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ORGANIZATIONS & PEOPLE

Great teams build great cultures

People committed to common purposes and goals can change key elements of a company's culture when they set strong ground rules that allow people to feel confident.

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Harvard Business School Press, 1993) and *Leading Outside the Lines: How to Mobilize the (In) Formal Organization, Energize Your Team, and Get Better Results* (with Zia Khan; Jossey-Bass, 2010).

People sometimes tell me that [*The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*](#) (Harvard Business School Press, 1993) helped them understand the difference between great team experiences and terrible team experiences. These readers recognized the value of what my coauthor, Doug Smith, and I called a “real team” — a team composed of people committed to common purposes, goals, and working approaches accepting of the diversity in others' skills and perspectives. In real teams, members hold themselves and their teammates mutually accountable, because of their emotional commitment to the work and to one another. That's how they get things done rapidly and effectively.

But all too often, these teams act as stand-alone entities within a larger, more indifferent culture, where people feel little or no connection to one another and to the work. This invariably limits the effectiveness of the teams. Indeed, it helps explain [a research finding](#) by Stanford University professor Behnam Tabrizi that 75 percent of cross-functional teams are dysfunctional. They lack clarity about their goals and accountability. They struggle more than teams that exist within a particular business or function, and there's a reason for that: Because they are broad-based, it's far more difficult for them to develop the personal respect that leads team members to care about their work together.

Many of us know the combination of despair, frustration, and amusement that people can feel as a result of being isolated from a culture, while at the same time being part of a great team. This bittersweet feeling is captured, for instance, in some classic modern novels. I'm thinking of books such as *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey. In these

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novels, protagonists create their own groups of disenfranchised people, within a larger culture that tries to shut them down. They are, in effect, real teams. They are emotionally energized and wholly committed to a goal, but their goal is typically mere survival as the disaffected individuals face off against the larger organization. These types of books often end semi-tragically; the team dissolves, its members scatter, and the larger organizational culture doesn't change.

But could something more productive happen in a real-life organization? Can a large company gain the emotional commitment of its employees through their experience of working in real teams? I believe the answer is yes. But to build the right kind of atmosphere, teams can't just assume that the spark of mutual good feeling will be there when they need it. They need to cultivate it in the organization at large. Rather than adopting a passive-aggressive attitude to oppose the company, as the flyers of *Catch-22* did, or fighting against it, as the hospitalized residents of *Cuckoo's Nest* did, they need to see their team's activity as a source of emotional energy for the company as a whole.

A recent *New York Times* [article](#) by Charles Duhigg captured one of the qualities that can help a team foster a better culture around it. The article recounted research, conducted by Google and others, on the distinguishing capabilities of teams. Researchers found one fundamental indicator of well-functioning teams: Their members were in sync with one another through a few behavioral team norms. These norms were unwritten rules that determined, for example, how to conduct meetings. ("Do we take turns speaking, or jump in when we have an important idea?") In our work on *Wisdom of Teams*, we called this a commitment

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to the specifics of their “working approach.”

The specific norms didn't matter. But it mattered that there were a few strong ground rules, which allowed people to feel confident with one another. In other words, the researchers found a good team was a “safe space” (as [Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson](#) has shown), where any team member could express an idea freely and without recrimination. Team members could take chances, which enabled them to capitalize on opportunities quickly, innovatively, and with great determination. In dysfunctional teams, on the other hand, members did not accept others' ideas; people were afraid of taking risks, of speaking openly, and of offering up those fast insights that might not be based in logic but that are often valuable.

It turned out that the purely functional aspects of a team's performance — the members' professional backgrounds, experience, drive, or intelligence, for example — were not as relevant to success as this safe-space facility. Moreover, once these teams were operating smoothly, they contributed more effectively to the larger culture of the company.

In short, when the emotional energy of a team is reinforced through a few clear practices, the team continues to develop its mastery and mutual commitment. Teams of this sort build and sustain sources of emotional energy that ripple out into the culture of the company around them. Other teams can then draw on that emotional energy, and the culture itself grows more adept, energized, and purposeful.

My upcoming book, *The Critical Few*, details an approach of an effective,

tested methodology for aligning a team's emotions and habits with those of the larger organization in this way. Companies can accomplish alignment by focusing on a critical few behaviors that spread across groups, once they are recognized. These can be individual behaviors — for example, a gracious way of responding to business callers — but they are most effective when they become team behaviors that lead to positive business results. Leaders may, for example, always open a meeting by “checking in” — to make sure everyone at the meeting says something about how they are feeling. Or the members may set a norm where problems are raised in team meetings, even if there is not an obvious solution (a countercultural norm in many companies). Teams that find the right kinds of practices and reinforce them, time and again, by insisting on following them, have greater influence and creativity. Simply put, team members hold one another accountable for adhering to these behaviors. Moreover, teams like this can become role models for other work groups.

Your company undoubtedly has some of those practices in place among its most effective teams. When you find those specifics and talk about them, and begin to practice them more explicitly, you provide positive reinforcement to the best aspects of your culture. Within a few months, these practices accelerate, influencing others in the company. That's how you build specific traits into a culture that nurtures its top-performing teams, furthering the emotional energy of both the teams themselves and the broader organization. +

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