

'Team Doctors, Report to ER!'

By Mark Fischetti

Is your team headed for Intensive Care? Our specialists offer prescriptions for the five illnesses that can afflict even the best teams

If teams are the cure, what's the disease? These days, teams are offered as the answer to whatever ails an organization, from lousy customer service to bloated bureaucracy to bugs in the network. But all too often, teams fail because of what ails them - an assortment of aches and pains, of maladies and malaise that sap performance and confidence, and eventually land even good teams in the intensive-care unit.

We've asked several of the nation's top team doctors to diagnose the five major illnesses that afflict even the best teams, and to prescribe a regimen that will revive a sick team and return it to good health. Each physician is a leading specialist in team diseases, and they all agree that the number-one cause of death among teams is this: The team should never have been formed in the first place! Jon Katzenbach - co-author, with Douglas K. Smith, of the seminal book *The Wisdom of Teams* and author of the new *Teams at the Top* - begins by asking us to consider a heretical question: Should your team even exist?

Collective Amnesia, noun: loss of memory, usually caused by brain-dead senior executives who authorize a team without questioning whether the project really needs one. Team members wonder, Why are we here?

You're on a team because some new-paradigm guru told the company's higher-ups that teams are hot. But this is the real world, and it turns out that your project should have been divided among individuals, with a single leader who has real clout riding shotgun. Too late, you discover that the team is superfluous.

Katzenbach, a director at the Dallas office of McKinsey & Co., has become the nation's best-known team doctor by helping scores of high-profile companies, such as Citicorp, General Electric, and Mobil Oil, to use teams wisely. Yet Katzenbach is a big believer in not forming teams. "Teams are neither efficient nor orderly groupings," he argues, "and teamwork is rarely the fastest way for a group with a capable leader to get where it's going - particularly if the leader has been there before."

The next time you're assigned to a team, use Katzenbach's diagnostic checklist to determine whether the team is better off dead.

Does the project really require collective work?

If the work can be divided among, say, eight people who do their parts and leave it to the leader to integrate those parts, then a team adds no real value. "Team performance is all about doing real work together," says Katzenbach. "And working collectively as a real team means having a small number of people with complementary skills who are

committed to a common purpose and to common performance goals, and who hold themselves mutually accountable."

Do team members lead various aspects of the project?

If the team leader makes all the critical decisions, you're not on a team - you're on a "single-leader unit." This non-team, says Katzenbach, "has a strong leader who knows the marketplace, who's disciplined about setting high performance standards, and who benefits from a well-designed system for assessing individual results. When these conditions exist, real team efforts are often unneeded."

Do people in the group hold one another accountable?

If people answer to the boss instead of to one another, it's not a real team. "A critical litmus test for a real team is whether there's mutual accountability," says Katzenbach. "It's best characterized by the phrase 'we hold each other accountable' - not 'the boss holds us accountable.' Mutual accountability reflects the higher degree of commitment that the members of a real team demonstrate."

Group Myopia, noun: a deficiency of clear, inspiring goals that leaves teammates confused and under committed, causing them to ask, What in the world are we trying to do?

It was an under-whelming goal that nearly sank a project at Texas Commerce Bank (now called Chase Bank of Texas). Top executives there charged several teams with the task of reducing overhead by \$50 million. Big mistake. "Teams aren't motivated by numbers - not even big numbers," says Katzenbach. "They're motivated by something to do with the marketplace, like beating a competitor." Sure enough, the teams made little headway. But instead of increasing the pressure to deliver on a boring project, the company's senior leadership asked the teams to design their own goal - which they did. Their revised objective: to bring employees closer to the customer. "This broadened the range of improvements that the teams could look for," Katzenbach explains. "Management gave them the green light, and they ended up saving nearly \$100 million."

What constitutes a "good" goal? One answer comes from a team at Sealed Air Corp., a manufacturer of packaging materials. The team landed an unglamorous but critical assignment: Shorten the average time needed to change machine settings by two hours. Katzenbach says this goal succeeds on five counts: It billboards measurable results. What could be more measurable than a two-hour reduction in changeover time?

It forces unflinching communication - and constructive conflict. Team members could focus discussions on mechanical changes - Will the changes really speed things up? - rather than on the work process.

It makes possible small wins along the way. The team was spurred to keep going when its early work reduced changeover time by a sizable amount. It challenges team members to make a difference in the marketplace. The team knew that less downtime meant more productivity - and an improvement in the company's bottom line.

It makes the team act like a team. No team member could single-handedly reduce changeover time. But the team could see that it would nail the goal if members worked collectively.

"When a small group of people is challenged in this way," Katzenbach says, "their titles, perks, and other identifying marks just fade into the background."

Leadership Phobia, noun: an exaggerated and usually illogical fear of assuming the leading role. The symptoms: Decisions aren't made. Problems pile up. The so-called leader impedes the team's work.

You're suffering under a leader who can't lead. You wonder whether the team would be better off on its own. Maybe, maybe not. According to Ruth Wageman's research, even "self-managing" teams will fail if they aren't set up correctly. Wageman, an associate professor of organizational behavior at the Columbia University Graduate School of Business, has studied self-managing teams at several major organizations. Such teams are fast: Since they take responsibility for their own work, decision-making is pushed to the front lines. But all too often, they're dysfunctional: People do their work independently, instead of solving problems and taking responsibility as a team. Wageman's interviews with 43 leaders and team members at Xerox convinced her that to succeed, self-managing teams need people who can fill three very different roles during three very different phases of a team's life. Such role-playing usually increases the chance that a team will succeed - since everyone on it ends up playing a lead role.

Team Designer "In many U.S. companies," says Wageman, "teamwork is an unnatural act." If a team is to be successful, the leader must use the critical launch phase to chart the team's course, to design its major tasks, to make clear its responsibilities, and to establish its reward system. "The most critical role of leadership," says Wageman, "is to get the team set up right."

Team Midwife If women can "coach," men can "midwife." Once the team is launched, the leader's primary role is to help the group establish its goals and its ways of working - to "midwife" the team's work processes. "Do this after the team fully engages the task - about when the team is midway toward a deadline," Wageman advises.

Team Coach Once the group starts performing, the coaching role takes over - and continues throughout the life of the team. Wageman believes that coaching is most effective when it is done sparingly. It should occur during natural "break points" in the action, such as at the beginning of a project and at interim deadlines.

Team leaders frequently tell Wageman that their top priority is to coach. That priority is misplaced. "If leaders haven't first attended to the design of the team," she says, "they'll be trying to coach members of a chaotic group."

Chronic Cantankerousness, noun: a condition characterized by frequently recurring quarrels that result from a team's inability to agree on the small stuff, such as when to hold the weekly meeting. Left untreated, this common condition can quickly escalate into all-out infighting.

A team should never underestimate the importance of agreeing on how to be a team. If it

does, people will waste time, perform poorly, and undermine one another, says Tom Ruddy, who's responsible for developing high-performance work systems for the 2,000 teams that make up Xerox's worldwide customer-service organization.

Trouble is, every team has at least one iconoclast. Ruddy developed a deck of 35 playing cards to deal with these rule-breakers. Each card lists a situation that the team is likely to confront. Team members agree on how they should respond in each case, and they write this "norm" on the card. Then they make a copy of the whole deck for everyone on the team. Xerox's service teams, for example, have a card noting that in meetings, everyone's opinion will be heard. If one team member cuts off another, the one who was speaking will "out" the rebel by playing that card. "After a while, team members internalize the proper behavior," Ruddy says. "That's when the team really starts to click."

Losing Life Support, verb, noun: being deprived of money, space, equipment, and information - everything essential to maintain the life and health of a team.

Senior leaders aren't looking out for the team? Can't get a budget that will make things happen? The symptoms are obvious. The diagnosis is in: The team is losing life support. And if intervention doesn't take place immediately, the prognosis is certain: death from wanton neglect. "Teams that start with great enthusiasm can quickly become disillusioned as they encounter frustration after frustration while trying to get the support they need," says Richard Hackman, a professor of psychology at Harvard University and editor of *Groups That Work: And Those That Don't* (Jossey-Bass, 1990).

A good tactic for reviving a team's life-support system is to recruit a sponsor who can make things happen - someone who, for example, can go to HR and shake loose the staffing that the team needs.

One man who knows how to leverage a team's sponsor is Joe Bonito. A consultant and team leader at Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, Bonito teaches teams there how to work together. He tells people that when they need someone to look out for their team, they should first look to their own bosses.

"Get one of them excited," says Bonito. "If you can show the boss that your team is doing something unique, something that will create a competitive advantage, the boss will want to become the de facto sponsor."

Bonito says there's an art to getting a senior leader hooked on a team's project. He once found himself on a team organized by a senior vice president of marketing. Its mission: Within six months, recommend a redesign of the company's market-research and information-technology functions - without disrupting service to clients.

"Every two or three weeks, we brought the vice president our latest blueprint and asked him to review it," Bonito recalls. "That got him to buy into our team. His thinking evolved along with ours. He felt like a co-designer." A lack of company support is one disease that teams rarely cure on their own. But teams aren't helpless. "Teams tend to make do with what they have," Hackman says. "But if the person who formed the team wants it to succeed, he should be willing to hear a case for more support."

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