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TEAMS versus COMMUNITIES

Is a high performance team really the pinnacle of success?

Since the start of the 90's the great ideal for managers, seems to have been the creation of high performance teams. Yet, at the same time, creating successful teams is far easier said than done. We can all picture the image in our heads, as we visualise a scene from the TV series *The Office*, with a slightly dysfunctional, largely dispassionate, but generally amicable group of people. Being faced with a team like this, is enough to drive any sane manager barking mad, and this is what has led to the popularity of team building exercises, events and workshops. All with the one burning aim of taking a counterproductive team of people and transforming them into a 'Super Team'.

Most companies find the right employee investments, highly beneficial and the resulting performance improvements beneficial to both the business and the staff. Indeed such investments continue to be made; for many businesses the creation of a high performance team may be adequate, but the big question is whether 'adequate is 'enough' to ensure your companies survival in the future?'

Do you need to go further and raise your sights, from the creation of a high performance team, to the creation of a sustainable, high performing community?

Anyone who has researched the formation of teams knows the danger that once built, they can be very fragile. If one team member leaves, the dynamic changes and the building process must start once again.

For a business that requires sustaining a high level of performance over an extended period of time, this is a problem! Equally, by their very nature teams have a restricted limit in terms of membership, which means that organisations have to be constructed from several different teams.

This construction comes with its own problems. The obvious one is the possibility for teams to create internal barriers and rivalries that result in a loss of alignment and focus. The benefit of course is that whilst some teams are going through a development or redevelopment phase, others are at the peak of their success, thus the organisation's performance is still relatively high. Although, perhaps just one or two levels below what would be feasible in an 'ideal' world.

Which takes us back to the main question, is 'adequate' acceptable? Can you beat your competition whilst performing one or two levels below peak performance? Will your stakeholders accept that you are not delivering the maximum possible return on their investment?

So what are the subtle differences between sustainable high performing communities and high performance teams?

The inspiration for answering this question comes from time spent with the Maasai in both Kenya and Tanzania and discussions with people from indigenous communities. In essence a team for whom the consequence of poor performance is not a poor result one year and the cancellation of a management conference or bonus scheme, but the difference between life and death.

The consistent foundations of a sustainable community are Respect, Courage, Humility, Contribution and Pride. These are not 'values' as they might be described in an organisational sense, but the basic human qualities that are developed, coached and

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encouraged in each and every member of the community in order to ensure sustainability.

Before looking at some of the subtle but important differences between Teams and Communities, let us explore how these five qualities link together into a powerful amalgam that we call a 'warrior culture'.

Respect is a multi-faceted quality. It starts with self-respect because people who do not respect themselves, find it hard to respect other people, processes and traditions. Therefore, each individual is constantly aware of their own value to the community and the value that others bring. Whilst many teams exhibit high levels of individual and mutual respect, it is their lack of respect for other teams, organisational priorities, processes and systems that stop the team operating as a community.



Courage is to some extent a consequence of respect in that people who have high levels of self-respect have high levels of self-confidence and can therefore demonstrate courage. However unless there are high levels of mutual respect, even self confident people may find it difficult to challenge the status quo or may do so in a way that tramples over the thoughts and feelings of others.

Humility is a powerful quality in communities and can only be demonstrated by people who have the courage to realise that they cannot always be right or that what they have done for many years without question or challenge, may no longer be appropriate.

Members of sustainable communities recognise that unless they first contribute to the success of the community, the community will not have the capacity or capability to contribute to their personal needs. Hence individuals are aware of their contribution to the overall success of the community and are always looking for ways to increase that contribution. Community success is more important than that of the individual, because individual success can only happen if the community at large is successful first.



Finally, Pride is the source of ongoing and sustainable performance. Anyone who has seen pictures of the Maasai will agree that they have the appearance of 'very proud people'. How sustainable is the performance of a team or business in which people do not feel proud of their achievements, products or brand?

In order to demonstrate the difference between a high performance team and a sustainable high performing community, it is perhaps easiest to compare and contrast various dynamics that create one or the other. Allowing you the opportunity to assess how the team verses community dynamic supports and reinforces the 'warrior culture'.

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Perceived levels of individual responsibility

Ask a member of any team what they consider to be their responsibility and generally they will describe their individual targets, or the task/functions that they personally perform. They may mention the interface with other team members and how they can set other people up for success.

When you start to explore areas such as motivation and development, they will rapidly start to allocate responsibility to others, such as their manager, their colleagues and 'the company'.

Members of communities take a much broader view and recognise that they are not just responsible for the job that they have been allocated; they are totally and utterly responsible for themselves.

In one community that I met, I noted that a seven year old girl was looking after their camels. A quick chat with the elders revealed that their camel herd represented two thirds of their assets, the remainder being cattle and goats, and that from sunrise to sunset the camels were in the sole charge of this young girl.

She daily took them several kilometres away from the village to graze and at no time did anyone go to check what she was doing or if she was happy. Nor did they ask her at the end of the day what she had done –completely dissimilar to the structure of our teams who would have partaken in a camel herding debrief or review meeting!

With my western eyes this struck me as strange and so I asked the elders how they could possibly be comfortable leaving two thirds of their assets with a young girl all day in an environment where natural predators were roaming freely.



Their answer was that in order to be allowed to do the job in the first place she had been rigorously tested to ensure that she was sufficiently responsible for the task. It transpired that at the tender age of four, she had expressed an interest in the role and was told at that stage that she could become the camel herder when she could prove that she was responsible enough. They told her how she would be measured, who would test her and the things that she could do to develop.

When I asked how often they checked to see that she was doing her development work they laughed. "Why would we do that?" they asked before noting that "If she was not willing to take responsibility for her own development, why would we ever give her responsibility for two thirds of our assets?"

They then pointed out that if they were they to constantly check on her progress during the day they would be undermining the very responsibility and trust that they had placed in her in the first instance.

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If members of your team expand their individual responsibility in delivering the targets that you have set for them, you may achieve high performance this year. But what about sustaining it as your customers increase their expectations, or your competitors grow stronger?

Are you really ensuring that team members take responsibility for themselves, their performance today and in the future?

Role Clarity verses Contribution Clarity

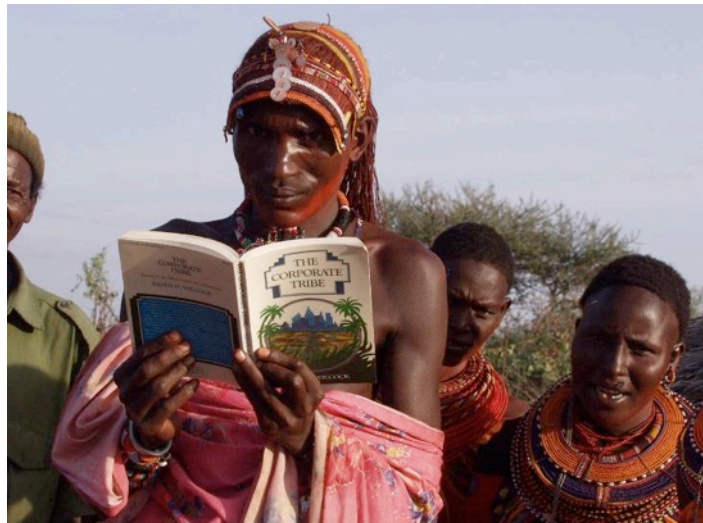
In any good team, the process of role definition is essential. People are allocated tasks and functions and given the appropriate performance standards to go with them.

In more sophisticated organisations, these definitions can include competence frameworks and other measures that can be used during appraisals.

There is nothing wrong with any of this and indeed it can be very useful yet does it really help the person to understand their individual value and thus increase their levels of self-respect.

It is my experience that within a community, people do not define themselves by role, but rather by their contribution to the community.

For example when I asked a Maasai Moran (the English translation is Warrior, although it may be misleading!) what his role was, he replied "My contribution is to die before anyone else in the community".



Somewhat alarmed, I explored further and found that warriors were expected to defend. They had to defend the cattle, the people and the settlements from attack by wild animals. If a "non-warrior" died then the warriors had not done their job effectively.

Since the Moran would not wish to fail, after all the consequences do seem a little dramatic they invest time in order to become the very best that they can be. So that in the event of an attack, not only will no one else die, but they themselves will survive.

It was also clear that no single Moran would ever say, "we failed" because another person died, the community would view it as a personal failure.

So how does this differ from teams? The focus on contribution rather than role definition makes a strong and unbreakable link to the overall needs, aims and objectives and vision of the community rather than just the team.

For example, ask members of your team what they consider to be their role? If sales people are saying, "To sell the product to meet my targets" or your finance people are

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saying, "To get the invoices paid on time", you may have good performance today but where is the sustainability?

What would your sales and finance people be saying if they thought like a Moran?

Extracting Current Performance verses Developing Future Potential

The focus and measurement of team success tends in general to be on the delivery of short term results, such as increasing sales or market share, reducing costs or increasing profit. A focus often driven by a need to keep investors happy.

Senior executives are often struggling with the balance of tactical versus strategic needs, and the apparent ambiguities that can result but are the two things really separate? Can you keep investors happy in the short term, whilst also ensuring that you can deliver sustainable returns in the long run?

In my early career, I was employed by a well known global computer manufacturer as a salesman. My team's sole focus was on achieving our annual targets and when that was done, after a short moment of celebration we then set out to do the same all over again but with a 15% higher target. We did it consistently and were recognised as one of the most successful teams in the business, but when, as inevitably would happen, members started to leave, the business had to start from scratch to build a team and the required performance.

When I met the Chief Moran, I asked him how long he expected to be in that role. He smiled and said "For as short a period of time as it takes me to find a better Chief Moran than me". He explained that his contribution was to ensure that the community had the best possible Chief Moran.

Not only would his success be measured by what he did whilst he was in that position, but also by the performance of the person who followed him.

The definition of his contribution, neatly encapsulated a balance between short term performance and developing potential for the future.

Imagine the impact of that on the sustainable performance of your teams. What if your team leaders and senior executives were measured and rewarded, not just for their time in post but also on the following five years?

Yes, I can hear the howls of protest already; "But, I would not have enough influence over what happened after I left", "It was all right when I left it", if you want to create a sustainable high performance community, individuals have to take responsibility for their legacy as well as their short term performance.

Teams are Managed, Communities are Led

The debate over the definition of management versus leadership continues to rage and will continue to do so for as long as people choose to write books on the topic.

So let us not argue with definitions, but look instead at what needs to be done in order to get the best from our teams.

The setting of targets, the allocation of resources, the defining of minimum standards, the development and implementation of reporting and measurement systems, are all essentially management activities.

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Team members operate within the boundaries that are laid out for them and aim to achieve the goals that have also been set for them. All of this is time consuming and requires regular contact and involvement with the team members, in order to ensure that the right things are happening.

When I have spent time with Maasai Elders, I found their conversations fascinating. They are solely focussed on strategic matters, for example what might need to happen if a drought lasts for more than a year.

Elders do not get involved in the day to day issues of the community because, there are several thousand responsible people making it work. They would see it as their failure, if they had to get involved in the daily events and issues of the community. They know that they cannot be strategic thinkers, if they act operationally.

It is the elders' contribution to act as role model for their culture, create an environment in which Respect, Courage, Humility, Contribution and Pride thrive and develop the talent, to deal with the major issues that lie ahead.



Whether you wish to call that leadership or management is down to your own personal definition.

I accept that the differences are in some cases, subtle and yet they can have a powerful impact on the true sustainability of your performance and therefore your business. It is fair to say that indigenous communities do not have to grapple with some of the complexities of the modern world. Never have I seen a Maasai elder with a Blackberry; although I suspect that if they had one, it would **NOT** be constantly buzzing because the community is getting on with what needs to be done.

Maasai have however, been in business for more time than the combined age of the FTSE 100 and the Fortune 500, so perhaps they have more to teach us about sustainable performance than we might have suspected!

Chris Howe

This article was published in TJ - the Training Journal – December 2007
The Photographs were taken by Anthony Willoughby on several of our trips to Kenya

*Chris tells this story for teams, groups and organisations.
He can also run a Maasai Masterclass Workshop for you to get you thinking about
Teams and Leadership within your own business.*