

Leading teams in troubled times

Mandy Flint and Elisabet Vinberg Hearn are experts in developing and leading teams in business and co-authors of *The Team Formula*. They share their expertise on what it takes to lead and maintain a healthy team in turbulent times

Why did you both become so interested in team leadership?

We are simply passionate about creating better relationships at work. People spend so much of their time at work and it's worth working on the relationships we have there. Imagine what it would be like if everyone did! Both of us have many years' experience of leading teams ourselves, so part of our interest is certainly driven from an interest in overcoming the challenges we've encountered when leading teams. In addition to that, we have come in contact with many teams over the years where it's been very obvious that people would not enjoy their work much and the organisation would not be as successful as it could be, unless people worked better together.

Conflict at work (both spoken and unspoken) can be a major source of workplace stress and often occurs in teams. What have you learnt from the most challenging team environments you've worked in?

Oh, so much! One example was a team where everyone only worked for themselves, carefully guarding their knowledge from everyone else, suspiciously viewing each other, even sabotaging others by knowingly withholding crucial information and only focusing on their own career progression. And it backfired of course, when the team was bypassed for a major project as the organisation's perception of them wasn't good and the CEO didn't trust them. There is no room for 'going it alone' in teams – unless everyone works together, the team will lose out in every way, individually and collectively.

You have both been working in this field for over 15 years. What needs to be understood about what constitutes a successful team?

A successful team cannot be led by the leader alone, it needs to have a shared ownership across the team, with everyone taking full responsibility for the results of the team. This means the leader needs to be willing to invite his/her team members in, and involve them in decisions and actions. For various reasons, some leaders find that very hard to do – sometimes for prestige reasons, sometimes because they don't think their team members are ready to take that responsibility. A successful team is one where team members trust each other 100 per cent, where they know and understand each other and themselves, and generously share their skills, knowledge and experience for the good of the whole team. Successful teams are more about how they do things together rather than what they do, and to achieve lasting success, an organisation needs to invest time in creating that kind of team culture up front. And that investment pays off very quickly.

You could say that a great team is like the Three Musketeers – all for one and one for all. Just having good individual contributors is not enough, because no one can know everything and when people come together and take joint ownership and offer their expertise, you create cross-pollination of ideas, and achieve better results.

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Mandy Flint is an international expert on leading and developing teams. She is the CEO of Excellence in Leadership, a global transformational change organisation. She has over 20 years of leadership experience in the corporate world.

Your approach is rooted in good communication and self-awareness, focusing on the feelings and emotions of the leader. How have you managed to get this message across in the still largely male-dominated world of business (which may want to deny thoughts and feelings and prioritise actions)?

We have found that we can bring in emotions and feelings with leaders and teams in a 'safe' way. Many are afraid of them and want to run away from any mention of feelings, so we talk about these emotions in a practical business-linked manner to ensure we keep them engaged. We introduce the concept of emotions by talking about the effect and impact on us personally, how they affect our behaviours and therefore the impact this has on others. Once that penny has dropped, we make the connection to their audiences/customers and ultimately to the bottom line.

There could for example be a leader who is feeling angry or frustrated with a person in the team, being very short with them or snapping at that person. The person will then feel unappreciated and will not go that extra mile to help and support the leader and that can affect their dealings with customers, which obviously affects the bottom line. Once they see these links, changes happen.

Do you notice differences in how men and women respond to your message about being emotionally aware and showing vulnerability as a leader?

Gender has an effect on how leaders respond and women can seem more aware than men of their emotions. But we have also worked with women who are more afraid of their feelings than men! This can come down more to their personality and the experiences they have had, than merely their gender. Behaviour breeds behaviour, and once we have worked with them on showing vulnerability and they have experienced how it feels and the result is good, whether male or female, they will continue to do it.

What are the particular challenges that you see leaders facing in the current climate?

Leaders may be tempted to cut corners to save costs, by getting their employees more focused on 'just doing their job', doing more and taking on more tasks, rather than investing in people's development and getting people to

work well together. This can become a very costly affair, as people get disengaged, intellectual capacity is lost through disengagement, and even turnover can be affected. People worry, organisations worry – this needs to be actively addressed, concerns need to be talked about openly and then proactively resolved, and solutions found. The need to be innovative is greater than ever; leaders need to encourage their teams to be creative in coming up with ways of dealing with the recession.

Are you observing any kind of pattern in terms of the most common problems that teams are experiencing?

Yes, as just mentioned, leaders and teams get more and more on their plate and end up just being busy, busy, busy. To combat this, the leader can encourage discussion around new solutions on how to improve, make things better, more efficient, challenging old processes and habits.

Additionally, the financial climate makes people internally focused, as they go into survival mode, and think about how they will be impacted personally. This is very natural, but unless understood and carefully managed, it can easily turn into an 'everyone for themselves' mentality. A leader can help their team members see that they need to be open to change and help them find ways to manage and even thrive as a result of that change. But that's a whole other subject that we may not have time for here...

Fear and insecurity in the workplace are not ingredients for a positive working environment. Have you thoughts on how leaders and teams might work best in this climate?

Communicate. Create opportunities for the team members to stay in touch with each other regularly, to discuss what they are working on, any concerns people have and how to move forward. One way of doing this can be through daily or weekly huddles, and quick get-togethers where everyone is aligned on challenges, progress and actions – and can share how they each feel. One of the main reasons that people hold on to bad feelings is because they haven't had a chance to share them – once they are out, they diminish in power and they can be dealt with. Regular huddles are equally relevant for geographically dispersed teams, where a brief conference call can serve the same purpose.



Elisabet Vinberg Hearn has extensive experience from the business world, having held various leadership positions, where she was responsible for customer servicing, process re-engineering and corporate culture transformation. She runs her own business and works with organisations all over the world.

The leader needs to carefully balance divulgence of their own concerns in an open and honest way, with a realistic and optimistic solution focus, creating a sense of 'this is an opportunity and we can do it together' in people, rather than a 'this is a threat!' feeling.

Can you recommend three things that might contribute to improving team health for the leader and team members?

Leaders need to:

- Assume positive intent
- Be 100 per cent present and listen with an open mind
- Recognise and utilise each person's unique strengths and contributions.

Team members need to:

- Assume positive intent
- Focus on solutions rather than problems and not play the blame game.
- Avoid multi-tasking, and be 100 per cent present in all parts of their life (including work!).

In a recession, training budgets are often cut, so organisations may not have the resources for staff development. Can you recommend a shortcut?

Simply spending time getting to know each other is even better. It doesn't have to cost a lot, just spend time together outside of work talking about life, personal things, family, and getting to know each other beyond the person at the office. Ask each other for some open and honest feedback and you will learn so much. Start safely and then build trust and do it more. It is invaluable. Take time out as a team and spend time talking about how you work together not what you do. That is the key!

Your new book *The Team Formula* depicts a maze on the front cover. Can you explain your thinking about this?

Working in a team is rarely straightforward and simple. Many times it's more like going through a garden maze – there are blind alleys, dead ends, you keep looking for a different path and it can be confusing. It can also feel wonderful when you get good results and find the right path. In a team, you can find your way through the metaphorical maze much more easily if you all work together, just like Stephen and the others realised in the book!

If you want to know more about this approach and would like to review a copy of *The Team Formula: a leadership tale of a team who found their way*, for *Counselling at Work*, do get in touch: counsellingatwork.editorial@bacp.co.uk

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