

What Really Makes Teams Click Today

By Gary Burnison, CEO of Korn Ferry

The choreographed dance. The wheel that turns without friction. The rowing crew in w.

When I asked our leadership team this week for their thoughts on teams and how they must function today, these evocative images jumped out at me. In these times, everything and everyone must be in motion—generating collective energy, one propelling the other.

I saw this among my own children several years ago, while on vacation. On our last day, as all seven of us scrambled to pack and get to the airport on time, in our rush somebody knocked over a fruit smoothie and sent it flying. Standing at the door, luggage in each hand, I watched as that pink lava, as if in slow motion, shot into the air and landed with a splat—right on a white rug, of course.

We all sprang into action. It was orchestrated chaos, and everyone had a role. Someone grabbed bath towels to sop up the mess. Someone else squirted shampoo (the only

“cleaner” we had) to avoid a stain. Another person doused it with water. After a lot of rubbing and scrubbing, somebody pulled out the hairdryer—and nearly burned the rug. We felt like the Keystone Kops.

Then it was time to go. But there was our daughter Emily, giving the barely visible pink spot one last scrub with a toothbrush. When I asked Emily why she was still working, she shrugged and smiled. “We’re having fun.”

In the same way, out of today’s chaos a new order is emerging. Teams must come together quickly, with little pre-planning, to get things done. As Jean-Marc Laouchez, President of the Korn Ferry Institute, observed: teams thrive when they have the right members, shared purpose, clear goals, active commitment, candid dialogue, openness, and, yes, even fun. (The alternative is a poor-performing team that’s closed, siloed, territorial, has no shared purpose or common objectives, and with members who are afraid to speak up.)

Korn Ferry research into team effectiveness has found that the seeds of change, planted a few years ago, are now growing at an exponential rate. Different work needs to get done, and work needs to get done differently. As such, roles are morphing, and responsibilities are broadening. Teams are coming together fluidly and in multiple combinations. Org charts need to be invisible, and hierarchy thrown out the window.

To create this kind of dynamic, virtual team environment, leaders need to ADAPT—our model based on extensive analysis of 150,000 profiles of leaders worldwide to identify what it takes to lead organizations right now. More than ever, leaders and teams must:

- Anticipate tomorrow
- Drive to elevate energy and others
- Accelerate with agility
- Partner to tap “collective genius”
- Trust to create elevated interdependence

Where teams trip up

As companies today revisit their business models—sometimes out of necessity and survival and other times to seize opportunities—tapping collective wisdom is paramount. Often that’s easier said than done. In partnership with Harvard University researchers, Korn Ferry studied 127 high-level teams in public and private organizations from 11 countries. They were rated on whether the team was able to sustain and grow the company, become more effective over time, and whether the teammates developed into better leaders. Debra Nunes, a senior partner in Korn Ferry’s Consulting business, who works with executive leaders on team effectiveness, explained the results were “awful”—about three-quarters of the teams rated either mediocre or poor. That just won’t work in today’s complex and am-

biguous world. As Debra told me, the world is inundated with change, so the concept of the team must also change.

Teams aren’t all kumbaya

When people think of teams, they often have a utopian image of locking arms around a campfire, taking the “trust fall” challenge, and walking over hot coals together. This is not reality. While it may sound counterintuitive, teams that are “all kumbaya” do not perform as well as teams that embrace conflict. Conflict can spark the creative process as people own problems and brainstorm with each other. Susan Snyder, a senior partner in our Consulting business who works on team development, found that “debating the issues and bringing conflict” in the room or on the Zoom is a key part of the process. Constructive conflict creates collective genius. Doing so, however, requires dropping the “but”—a real buzzkill. One person floats an idea or asks a question, and someone else jumps in with “but.” What comes next is always negative. Invariably, it leads to disagreement. Replacing “but” with “and” improves team effectiveness.

The electrified team

With more change likely in the next 2 years than we’ve seen in the last 10, tomorrow’s teams must come together differently today. Dennis Baltzley, our Global Head of Leadership Development, uses four key words to describe these teams of the future: diverse, distributed, nonhierarchical, and transient. Different, diverse people with broad perspectives and varied experiences come together from across the organization (and, often, around the world) to solve problems. They cooperate and collaborate as needed—and then move on. Within this mix is the leader who has gone from being the “orchestra leader” of the past five years-

(making sure all the players harmonize) to today's "electrical conductor"—pushing information and energy throughout the network.

Rowing in unison

When my son, Jack, took up rowing at West Point, I had a chance to watch the team practice on the Hudson River. It was 20 worlds away from anything I'd known growing up in Kansas. Esther Colwill, President of our Global Technology practice, who had rowed crew at Oxford, described to me the subtlety of two fundamental motions—the stroke and the recovery. "The strokes, when the blade is driven through the water, require the most power to push the boat forward, and the recovery, when the blade is out of the water, requires the lightest touch, the most careful movement; otherwise, the momentum of the boat is checked." This "dual motion" is also the rhythm required of today's leaders, given the Ironman competition we're facing: the finesse to reach each individual and the power to drive collective momentum.

The last word on teams

Clearly, teams today mean different things to different people and organizations. But there are common themes that connect

them all. This week, I asked our leaders to share their views on the meaning of "team" in today's world. Here are some of their thoughts:

"Teamwork starts with a common purpose and trust in one another."

"Creating collective muscle, mutual commitment and trust, and willingness to support others."

"Sisterhood/brotherhood, having a heightened sense of others and not leaving anybody behind."

"Collective wisdom and knowledge to achieve superior results."

"Collaboration—each person having a role in which strengths complement weaknesses in producing greatness."

"Diverse people with diverse ideas working toward a shared goal."

"Any two people working together must know that, without working together, neither could achieve their goals separately."

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