

BACK CHAT



Photo: L. Devenish

Achieving more as a team than the sum of the parts

Most of us work in teams, even if they are virtual, and many of us enjoy this fact. We can find them both energizing and supportive. We can draw on the expertise of others in an informal fashion and share ideas. Best of all, more can be achieved as a team than could ever be accomplished as a mere sum of the individual parts. However, teams do not just arrive. They require effort, on the part of not only the leader but the individual members too.

What has prompted me to think about the functioning of teams is reading *The Team Formula* (ISBN 978-1-78092-347-5). Written by Mandy Flint and Elisabet Vinberg Hearn, in 231 pages they tell the story of a particular – fictional – team, a result of the merger between two insurance companies, and it is, indeed, written as a story. This is therefore not your average business book. Telling it as a tale is a clever way of drawing the reader in; in fact, it is perfect flight fodder. A Europe-based reader can have the whole thing read and assimilated before reaching the other side of the Atlantic, with time to spare. However, it will probably be the reflections later that will be of greatest value. I was interested from the first page (page 8) and by page 48 I had no choice but to keep going. I had become seriously involved with the team and its members and wanted their endeavours to succeed.

The book is written with large organizations especially in mind. However, this does not mean that almost anyone working in a team could not benefit from some of the insights that are not just shared *with* the reader but shared *by* the reader because the experience described works on more than a purely intellectual level – you are going through it all with the team.

By revealing the thoughts and feelings of the team leader through making us privy to his journal, as well as showing us his external behaviour in meetings, we understand the complexities of his situation. The other team members, while not receiving the same treatment, are drawn vividly enough that not one is an obvious stereotype, despite the reader's ability to recognize such characters from real life, which paradoxically provides extra authenticity.

In choosing a post-merger context for the new team, Flint and Hearn highlight a scenario with endless possibilities for conflict. To harness the power of conflict and tension, it is necessary to find resolutions rather than just sweeping such difficulties under the carpet. The idea of the leader learning how to let other team members help him resolve seemingly intractable problems by empowering the rest of the team (without losing his own authority) is explored. More than the inevitable conflict (which, when handled right, need not be an impediment to success), downright dishonesty on the part of one team member has to be confronted. I shall not give the game away by saying any more.

Far from encouraging the reader to point a finger, the story invites him/her to reflect on his/her own behaviour in the context of operating in a team and acts as a prompt to asking various questions:

- What choices am I making?
- How does this apply to me and my team?
- What am I doing to make this team work?

Flint and Hearn are candid about the fact that many teams work by the leader letting everyone get on with their jobs individually, with very little team interaction or guidance. However, being a proactive leader, providing the team with structure and culture alongside direction, in order to make it great, is what interests them. The latter requires work upfront. The authors point out that leaders rarely feel they can spend the time on such matters, particularly when going through a change process, but they argue convincingly that this is an investment worth making.

The Team Formula can only work by following one team's experience in detail – that is the story. However, Flint and Hearn provide a summary and key learning points at the end of the book and stress that, just like individuals, teams are unique. It is the collective intelligence, experience, ideas and drive of the whole team that counts.

We see great examples of loyalty and hope in how this particular fictional team works even in the darkest days and how these qualities can be built on. The book provides a credible approach to persuading a team to work together, even when the odds are stacked against you.

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