

BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS - THE THREE PRIORITIES OF A HEALTHY TEAM

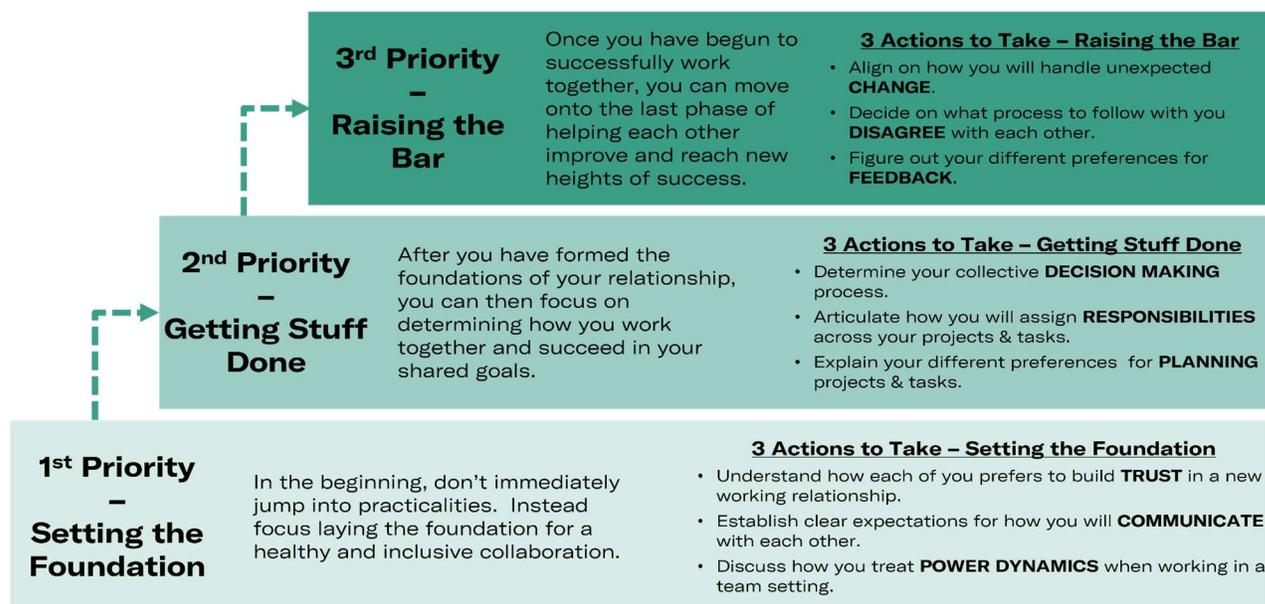
For the past half-year, my quest to embed the seven dimensions of collaboration into our organizational fabric has been both exhilarating and, frankly, a bit of a headache. Despite receiving overwhelmingly positive feedback on how these dimensions have illuminated the intricacies of team dynamics, I've hit a couple of stumbling blocks that no amount of aspirin could cure.

Firstly, while enthusiasm for the model was high, its application proved daunting for many. Where do we begin? How do we prioritize these dimensions in real-world scenarios? These questions loomed large, unanswered by the original framework's non-sequential nature. Secondly, a recurring piece of feedback highlighted two gaps in our model: the need for clarity around roles and responsibilities and how to manage unexpected change. It became apparent that while the seven dimensions offered a solid foundation, there were critical elements of collaboration we hadn't accounted for.

In a lightbulb moment, sparked by the very teamwork principles I'd been championing, my colleagues and I expanded our model to address these gaps. We introduced two new dimensions focusing on role clarity and adaptability to change, enriching our understanding of effective collaboration. But with complexity increased, we faced a new challenge: how to simplify this model without losing its depth. The breakthrough came when we realized these dimensions could be grouped into different priorities, making the model not just richer, but also more navigable.

This revamped approach has not only resolved my initial frustrations but also equipped our team with a more comprehensive roadmap for collaboration. I'm thrilled to share these insights with you, hoping they'll transform your teamwork as profoundly as they have ours. In this month's article I will introduce this new approach to you, and in the following two months I will introduce the two new dimensions of teamwork.

The Three Priorities of a Healthy Team / Collaboration



The First Priority of a Healthy Team - Laying the Foundations

The First Priority of a Healthy Team is pivotal because it sets the tone for the quality and depth of the collaborative experience between a manager and a new employee. This Laying the Foundation priority is about building a bedrock of mutual understanding and respect, which is essential for a robust and dynamic working relationship. The three dimensions within this phase are not just interconnected; they are interdependent, each reinforcing the others to create a holistic framework for effective teamwork.



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- How do we build **TRUST**? - Task Based Trust vs Relationship Based Trust
- How do we **COMMUNICATE** with each other? - Low Context Communication vs High Context Communication
- How do we view **POWER DYNAMICS**? - Egalitarian Power Dynamics vs Hierarchical Power Dynamics

Trust is the cornerstone of this foundation. Without trust, effective communication cannot take place, and power dynamics within the team may become skewed or oppressive. Trust must be cultivated with care, recognizing that people may place trust differently—some through the demonstration of competencies and reliability (task-based), while others through personal connections and shared experiences (relationship-based).

Communication is the vessel through which trust is expressed and power dynamics are navigated. Low context communication provides explicit, clear exchanges that leave little room for misunderstanding, particularly vital when trust is being established. High context communication, which relies on shared understanding and non-verbal cues, can deepen the connection once foundational trust is in place.

Finally, **Power Dynamics** influence both trust and communication. In a phase where the groundwork of collaboration is laid, it is crucial to establish whether the relationship will function on egalitarian principles, fostering a sense of shared leadership and collective decision-making, or if it will adhere to a more hierarchical structure, where roles and levels of authority are clearly delineated.

Together, these dimensions interact in Phase 1 to create a secure, open environment where both the manager and the new employee can understand each other's preferences and work styles. This understanding allows for the customization of the teamwork approach to fit the individual preferences of the members of the team. By prioritizing these dimensions early on, the collaboration / partnership will lay the foundation they will need when proceeding on their path towards sustained team performance and growth.

The Second Priority of a Healthy Team - Getting Stuff Done

The Second Priority of a Healthy Team, "Getting Stuff Done," is the critical middle ground where the foundational elements of trust, communication, and understanding of power dynamics are put into action. It is the phase where teams transition from talking about work to doing the work. It's the practical application of the groundwork laid in Phase 1, turning strategies into tasks, and ideas into results. This is where the rubber meets the road in terms of decision-making, responsibility allocation, and planning. These three dimensions are critical because they define how a team interacts on a daily basis and how they collectively move towards their goals.

- How do we want **DECISIONS** to be made? - Consensual Decisions vs Top-Down Decisions
- How do we assign **RESPONSIBILITIES** and accountabilities? - Organized Teamwork vs Organic Teamwork
- What is our approach to **PLANNING** when it comes to accomplishing tasks and delivering results? - Linear Planning vs Flexible Planning

Decision Making is the dimension that shapes the governance of teamwork. Whether decisions are made through a consensual process involving all team members or directed by a leader, this approach sets the tone for how team members engage with each other and with the work at hand. It is essential to align on this dimension to ensure that everyone is on the same page about how decisions are reached and enacted.

Clarity in **Responsibilities** ensures that each team member knows what they are accountable for. Whether responsibilities are assigned in an organized, structured way, or allowed to develop organically. Understanding this dimension helps prevent overlap and gaps in team efforts, ensuring that all critical areas are covered.

Finally, the approach to **Planning** is about how teams navigate their road map to success. A linear approach emphasizes a step-by-step progression towards goals, while a flexible approach allows for adaptation to changing circumstances. How a team plans their work will dictate the pace, agility, and resilience of their operations.

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The essence of Decision Making, Clarity in Responsibilities, and Planning cannot be overstated. These dimensions collectively forge the operational spine of a team, dictating the rhythm, adaptability, and robustness of their collective effort. Decision Making sets the governance rhythm, Responsibilities delineate the scope of each team member's contribution, and Planning charts the course towards success—be it through a steadfast, step-by-step journey or an agile, adaptable traverse.

The effectiveness with which a team makes decisions, assigns tasks, and plans its trajectory lays the groundwork for going beyond ordinary success and achieving exceptional performance. The 3rd priority of a team, "Raising the Bar," is not merely an extension of getting things done; it's about elevating each aspect of our collaboration to unprecedented heights. By mastering the art of execution in this second priority, teams are better positioned to challenge the status quo and innovate to reach new levels of success.

The Third Priority of a Healthy Team - Raising the Bar

Finally, the Third Priority of a Healthy Team, called "Raising the Bar," represents the culmination of teamwork. The foundational elements of trust, communication, and power dynamics have been established, and the practicalities of decision-making, responsibilities, and planning have been finalized. The team is now ready to evolve past the basic functions of a team, and push for continuous improvement and excellence.

These three dimensions are what differentiates a successful team from a sustainably high performing team.

- How do we handle unexpected **CHANGE**? - Realistic Mindset vs Optimistic Mindset
- What do we do when we **DISAGREE**? - Open Disagreement vs Discrete Disagreement
- How do we prefer to give and receive **FEEDBACK**? - Direct Feedback vs Indirect Feedback

Handling unexpected ****Change**** is a critical aspect of working together as it shapes your agility and resilience when things don't go according to plan. It is not merely about surviving change but leveraging it for growth and innovation, and both the Realistic and Optimistic mindsets are critical. Teams that effectively manage change are more likely to engage in constructive disagreement and provide each other feedback for improvement. This openness stems from an understanding that change is constant and navigating through it requires robust dialogue and varied perspectives.

Approaching **Disagreement** is a sign of an engaged and passionate team, even if the disagreement comes in different forms. How disagreements are managed can either lead to breakthroughs or breakdowns. Open disagreement creates a platform for honest feedback. When team members feel comfortable voicing their disagreements, they're more likely to provide candid feedback. Conversely, a team that values discreet disagreement may prefer more nuanced and supportive feedback mechanisms.

Giving and receiving **Feedback** is vital for individual and team growth. It fosters a culture of transparency and continuous learning. Feedback is the cornerstone of adaptation. Teams that excel in giving and receiving feedback are better positioned to respond to change. They can quickly assimilate new information, adjust strategies, and modify behaviors to align with evolving circumstances.

Differences Across the Nine Dimensions is Crucial

Leading a team often requires us to step outside of our comfort zone. It is too easy to want things to remain as they always were. We can easily overlook the value that different perspectives bring to the table. Yet, it's the acknowledgment and celebration of our differences that truly propels a team from good to great.

When it comes to Healthy Teams, diversity in how we think and act is not just an HR buzzword -- it's the foundation of high performance. Whether it manifests in the trust we build, our planning strategies, or our style of feedback, embracing these variances not only enriches our collaboration but also strengthens the very fabric of our team. It's through the synergy of varied approaches—be it task-based or relationship-based trust, structured or organic responsibility delineation, linear or flexible planning—that we unlock our collective potential.



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However, embracing diversity doesn't mean seeking differences for the sake of differences. Within the nine dimensions of teamwork, there's no singular path to being an exemplary team member or leader. What matters isn't the presence of differences but our response to them. The true challenge—and opportunity—lies in our willingness to explore these differences with an open mind. Once we open our mind to those differences, we can begin to understand them, and ultimately leverage them towards achieving our shared objectives.

Whether you are a leader or just an informal leader in your team, I challenge you to value these differences. So, the next time you meet a new colleague or are partnering with someone who you don't like, be curious and respectful of those differences. Instead of a source of frustration or confusion, they can be the fuel that helps you achieve shared success.

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