

Team Building in Tough Times

“Concepts precede practice” is an oft-used quote in the fields of science and management. The first known use of the word ‘VUCA’ was made somewhere in the 1950s by the Army War College in USA, during the post-Cold War period, and the word “Artificial Intelligence” was first recorded in 1956 when a group of academic researchers were working on the ideas of Native Intelligence and artificial systems. James Champy and Michael Hammer, in their book titled “Reengineering the Corporation” called for massive process re-engineering of all aspects of business. However, today, many years after the emergence of these ideas, we are witnessing the changes predicted by these concepts, for which we were and still are, at best, half-prepared. Even if we assume that we were prepared for changes, none could have predicted the rapidity of the disruptive changes that we are grappling with today. That’s the impact of the VUCA elements.

Technological breakthroughs, globalization, and innovative business models have altered the shape of many organized activities and compelling all to scale up to survive or vanish.

Corporations of all sizes are going through a virtual “blitzkrieg” and their survival rests on their ability to adapt, change, and again change in line with the changing external environment. Among the many things, the maximum impact of the VUCA blitzkrieg has been on the human resources function, which is both an object and subject of change.

Impact on Work Design principles

A business strategy links a firm’s internal environment to the external environment. Organizations are expected to align their internal capabilities (that consists of resources and capabilities, structures, and systems and goals/mission/vision/values) to the external changes and maintain this equilibrium to differentiate in the marketplace. The faster one does this, the greater are the chances of survival and growth. Alfred Chandler, a professor of business history at Harvard states that “Structure follows strategy”, which implies that as and when the organization’s strategy changes, it needs to relook at the ways in which resources of all sorts are allocated, grouped, tasked, and measured.



This is where the impact of sweeping changes in the external environment forces the organizations to change their strategies, which in turn has serious impact on the team roles, capabilities, and competencies and posed a huge challenge of realignment. Think of the impact of the recent decision by Toyota and Suzuki to sell each other’s cars from their own showrooms. Who could have visualized that the two direct competitors could even think on these lines a few years back, and the impact it could have on their workforces in terms of knowledge, roles, structure, capabilities, and training etc.

Impact on Organizations

It's common knowledge that in organizations, work gets done by the means of Organizational Structures that provide clarity on what needs to be done, who shall do it, how the coordination will take place, who will call the shots, and defines the boundaries between teams. The collective impact of the team's performance is as important as the competency of an individual member. Hence building, developing, and sustaining a cohesive, motivated team directly contributes to the bottom-line of the organization; and is also a serious leadership task that ensures a disruption-free flow of the affairs of the team and organization.

This article explores the challenges of building a performing team under these trying VUCA conditions and what could a leader do to bind the team together, navigate it through the choppy waters, and achieve the team goals successfully. As we start, let us clarify a few terminologies.

The terms – 'Team' & 'Building'

While a Google search can pour tons of definitions on a single click, my experiences of success and failures as a team member and as a team leader allow me to define a team as, "A group of people with diverse backgrounds, needs, and interests coming together to work for a common goal, or cause or for an outcome; they tend to draw from each other's strengths unconditionally and hold each other accountable for achieving the goals; highly effective teams display mutual respect, trust and affinity amongst themselves and present a confident and cohesive social image to others."

The word "building" itself fetches a dose of warmth and affinity to the context of building a team. We usually build something to sustain, grow, and progress. Else we could have used the terms such as "Team Construction", "Team Assembling" etc. Thus, it's just not only about assembling disparate individuals to do a task but also about building a team with required social-skills and to provide them with a solid platform of social context. This base-line, when established, fosters trust, fairness, and equity and inspires team behaviors. This ambience also establishes a free and fearless flow of communication pattern within a team.



Building great teams

- Know their strengths

With the massive ingress of millennials in the workplace, quite a few of the stonewalled processes and holy grails need to be rewritten. Cisco's doing away with the ubiquitous Bell Curve approach to review performance has been forced by the demands of the younger generation of employees they hired, as per the confession of John T Chambers.

Perhaps, the next Holy Grail that may come under attack may be the idea of the role-based organizational structure that has served us all well so far. One way of engaging the millennials is to allow them to flourish in roles based on their strengths and passions than by assigning roles basis their qualification and experience.

Under changing conditions, it is important for the team leaders to know the strengths, passions, aspirations, and shortcomings of each of the team members. Armed with these insights, team leaders will be able to clearly align roles to the person who has clear strengths and can avoid mismatches right from early days. Unfortunately, often times, the leaders getting to know his/her team members just stops at the interview panel discussion and many times I have seen conflicts between the team members and leaders arising out of this failure on the part of the leaders.

A leader's genuine interest in each of his team members secures a great amount of trust, respect, and inclusion. The mere process of a leader spending that much time to know them well can be enabling; however, to get to this level, the leader has to gain the trust of the team members but this can be challenging. In times of crisis, it's the leader's personal character that ties the team together, more than the professional acumen.

- Clarity of role and task

Meaningful jobs by themselves enhance the level of job satisfaction even though a few other factors may dampen the spirit of a worker. Meaningfulness can be derived straight from the job one does (task identity) and can be highlighted to the employee by the leader. If within a team, there exists absolute clarity on each other's roles, it is more likely that the team performs in absolute sync. The less of this is likely to breed doubt, distrust and ambiguity in the role holder's mind. An astute leader will use both the means to continuously highlight the meaningfulness of what one does. However, if we take a contrarian view, then we will also need to come to grips with the idea that an able employee might want to lay hands on multiple assignments as opposed to the straight jacket KRA-driven goal sheet. With the technology enabling knowledge sharing and access to information so simple, this situation will emerge sooner than later and under such multi-strength-based structures, the leader's in-depth knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the team members will be pivotal in terms of resource deployment and utilization. When handled well, we can see that all are winners in the new world.

- Manage both individually and collectively

This sounds a bit paradoxical. Yes, every single team member brings their own idiosyncrasies to work and hence, the leaders have to recognize this to invoke the best response from them individually and collectively. The attempt to know team members well provides the platform to building strong personal bonding and on the back of this strength, the leader can steer the meeting of the teams effectively. Once, I was in a tricky situation where I had to nominate one of two people for a prestigious project hosted by the organization. After engaging with them individually and after expressing the dilemma I was in, one of them opted to wait in the interest of the other without any disappointment or anger. This was possible as they were able to see the decision-making dilemma I was faced with and they wanted to help the leader by displaying a great team behavior. Maybe we could learn a lot from the way the highly prized Football teams such as RM, BFC, are managed and nurtured by their coaches and owners.

- Be consistent and predictable

Change disturbs a few to some extent and the most by greater extent. Team members observe what the leader does more than what the leaders says. In a way, they seek to note as to whether their interests are attended in an equitable way compared to the other team members. Understanding the play of this perceived sense of quality in treatment is important for the leaders to build harmony in their teams. For e.g., if a leader chooses to appreciate someone in person and the other through an email to relevant many, perhaps he is doing something wrong unless clear norms of appreciation as a process are established in the team. Thus, consistency and predictability of leadership behavior enhances team harmony and trust.

- Encourage healthy conflict

Encouraging diverse views, moving away from one's own entrenched position, and listening with genuine intent goes a long way in promoting team cohesion. Leaders need to ensure that the "issues" get discussed, not the person or the intent. Conflicts are bound to occur in all groups and teams, but if well-handled, they can become the source of best of decisions. Most leaders tend to think that conflicts kill team cohesion and harmony. Not all times. A leader's competency to remain objective throughout the conflict situation and take decisions in the best interest of the organization is important.



- Be perceptive and observant

Since we deal with human beings, there are bound to be times of anxiety and stress that can be experienced by the teams or its members individually. In teams where a good level of open communication exists, such breakdowns help the leaders to reflect. However, there are times when leaders have to be perceptive to pick up signals especially whenever a new member gets added to the team or a member leaves the system, since in many ways it will open up the classical 5 steps of Bruce Tuchman's Forming, Storming, Norming process. I had the habit of spending good amount of time with the new joiners in my team for about 5 to 6 weeks to set the ground rules correct and also do a limited hand-holding. Least did I realize that this created a perception among the other team members that their primacy and face time with me will get lesser and lesser. Once I got a hang of this sentiment, I clarified my approach towards handholding a new member at a suitable moment.

- Don't lose focus on your core obligation

A leader has to deliver value to multiple stakeholders and one among many such stakeholders is the immediate team. Effective team delivery is the basis of existence of every team member's role in the organization including that of the leader. From this perspective, a leader has to make each member accountable for outcomes and also provide suitable empowerment and support to the member to perform his/her role. Setting high standards of performance, clearly defined goals and measures, ongoing performance reviews and feedback etc. are absolutely important to drive team cohesion, effectiveness, and impact. At no point in time should the compulsion to behave nice within the team

deflect the team's ruthless focus on high-quality outputs. True leaders don't flinch from sharing the 'not so great news' upfront with the team members. Only then they shall be seen as objective, fair, upfront, and transparent. If handled poorly, it can leave deep scars on the psyche of the team and decay may set in.

No doubt that leaders who show maturity in their dealings with a fair balance of logic and empathy can leave lasting impressions on individuals and teams. It is also true that most of the times, the gut and instinct of a leader guides the final call or action. Like I said in the beginning "concepts precede practice" in the space of teams, team building, team roles, and group dynamics. The fundamental belief is that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts".

Especially in the area of team building, much of a leader's social and interpersonal skills are put to test and from this perspective, hiring a person from the team role fit or team culture fit can enable the formation of a high performing team. Team building in tough times

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