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WHITE PAPER

The Evolution of
High Performance Teams

What you can measure you can manage.

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TrustInside
Assessments

The Evolution of High Performance Teams

In their book "The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization", researchers and authors Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith reported their findings from studying high-performing teams over several years as senior consultants for McKinsey and Co.

They first defined what they called a "real" team:

"one where team members are equally committed to a common purpose, goals, and working approach, for which they hold themselves mutually accountable."

This indicates that for a team to become "a real team", a high level of alignment is essential.

They went on to say:

"a high-performance team has all the characteristics of a real team and team members who are deeply committed to one another's personal growth and success."

To put this in my own words, members of a high performance team care about each other and have a high level of trust for each other.

When Dr. Ralph Colby created the first version of the Team Alignment Survey™ in 1980, in addition to developing items that would measure the degree to which a team is in alignment on important strategic factors, he developed a set of items to measure the level of trust in the team. His assumption was that for teams to have the conversations they need to have to get into alignment, they need to have a high level of trust.

Many years later we now have several rounds of psychometric analysis that clearly show that teams that are low in trust are also low in alignment. What that means is, teams need to ensure there is a high level of trust first so they are able to achieve high levels of alignment and performance.

Our experience is that teams are much more comfortable getting into debates about their strategies and structure and don't want to talk about the level of trust that exists in the team. We know that doesn't work – they need to increase their trust for each other first, and then they can get into alignment.

This is why it is so important to measure both the alignment and level of trust in the team from the outset.

Alignment can be Measured and Analyzed

There are 6 key factors that teams need to be in alignment on:

1. **Purpose** – why the team exists
2. **Values** – how team members behave
3. **Vision** – what the team will be doing and have achieved at a point in time
4. **Goals** – how the team will measure success in working towards the vision
5. **Priorities** – what is most important to focus on now
6. **Roles** – who on the team is responsible for what

Two things need to be measured to determine the level of alignment on each of these six factors – Clarity, and Approval. Team members cannot be in alignment with something that they are not clear about, and even if they are clear, if they don't approve of it they are not in alignment.

In the Team Alignment Survey, Clarity is a measure of the degree to which team members think "the team" is clear about each of the six factors, not how clear they are individually. Approval is a measure of the degree to which team members personally approve of each factor - do they buy-in to it.

Let's look at an example of how the Team Alignment Survey helped Bob, the CEO of a software company who wanted to organically grow his business by 50% within three years. He was struggling to get his leadership team behind his vision and there was consistent failure to execute their strategic plans.

Each member of the leadership team completed the assessment to determine their perception of the alignment and trust in the team.

In the Alignment Graph below, the line and dots show Bob's perception of his team's level of clarity and approval across the six factors; purpose, values, vision, goals, priorities, and roles. The shaded areas show Bob's leadership team's actual levels of clarity and approval. As you can see, his team is not in alignment and Bob could not see to what extent until it was measured.

Alignment Graph

Individual Scores   Team Scores

Approval Scores = Personal Approval
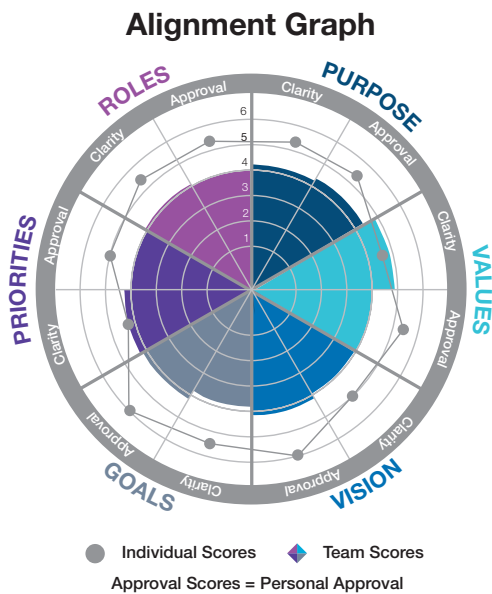
As the graphic shows, Bob believes the team is clear on just about everything, and he personally approves of everything. The rest of the team, however, were not clear on anything but Values, and although their Approval scores were a little higher on some factors, they don't demonstrate a real commitment to Bob's plans.

He thought he had made everything clear and that the team was on board. Now that he knew there was a lack of alignment in the team, he had the information he needed to take action.

Bob worked with his team to reconfirm their Purpose and Values, and to identify a shared Vision and Goals. He then got a verbal commitment from all team

members to support him in achieving the Vision. As it turned out, the team's failure to get behind and execute his Vision was caused by a lack of clarity and a fear of speaking up to say that they weren't clear or that they didn't approve – a clear sign that trust was low.

The Integro Trust Model™

Having a high level of trust is necessary to achieve high levels of team alignment and performance. The assessment used to measure the level of trust in the team is based on the Intégro Trust Model which identifies eight values team members must operate by for the team to develop a high level of trust. They are:

- Respect
- Recognition
- Receptivity
- Disclosure
- Straightforwardness
- Honesty
- Keeps Commitments
- Seeks Excellence

Here is the overall Trust Graph for Bob's team – as you can see, they haven't scored high in any of the eight values except Honesty.

Trust Graph

Individual Scores   Team score
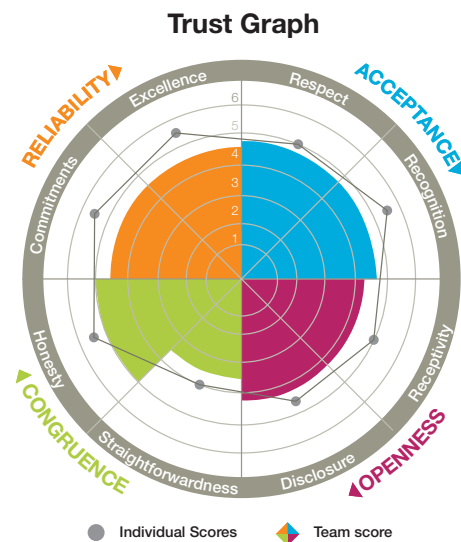
It makes sense that the more the team operates by these values the more likely they will have the robust conversations they need to have, to achieve high levels of alignment.

In our latest round of psychometric analysis, we decided to take a deeper dive into understanding what teams who had very high levels of alignment did differently from teams that struggled to get into alignment.

In other words, rather than generalizing by saying that if you increase trust you will increase alignment, we wanted to identify specific trust-building behaviors that would be most effective for teams to work on, based on the level of alignment they are currently at.

To achieve this, we took all of the teams that have taken the Team Alignment Survey over the past several years and put them into four levels based on their alignment scores. We then used statistics software to determine which of the values that build trust would most strongly predict teams moving up from the lowest level of alignment, Level 1 to Level 2, and then eventually to Level 4.

Moving from the Bottom Level

What we found is that teams who score in Level 1 of alignment, need to focus on increasing their receptivity to the input from others and their willingness to disclose their own ideas, thoughts and opinions to progress to Level 2. This increased level of open communication between team members will enable the team to identify specific action steps they can take to get to the next level of alignment. The value of keeps commitments is also a strong predictor for moving from Level 1 to Level 2, emphasizing that team members need to commit to following through and implementing those action steps.

That was precisely the situation with Bob's team. The results shown in the Team Alignment graph above put his team in the bottom level of alignment, Level 1. When you look at the Team Trust graph above, it would appear that the team needs to focus most on straightforwardness, because it is their lowest score.

However, we know from our research that this team will be much more successful at moving up to Level 2 if they focus first on being more open with each other by using the values of receptivity and disclosure, and then committing to their action plans.

Moving from Level 2 or Level 3 to the Top - Level 4

One of the most interesting findings from this analysis is that recognition is the strongest predictor of teams moving to both Level 3 and Level 4. We need to look at the items that are used to measure recognition to better understand how this contributes to increased alignment. The two items are:

- Praise is freely given in our team
- Team members encourage each other

We are not just talking about recognition from the team leader – more importantly, it is the praise and encouragement team members give each other that creates a culture where team members feel a strong connection. This results in a further increase in open communication within the team, allowing for a free exchange of ideas and opinions where team members can be more straightforward with each other. Straightforwardness is essential for achieving high levels of approval of the team's strategic alignment.

The Most Highly Aligned Teams – Level 4

As mentioned above recognition is the strongest predictor of teams reaching both Level 3 and Level 4 – the highest levels of alignment. However, what the data also tells us is that recognition is such a strong predictor of teams achieving Level 4, we would argue that teams cannot achieve this high level of alignment without team members being free with praise and encouraging each other to a high degree.

This finding appears to align closely with the research conducted by Katzenbach and Smith mentioned earlier, that high performance teams exhibit all the characteristics of real teams and have "team members who are deeply committed to one another's personal growth and success".

The Tuckman Model
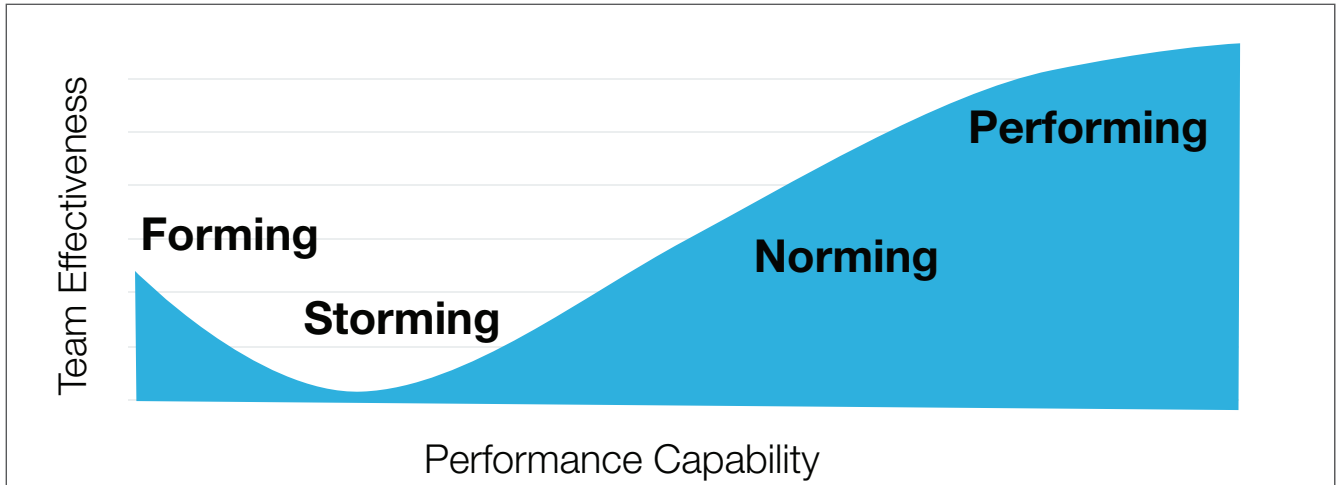
## Alignment with the Tuckman Model

One of the most widely used models of team effectiveness is the Tuckman Model. My understanding is that Bruce Tuckman came up with this model as an observation of how teams moved from forming to performing. Of course, not all teams get to performing and some never get past storming.

This model came to mind when reviewing the data from our latest round of psychometric analysis – it seemed that the four stages of team effectiveness could align with the four levels of alignment – Level 1 forming to Level 4 performing.

It makes sense to me that teams in the bottom level of alignment, are essentially at the forming stage, even if they have been formed for some time. In other words, they have not had the conversations they need to have to begin to get into alignment. The conversations they need to have would be focused on receptivity, disclosure and keeping commitments as outlined above for moving from Level 1 to Level 2.

What also made sense in looking at the overlap with the Tuckman model, is that to move from Level 2 to Level 3 , that is, to get out of the Storming phase, there is a need for a high level of straightforwardness.

The Evolution of High Performance Teams
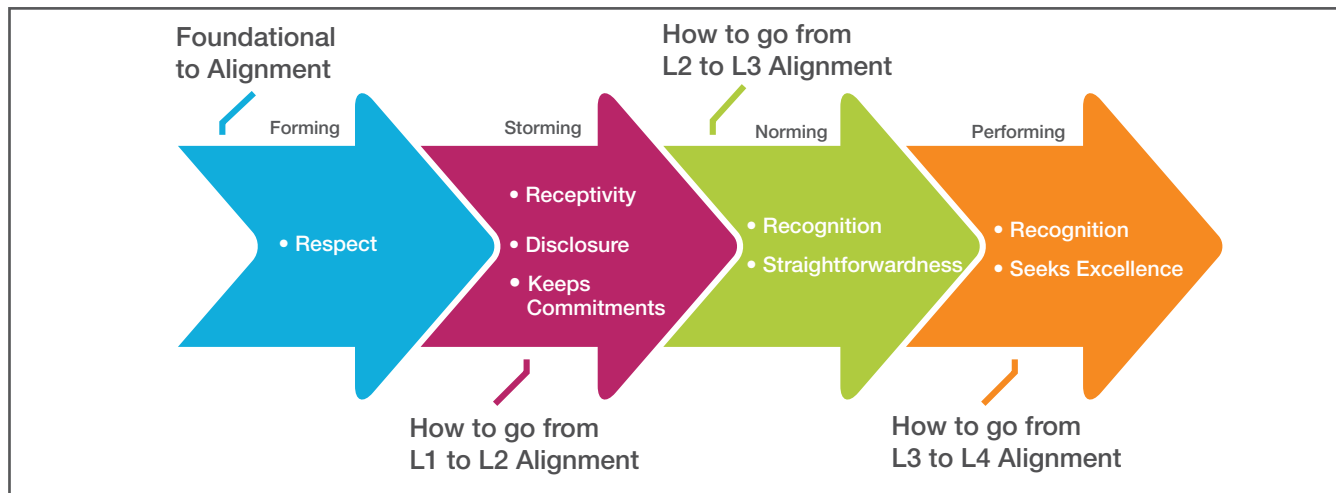
Now, straightforwardness can be pretty blunt, so we need to take into account the other important predictor of moving to Level 3, recognition. That is, being free with praise and encouragement of each other, a necessary balance for the straightforward conversations that need to be had.

There seemed to be such a good fit between what the data is telling us and the Tuckman Model that we created the above graphic to illustrate The Evolution of High Performance Teams.

Many leaders are in the same situation that Bob was in, believing they have clearly communicated their purpose, values, vision and goals and assume they have the support of the team when there is no push back. However, we do know that some team members are reluctant to say "I'm not clear on that" so they don't appear foolish, and they are seldom going to say "I don't agree." They just nod their heads.

It took Bob some courage to face up to the fact that his communication to the team had not been as effective as he thought it had been. However, because the Team Alignment Survey enabled him to clearly understand the nature and extent of the problem, he was able to immediately start taking action.

In summary, by measuring your team's current level of alignment and using the evolution of high performance teams as your guide, you can develop targeted action steps to get your teams into the top level of alignment and performance.

To see what level of alignment your team is in, contact:

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