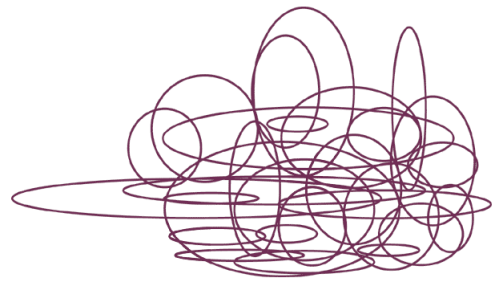


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Inger Draeby og Arne Vestergaard:

## When team building is the answer - what was the question?

*In this paper we will discuss team building from an irreverent position. We have observed the downright flood of manuals on team building being published, giving advice on practically every aspect of the issue, and we believe that a lot of the effort that is being put into team building is waste of time and money. We have observed in our own practice as well as from our colleague consultants that the practical results of team building too often do not fulfill the expectations.*

*We fear that a continued optimization of the "know-how", the methods, techniques, and games will not provide the help that is needed, but take us further away from creating the effective working units that are asked for. It is therefore our aim not to present another manual, but to shift the focus from know-how to know-why: to question the appropriateness of the concept of team building as a solution to such a wide variety of dysfunctionalities in organizations as it is used for.*

*Our position is that failures with team building are not so much related to poor choice of or inefficient techniques and methods, as it is related to our images, the way we **think** and **talk** about team building. Therefore we will investigate the thought forms and belief systems that hover behind the team talk and team events, hoping that this will enable us and other team leaders and consultants to do better work with teams, and to achieve results faster.*

*Team building: A conjuration by the 90's organization*

*We believe there is a real increase in the need for team work, as the complexity of today's business life demands that information is shared and multifunctional solutions are created. Team work understood as a means to combine resources in new ways in order to meet changing market and customer needs is, indeed, a must.*

However, what is most often happening is that teams are established within an unchanged organizational context: department structures, reward systems, and functional measurements that are often mutually contradictory are kept intact - and yet a cross-functional team is expected to create innovation.

A brilliant exception from this practice has been shown by Oticon, a Danish hearing-aid supplier. Realizing that innovation was a must, and that a team based project organization would be the best means hereto, all existing organizational structures, procedures, and policies were questioned. As a result, department boundaries were loosened, allowing people from any department to apply for membership on a project team and be rewarded according to the team's success; all privileged work places were removed in favour of a non-permanent work place system, so that people could move with their project team; company and individual targets were made accessible and comprehensible to any employee; and the entire internal and external communication was transferred into an online network in order to make information accessible, transparent, and no-space requiring. As pointed out by MD Lars Kolind: "It was not team work in itself that produced the change, it was the simultaneous change of 4 important organizational parameters."

Most often, however, teams and team building are being used purely instrumentally in line with traditional management tools, without defining the particularity of the team task and hence without questioning the contextual conditions. The result is the well-known "After Training Syndrome"

where everything goes back to normal within a few days.

The term "team" is now being applied to almost any organizational group construction - without changing neither context nor content. It looks as if changing the name is in itself expected to create a new reality without implying any real change effort. Complexity as the underlying threat is being excommunicated, and "team building" has obtained the aura of a universal remedy, a miracle medicine that in the hands of a skilled coach or facilitator can create simplicity in a complex world.

The word "team" is used like a conjuration: it is repeated over and over again as the answer to almost any kind of challenge or problem; it is being repeated so often that the question that lies behind is being shouted down. The notion of the DreamTeam becomes the seductive defense against facing an incalculable and sometimes threatening reality. As a result, we observe that in the 90's team talk has increased more than team work.

We are in line with David Casey when he asks: "Does this group need to be a team?" Like him, we want managers to be relieved from inappropriate obligations to team work, but we will explore the prevailing team talk further, in order to not just use teams where they are useful, but also to make them function.

### **Irreverence: There exists no such thing as a team**

The first assumption underlying the Team Talk, is that teams exist as an objective

category, that the word "team" has a direct reference to hard core reality. It has disappeared out of our daily minds that a concept like "team" is a social artefact, something human beings have constructed; that the word has different meanings, depending on the context where it is used, and on the people who use it. We tend to do the epistemological mistake of considering teams as a universal category, thus talking about teams as if there existed a right and unambiguous definition of the word.

The term "team" is originated in the world of sports, but even within this context "team" has very different connotations. Put together a soccer player and a rower and ask them to form a team, and they will most likely show very different degrees of tolerance towards individual initiative within the framework of the team, the soccer player having learned that good results build on a great deal of diversity, while the rower will focus on the need for submission to the team rhythm.

This example shows the dependence on the context or frame of reference when talking about teams. The term is interpreted according to personal, cultural and subcultural experiences and ideas. Therefore, using the term eventually infers more confusion than clarity, if the differing understandings are not negotiated and agreed upon. The discipline, the task at hand, the overall context must be taken into consideration. This is very often neglected when we enter the field carrying the Team Building Manual, stating that "Team means..."; "Good teams have the following characteristics..."; "Effective teams share...!"

### **Case:**

*A management team for a sales organization consisting of a general manager, some marketing managers and some sales managers were all convinced that they wanted better team work. What this meant, however, later turned out to be significantly different from category to category. The sales managers who were very customer oriented wanted the overall decision making to be based on customer needs and requirements, whereas the general manager wanted to utilize the group for implementing the centrally decided strategy .*

*Clearly, the team concept of the sales managers was rooted in their daily business together with their sales force, while the team concept of the general manager had its offspring in his membership of and commitment to the corporate management team. The resemblance to the above example is obvious: The sales managers acted like soccer players, and the general manager as a captain of a rowing team.*

*Each party could - and rightfully from his own point of view - blame the other for not being a team player, and this was exactly what happened. In this way, a metalevel of communication was established, namely that of being right or wrong in relation to a non-specified team concept, and the conflict thus came to appear on an ethical level, removed from the level of business and organizational strategies.*

What are the consequences of the Team Talk in this case? Clearly, a blame game is going on, with the purpose of winning a moral battle that will at least one's personal superiority over the other party. This game is played on basis of the belief - obviously shared, because it is not discussed - that a true or right definition of team work exists. What could and should have been handled as a conflict between different beliefs with regard to business and market opportunities - differences that could have been explained and negotiated - was handled as a team issue, whereby it was turned into a personal conflict. Through this, changes in the team's task and operational mode were made impossible - unless forced by the person in power (the general manager), which would in turn have created even more interpersonal tensions.

To make progress in such a situation, a coach or consultant can prompt the individual team members to reveal and exchange their preferences and prejudices concerning teams. Eventually, it can be useful to talk about what other team experiences the individuals have. Exchange of previous experiences, good as bad, will help the team realize the fact that "team" as a concept is a social artefact with different shapes and meanings. When "the truth" is graduated, its status as a construct comes forth, and a real discussion about what kind of team that is needed can take place. We have experienced that this discussion has made a significant difference in many team building sessions.

When the discussion has deconstructed the idea of team as a predefined category, the time is ripe for deconstructing another tacit

assumption about teams in organizations: that teams are basically good, that more team work is always better than less.

### **Irreverence: More team is not always better**

This irreverence builds on the previous as it addresses the observation that our habitual conversations about team building often include the tacit embedded assumption that "More is Better." Not only are teams believed to exist as such, they are also talked about as something purely positive (a belief that was also shared by the team members in the case above). As the word "team" is used in everyday requests to business consultants, it implies commitment, shared vision, direction, goals, and action. First of all, it implies consensus. It is presumed that diverse resources are being merged into a synthesis (team synergy) without substantial friction or conflict.

However, the Team Talk can become so noisy in the public room of an organization that it calls for the counterquestion: When teams are talked about, what is silenced? It is as if talking about teams and team building will by itself create the welloiled system, persuading the individuals to give up their divergent views and standpoints and join the common cause. The possibility of non-merging, of permanently differing opinions and conflict is what is tacitly perceived as the main threat against becoming the dream team. However, the difference between conviction and compliance will show in action. When Team Talk is used - consciously or not - as a protection against talking about conflicts, the after will be worse than the before.

**Case:**

*A manager of a sales group asked for help with team building under the headline of "Shared Vision". This was supported by the group consisting of salesrep`s and marketers. Everybody agreed openly that the group was very diverse when looking at the personalities present, and it held an outspoken - though not substantially specified - norm of mutual respect. Furthermore, it considered consensus decision making to be strongly desirable. Commitment to group decisions was a clear and agreed must - however, there seemed to always be disagreement with regard to which decisions had actually been made. Also, all group members required "better listening" among themselves - their pattern of interaction, however, was that of persuading.*

*In the eyes of the consultant the group seemed unable or not willing to handle the process of merging interests and viewpoints on the personal level: the consultant was explicitly asked to avoid issues that might lead to personal confrontation and the loss of face. The solution in the eyes of the group was to establish a shared vision - a team feeling - that would encompass and transform diversity into consensus. The "Team Vision" was seen as the magic key that would unlock all resources and resolve the lurking conflicts.*

*When the consultant respectfully (!?) decided to follow the request of the group and stay away from possible interpersonal problems, the group reiterated its patterns of interaction, just on a higher level of abstraction. Non-merging diversity exhibited itself*

*on the level of "vision" exactly as it had done when the group was dealing with more concrete matters.*

Because the assumption "More is Better" was not questioned, the team building efforts resulted in a cementation of existing structures, in less team work and more TeamTalk.

What was hidden by the Team Talk in this case was the resistance against facing the interpersonal conflicts that resulted from the dilemma between being an independent individual and being part of the team. It showed in a contradiction in the group's norm or belief system, that on the one hand claimed respect for the individual, on the other hand consensus decision making - without the group having a strategy for reconciling these two positions. When the consultant worked with the group on team building without confronting this contradiction, it had the effect that the beliefs held were strengthened, and the discrepancy between behaviour (avoiding conflict) and the official intentions (to become a team) increased.

The point we want to make with this case is that "more talk less team" is related to the idea of team building as a universal miracle medicine. In this team the dilemma between individuality/autonomy/self control as one set of values, and consensus/group control as another was repressed by the Team Talk. The exclusively positive connotation of team work silenced the talk about the price to be paid for becoming a team. The hope directed to the "team building" session by the team members prescribed a solution

that supported the same line of thinking as had created the problem in the first place. Namely the hope that by neglecting conflict, individuality and consensus can live harmoniously together. The term "team" is used to in one word express this hoped-for situation.

In this case, the function of the team talk as a suppressor of "personal problem talk" was evident from the very start. What the consultant could have done, was to negotiate the contract or commission instead of accepting the premise the group had set for the session, namely that interpersonal problems were not an issue to be dealt with. A negotiation of this kind would probably have revealed to the group how the conjuring TeamTalk was part of the group's overall cooperation and communication pattern.

What else can be done to help the group out of the blind alley? First, it must be avoided to add more TeamTalk on top of the existing conjurations "that we are a team". One way to do this is to investigate with the group the meaning, effects, and function of the declared teamness.

Another approach to this result is to discuss what is not talked about when the group is talking about the assets of team work. The excommunicated issues must be allowed to enter the dialogue: the relationships between separateness and togetherness, between closeness and distance, and between freedom and commonality. This discussion will open up for talking about and negotiating the personal costs and benefits connected to engaging in or disengaging from more team work, more sharing, more commitment, etc. Only with a clear

and mutually accepted understanding of the why's of teamwork, and of the scale of teamness required in the particular case, effective teamwork will result.

## **The double bind of Team Talk**

Before we further develop the practical implications for team leaders and consultants of our irreverences, we will explore the dilemma that lie behind the conjurative use of the team/ team building concept along with its taboo-like relation to autonomy and self control.

The dilemma we refer to when seen from the individual is a dilemma between being a loyal member of the team, and being an autonomous individual. It is an intrapersonal dilemma between freedom and belonging, that displays itself in the team context. In the person's inner dialogue the dilemma could express itself like this: "I am asked both to display my unique individuality as a means for creativity and synergy and to join the "team charter" and let my personal interests go. So, if I stay myself, I don't respect the demand for compliance, and if I comply, I don't respect the demand for genuine contributions." Or: "When I talk about team, I exclude myself - but how can I, who am excluded, be a team member?" This is a double bind that does not allow the person to move in any direction.

The same dilemma seen from the management position is a control dilemma. On the one hand, if strict control is enforced, it is at the risk of commitment and performance. On the other hand, without control the risk is believed to be conflict or chaos: "If everybody should have a say, we would never get

anything done". There is an old assumption popping up here, namely that there exists antagonism between company goals and individual goals, that individual goals will cross corporate goals, if they are allowed to voice themselves.

The result of this dilemma is often seen to be the emergence of a double discourse: An official discourse that takes place in the conference rooms, focussing on common goals, values, missions, etc., and an unofficial discourse going on at the coffeemachine in the breaks, where people confirm one another in divergent individual perspectives. Here the Team Talk becomes downright counter-productive: When managers in their effort to create consensus suppress the talk about autonomy and individuality, the result is resistance towards consensus, increase in the number of hidden individual agendas that coexist undialogued with overt company agendas, disempowering the quest for a common goal.

All organizations have a built-in tension between separateness /individuality/self control and togetherness/commonality/organizational control. This tension is not unresolvable, but it becomes a double bind if it cannot be talked about. The fear of exposing this dilemma that is at the root of any organization, is what we believe to be the background for the Team Talk. The Team Talk disguises the dilemma, whereby it functions as denial or wishful thinking. The popular idea of The Learning Organization is highly at risk to reproduce this denial.

When a manager talks about team and arranges for team building sessions, it is a

demonstration that (s)he is able to recognize a problem and take action. But when through this very action the need for autonomy and self control is silenced, the tension has not been resolved, only hidden and suppressed. On this basis, no real negotiation and contracting between the people involved can take place.

In such a context, team building sessions and consultancy are obviously not productive. They may be fun to participate in, if the consultant brings in new games and exercises, but in the long run they will be experienced as entertainment or - waste of time.

It is not our errand to claim that all team building sessions should be called off. The point is that the challenge with teams far from being of technical, know-how character is one of bringing back into the discourse what has been left out, first and foremost the know-why. In relation to the double bind situation, talking about autonomy, self control and identity is a prerequisite for successful team building. The conjurative Team Talk is not the main road to team development, it is a roadblock. In the following part we will suggest some practical approaches for managers and consultants who wish to act from this perspective when working with team

### **Construction takes deconstruction: Practical approaches**

An important step away from the misleading Team Talk is to leave the idea that teams are things, and to forward the idea that teams are the possible outcome of a negotiated working contract between autonomous

individuals. Instead of expecting team building to be a miracle tool eventually delivered by an expert, we suggest that it is considered as a practice of dialogue.

The practical implication, then, is to begin any talk about team work by deconstructing the dysfunctional beliefs and expectations that may exist, as we have exemplified in the cases. When this deconstruction has taken place, the negotiation around a joint construction of a relevant team concept can begin.

The questions listed below are a means hereto that can be used by team leaders and consultants. The questions are what we recommend as starting points, they should not be considered an extensive list. In our practice we have experienced good results by asking the questions to each member in front of the group.

### **Deconstruction 1: Teams are not things**

- What do you understand by the word “team”?
- If you overnight came to work as a team, what would be different?
- What team experiences do you have that you would like to repeat?
- What team experiences do you have that you hope never to experience again?
- With whom in this group do you agree most/least with regard to team work?
- Choose a picture or a metaphor that illustrates the kind of team work you hope will occur in this group.

With this kind of questioning it becomes obvious that a universal team notion does not exist, and that there are no right or

wrong ideas about how to work together in teams. This is what we term as deconstruction of the idea that “team” refers to a thing and is not perceived as a social construct. With this, the ground is prepared for the next deconstruction.

### **Deconstruction 2: Teams are not always good**

- What are the main benefits for you, for the group, and for the task, if you work more as a team?
- Who in this group would you believe to be most/least interested in team work?
- Who outside the group do you think is most/least interested in you working as a team?
- How little team work is enough?

The effect of these questions is that some of the most idealistic phantasies about the Dream Team is challenged and tested against other realities. When the group has left both ideas: that teams are things and teams are always good, it has made itself ready for a joint construction of the necessary team work that applies exactly to this group and this task.

### **Construction 1: Bring the excommunicated back into the dialogue**

- Which issues, problems, or dilemmas were you dealing with at the time when the team talk began?
- What would be the most urgent issues for this group if you suddenly stopped talking about team work?
- How is the team talk related to these issues?
- What level of autonomy do you think the members of the team need in order to

perform well?

- How should the balance be between individual power and team power?
- How will you secure the diversity that is necessary to produce creativity and synergy?

These questions focus on the function of the team talk and on the tension between the individual and the group level. While supporting the team in focussing on the hoped-for solution, they make the excommunicated issues re-enter the dialogue. In this way the basis for team contracting is significantly broadened.

## **Construction 2: Contracting**

- How would you explain the primary task of this team?
- Which elements of the task makes team work especially meaningful?
- Which elements are best handled through individual work? Why?
- How can you personally benefit from being a member of this team?
- What are your personal risks/losses by being a member of this team?
- How does team membership here fit with your other tasks and duties?
- How do you think you can contribute to the team work?
- Who outside the group would first notice the difference if you started to?
  - work more as a team?
  - What would they notice?
- Who would be most/least pleased?
- What kind of team work is each member desiring?
- What kind of autonomy is each member desiring?

All four groups of questions help the team to define exactly the kind and amount of team work that will ensure maximum commitment from the individuals, and maximal fit to the task at hand. There is no universal way of handling this negotiation, but in our experience there is a significantly higher probability for success - i.e. the creation of the proper sort and level of team work - when the process is initiated with these questions, than if they are ignored. In some cases, the idea of team working on the task at hand will die in the process. No harm done by that, but time and money saved. In any case, diving into the why's of team work represents enormous learning opportunities to organizations as well as to individuals.

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