is both constructive and remedial. Successful team development comes through a progression of stages: forming, norming, storming, and performing (Manteklow, 2011; Tuckman, 1965). Teams must progress systematically through the first three stages in order to effectively advance to the fourth stage of performing. However, there are bound to be some overlaps between successive stages—and the time taken by each team to transcend each stage will vary.

Developing a successful team requires great diligence and awareness on the part of the leader—because it is as much an art as it is a science. In this context, each team will be different with diverse stressors and barriers for leaders to overcome and adapt to—indeed, even to neutralize and balance. A strong team recognizes that team members are dependent on each other for success, and that they have to work in unison to overcome adversity. With that in mind, a strong, resilient
team will develop with great potential to complete its stated objectives. However, a high-performing team with the right capabilities but the wrong leadership can jeopardize success. Therefore the successful leader who engenders success needs to consistently lead a team with sensitivity, competence, and wisdom towards successful outcomes.

**Best Practices in Balancing Leadership and Teamwork**

Contemporary leadership requires more awareness of the human element in execution. Indeed, it calls for a balance between the technical and the behavioural, the hard and the soft, and leadership and teamwork. Team members are motivated differently from each another. Team leaders need to recognize that for some, the prestige of being in a productive team may be sufficient motivation. Team members may simply be self-motivated and seeking new challenges. For others, motivation may come from money, self-interest, exposure, or from the learning experience itself. Leaders must also be willing to provide growth opportunities to team members by placing them on teams that can enhance and expand their leadership skills. It takes an effective communicator with charisma to motivate, mentor, inspire, and build a cohesive team, while being aware of the individuality and unique aspirations of each team member. For pragmatic leaders to actualize the need for this balance, a conceptual framework can be constructed to balance leadership and teamwork—incorporating a keen understanding of human behaviour and motivation. Drawing from the above discussion on effective leadership and team dynamics, this basic framework of best practices in balancing the two integral phenomena is mooted. It takes effective communication for the leader to motivate, inspire, and build a cohesive team, while respecting the unique skills, drivers, and aspirations of each team member. This preliminary framework is made up of eight tenets comprising essential soft skills that bond leadership and teamwork in a symbiotic balance.

**Vision:** The visionary leader sees the invisible, feels the intangible, and achieves the impossible.
The leader’s vision of a successful team needs to be shared with the team from the outset. A clear vision also enables team members to act without close supervision by providing direction for action while encouraging creativity and resourcefulness. The vision should underscore the organizational culture and dictate the roles of individual team players. An effective leader is often described as having a vision of where to go—and the ability to articulate it. Visionaries thrive on change and being able to draw new boundaries. A visionary leader is someone who lifts up, gives a reason for being, and provides the vision and spirit to change. Visionary leaders enable team members to feel that they have a real stake in the project. They empower people to experience their vision as their own. Involving team members in the creation of the team’s vision statement can help to achieve buy-in and benefits from the perspective and experience of the team members who will be charged with accomplishing the tasks necessary for success. Ultimately, the leader’s role in participative vision development is to ensure consistent alignment of team goals with organizational objectives, consistent with organizational policies.

**Integrity:** Integrity is the irreducible minimum of leadership and followership. It breeds trust, respect, and credibility. The leader’s actions set an example for the team members. Integrity is indeed the ultimate best practice in balancing leadership and teamwork. A high reputation for integrity needs to be consistently maintained throughout—with the leader setting the example for high ethical standards for the organization, and for the team.

**Communication:** Leadership calls for clear communication about goals, responsibilities, performance, expectations, and feedback. The leader is also the team’s link to the larger organization. Transparent communication in all directions enhances credibility, trust, and
efficiency. Differences are bound to appear—but dialogue and discussions should be a basis for solutions. The leader must have the ability to effectively negotiate and persuade when necessary to ensure the success of the team. Team members have four major communication needs: responsibility parameters; co-ordinating with each other and the leader; awareness of project status; and, synchronization of decisions by various stakeholders (Verzuh, 1999, p. 222). Communication is therefore vital, not only in ensuring team progress, functionality and cohesion, but also in effective leadership. Communication plays such a critical role in the development of a team that it is important to nurture it from the very inception of team formation. It is very easy for a miscue to set back team formation in the very first meeting of team members. The leader needs to mediate those early meetings to ensure that team members are effectively communicating during team formation. Expectations and objectives need to be clearly, concisely, and correctly communicated to all team members with the backing of the leader.

**Collaboration:** Strong leaders build strong teams composed of groups of people who work together in cooperative effort. They adapt their style(s) to suit any given situation and create an environment where the team flourishes. Team members may come from a single source and produce a highly specialised output, or may come from diverse backgrounds and approach a result from a holistic viewpoint. The leader’s role is to understand what views are held by individual members of the team and refine them into common categories of value. These values reflect deeply held personal beliefs and provide strong motivation for the group as a whole, as well as serve as an impetus for collaboration and commitment (Martinelli, 2010). This commitment can help ensure that team members embrace challenges with enthusiasm, weather difficulties with resolve, and exhibit spirited effort. Indeed, the definition of a high-performing team seems to embrace the
value of collective individual strengths toward successful collaboration. Every member of a team has skills to bring to the table, and a great deal of them surface through conflict. Conflict is a naturally occurring process that is displayed within healthy teams and is necessary for the dynamics of team success. This is especially true in cross-cultural situations with more complex communication issues. In general, collaboration is the key to resolving conflicts amicably and creatively.

**Creativity:** Creativity can be an advantage if employed constructively; it provides flexibility, innovation, and competitive muscle. On the other hand, it could be a possible hindrance if the leader allows the project team to digress and lose focus of the project goals. By promoting a healthy and inclusive project environment that fosters creativity, the spirit of innovation can flourish (Abgor, 2008). Creativity and innovation are an organization’s primary source of competitive advantage in the 21st century; yet, it takes an understanding leader who is interested in bringing innovation to the organization, to implement this strategy (Abgor, 2008). Creativity in teams needs to be encouraged, as it is a way of generating ideas that could enhance or transform an organization’s bottom line. Nevertheless, creativity is not limited to generating ideas but can also be an effective tool in problem-solving—especially in a competitive environment. Therefore it is important to encourage value-added, creative output to tap into the tacit knowledge of the team members.

**Goal-orientation:** The goals of the organization should constantly be kept in view by both the leader and the team. Also, the overall organizational goals need to be balanced with the team members’ personal goals for the project. The team should take ownership for goal achievement,
which in turn leads to personal accomplishment and advancement. Goal-orientation is especially important during planned and unplanned changes in the organization. The leader and team should anticipate and embrace changes while incorporating pre-emptive plans for risk management towards successful realization of the goals. When the goal and milestones are shared and constantly focused on, teammates are concertedly working with, and for, each other.

**Empowerment:** Empowerment means helping to develop in others a sense of self-efficacy, self-determinism, personal control, meaning, and trust (Whetten & Cameron, 2011, p. 472). The leader should be able to communicate effectively with the team members to establish trust and to build relationships. When individuals are able to build relationships that are positive and that create energy, important physiological, emotional, intellectual, and social consequences result (Whetten & Cameron, 2011, p. 238). This exercise is aided by mentorship, and is constructive as most people have little trouble communicating effectively in positive situations. Strong leaders who empower and mentor team members know their own strengths and weaknesses, and also those of the team members. In this context, delegation is also part of empowerment. The project manager should be able to delegate, recognizing the skills and expertise of the team members and assign tasks accordingly. This enhances trust, which also is an essential element in a positive and balanced relationship of a leader with team members. Empowerment shows that the leader has confidence in the team to get out of their comfort zones, to be creative, and to find new ways to accomplish tasks.

**Team-building:** The leader needs to be a good team-builder. A team-builder can best be defined as a strong person who provides the substance that holds the team together in common veal towards
the right objectives. The team starts as a group of strangers and needs to be synergized into a high-performing team. Keeping the sense of team-spirit alive despite the many problems in execution is another crucial quality a leader should have. The leader has to play a significant part in defining a positive work tone and ethic for the team from the very outset. The team should be nurtured in a way that evokes a positive, team-building culture.

To understand the process of forming solid relationships to accomplish team-building, it is essential to track the process that teams go through while metamorphosing—generally understood by the four stages of forming, storming, norming and performing (Tuckman, 1965). During the initial ‘forming’ stage, team members are polite and team roles are less clear; during this stage, team members rely on leadership to establish boundaries and explain expectations. As roles and relationships become clearer, the group moves into the ‘storming’ stage. During this stage, established roles may be questioned and leadership may be called upon to explain the foundation set for the group. As the group moves forward, they encounter the ‘norming’ stage. During this stage, the organization has a comfortably established hierarchy, which facilitates work for the group. During this phase of group development, camaraderie develops and relationships become stronger as the group realizes they have a shared vision. Finally, in the ‘performing’ stage, the actualization of the group’s overall goals occurs. Hierarchy and culture are established, and team members have the ability to join or leave the organization or team without impacting its culture. During all four of these stages, building solid relationships becomes imperative for success (Manteklow, 2011). A balance of well-developed team-building and astute leadership is obviously needed to construct strong, successful teams.
Conclusion

Balancing leadership and teamwork as two sides of the same coin has become necessary in an increasingly competitive environment, especially in the face of scarcity of valuable resources—most importantly, human resources. Tapping into the best that a team can yield toward a relentless pursuit of organizational success requires greater emphasis on the ‘soft’ skills of leadership than hitherto acknowledged. However, balancing the two intertwined phenomena is a worthwhile endeavor that is doable through persistent interpersonal effort by both leader and followers. The basic framework of eight soft skills spanning and balancing leadership and teamwork presented in this paper attempts to encompass best practices in this arena. It needs further expansion, categorization, and empirical testing, but will serve as a good starting point.

Leaders need to be continually evaluating their: leadership styles and perceptions; understanding of different cultures; individual and team motivations; interpersonal skills; levels of creativity; ability to manage change; communication style; listening ability; decision-making skills; and, personal ethics. A leader must marshal appropriate skills and tasks to successfully build teams, accomplish goals, and avoid pitfalls. However, the achievement of all of these requires a leader to be flexible and capable of finding creative and effective solutions. The inevitability of organizational change requires a proactive, forward-looking approach. This means that the leader should be prepared to develop novel and effective methods of timely and complete communication, team-building, negotiation, and conflict resolution—in parallel with the technical aspects of schedules, risks, and resources.

Overall, being a successful leader is to be able to effectively communicate with the team members
toward project success. Strong communication skills in the leader help foster and build relationships. The leader will thereby find the best routes of motivation, mentorship, and empowerment to energize each member of the team. In the final analysis, it is important for the leader to balance wise leadership with a unified, high-performing team that reaches its full potential—beyond all expectations.

References


