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Launching and leading intense teams

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Abstract   Collaborative work environments and team-based structures are commonly used across different types of organizations. Leaders increasingly need models for leading in complex intense teaming situations. To understand the team leader's role, it is important to appreciate and know the dynamics of teamwork, including how teams develop over time and the teaming elements that are important for success. By understanding the stages of team development and the dynamics occurring within a team setting, leaders can focus initiatives that are directed at certain critical moments for the team and build positive team dynamics. Team leaders should leverage the natural timelines that are part of running a project to effectively manage team dynamics to achieve high performance. Two crucial moments for the team leader are building and launching the team for a new project initiative. Following the project launch, teams start to collaborate and begin the performing and evaluating cycle toward goal accomplishment. In this article, we discuss our work with team leaders across industries to define and describe the role of a team leader, report on research focused on team dynamics and development, identify initiatives for team leaders to significantly improve the performance of intense teams, and specify strategies team leaders can use to turn around underperforming teams. We offer a new model for understanding the stages of team development and build this model to integrate important leadership tasks at each stage.
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1. The importance of team leaders

Consider the following: *Team members are hijacking team meetings and convincing others to deviate from the original goals. The team leader lacks* the skills to recognize these dynamics. Furthermore, the leader struggles with determining a turnaround approach and leadership model to effectively regain control of this intense team and refocus the members to achieve the original goals and objectives. Deadlines are slipping, customers are dissatisfied, and the leadership approach is ineffective.

Collaborative work environments and team-based structures are commonly used across different types

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of organizations. Leaders increasingly need models for launching and leading teams that engage in intense collaboration. However, only 15% of emerging leadership research provides guidance to leaders regarding the essential steps for improving the performance of teams (Dinh et al., 2014). Furthermore, leadership theories and models often focus on either a leader-centric approach or a member-centric approach with minimal consideration of the simultaneous impact of both the leader and members (Sauer, 2011). Because of this, it is timely to provide a comprehensive model for team leaders that considers both leader and member approaches simultaneously with specific initiatives for building and improving the effectiveness of intense teams. Intense teams are defined by qualities such as high stakes deliverables, challenging deadlines, and potentially fluctuating project requirements. In addition, intense teams are staffed with skilled knowledge workers and operate in a highly competitive environment. These types of teams often evoke strong opinions, high levels of emotions, and extreme commitment.

In this article, we discuss our work with team leaders responsible for the performance of intense collaborative teams of knowledge workers across industries. The four key objectives of this article include:

- Describing the role of a team leader;

- Reporting on research focused on team dynamics and development;

- Identifying initiatives for team leaders to significantly improve team performance; and

- Specifying strategies team leaders can use to turn around underperforming teams.

The team leader is an individual typically in the middle management layer of an organization with specific responsibility for the outcomes of a team or multiple teams of employees. Team leaders may have a consistent team of employees that work collaboratively to accomplish a variety of projects or they may need to build a team based on the demands of the project. In either setting, team leaders function similar to traditional middle managers; however, their roles are significantly more complex due to the dynamics that occur within a team environment. To understand the team leader's role, it is important to appreciate and know the dynamics of teamwork, including how teams develop over time and the teaming elements that are important for success.

1.1. Team development

For almost 50 years, our knowledge regarding the developmental process of teams has been primarily based on the research analyzing teams not involved in real work environments (Tuckman, 1965). Surprisingly, we continue to rely on this limited body of evidence that states that teams go through five stages of development: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. These stages of team development assume that teams are formed with members that have not worked together before, have unlimited time to work together, and do not have a formal leader. These assumptions are often not true for most teams inside collaborative organizations. Instead, we have found through working with dozens of team members and leaders that intense teams typically have members that have some prior work experience together, work under challenging project deadlines, and have a specific leader.

These teams do not follow a traditional linear team development model. Often performance issues require teams to evaluate and refocus work efforts (Gersick, 1988). Our work with team leaders across a variety of industries has uncovered a dynamic team development process. In fact, team leaders discussed how intense teams can often cycle multiple times between performing and evaluating as a dynamic process to achieve the long-term project goals. This dynamic developmental process is typical for teams with team leaders, a team project plan, intense collaboration, and clear team objectives.

Opportunities for effective team leaders to impact the success of the team are often bound to understanding the team stages of development. Knowing and leveraging the team development phases is critical for team leaders and consistent with the simultaneous leader-member analysis approach. Richard Hackman (2002) argued that team leaders have a significant impact at the start, midpoint, and end of the life of the team. Expanding this research to understand the dynamics of organizational teams, we propose a dynamic team development model. In this model, teams begin at the building stage when the leader learns about the project—before the members are asked to join the team or get briefed about the project. The second phase is the launching stage, when team members are briefed on the tasks and objectives. Third is the collaborating stage, when team members begin determining how to accomplish the team objectives. Next, the team begins performing and working toward accomplishing key milestones. Along this path, evaluation opportunities are built