Chapter XXXV
Ultimate Performance in a Highly Functioning Team

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores ultimate team performance as experienced by veteran airline pilots working together with a common purpose. The research ellicited the subjective experiences of five individual team members, employing a structured interview method to gather data for phenomenological analysis. Results offer a better understanding of what makes a high-performing team, the team experience itself, the context, and the meaning of ultimate team performance as lived experience. The research offers subjective descriptions of social interaction between self and other in a virtual/nonvirtual team context, offering a window into the collaborative experience; the self-other relationship; how individuals navigate their lifeworld within a team setting; and the applicability of the pilots' experience processes across other organizational domains.

INTRODUCTION

Collaboration is key to a thriving business in a fast-paced, global environment. In my work with both virtual and non-virtual teams, I see all sorts of team function and dysfunction, and dedicate a good portion of my time to helping teams improve team collaboration. I was curious about what makes certain teams very good at collaboration, often when team members are in multiple locations. What factors are at play to create the environment for ultimate performance? I chose to examine this airline pilot team as it is thought of by the organization as an example of strong team performance and collaboration.

What are the characteristics of a high performing team that allow it to adapt and thrive in an ever-changing environment, often with some members across the hall and others in separate locations? What are the characteristics of a team

that push it into high performance and allow it to maintain exceptional functionality? And what can we do to help teams move past solid performance and into ultimate performance?

SUBJECTS

I searched for a business team to examine after doing research on a jazz team in 2003 (Jeddeloh, 2003). I was looking for a team that displayed what the host company deemed as high-performance. I also was interested in identifying a team whose members considered themselves to be high-performing. I found that team operating in one of the major US airlines: a group of veteran male pilots who, in addition to their regular duties, came together to develop flight safety policy and training; or, as they put it, "We try to keep the passengers and pilots out of the trees," overseeing airline safety for the commercial pilots and passengers, in accordance with Federal requirements and airline best practices.

DATA-GATHERING METHOD

Pilots were interviewed singly and then as a group to allow them to reflect on what they said in the interviews. All conversations were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions then were analyzed for common themes and characteristics. Open-ended interview questions were designed to draw out the team characteristics and allowed team members to talk about what they deemed important.

What follows is an overview of the themes supported by the pilots' own words. I will then draw some conclusions and make suggestions based on this team's experience. The fact that this is a qualitative description of one high-performing team is not a proclamation of truth, but an invitation to others to conduct more research, examining individual teams to learn what we can do to improve team performance.

THEMES

Themes from this study can be thought of in three broad categories, factors that impact team performance: Individual Member Factors, Team Collaboration, and Organizational factors. Individual Member Factors include a strong sense of *self,* relationships with other team members, and individual technical expertise. Team Collaboration Factors include: problem solving processes, mistakes, conflict, team leadership, overt and covert cuing, and the work itself. The Organizational Factors include: team chartering and sponsorship, rewards and recognition, and environment.

INDIVIDUAL MEMBER FACTORS

Sense of Self and Relationship Between Team Members

Pilot team members described each other as having a strong ego that is kept in check when operating with the team. This is exceptional given the ego strength of the individual team members. What makes this exceptional? One member stated, "I think lack of egos. In fact I feel pretty strongly about that." They described other teams in the past as having members exerting too much ego. "It was just a daily, ongoing train wreck that wouldn't stop …"

Team members describe themselves as personally dedicated and proud of what they accomplish, what they bring to the team, and what the team does, reflecting, and building on past experience individually and together. This is a group of men who set very high standards and work incredibly hard to maintain personal and team pride in the work. The way they do this is by asking questions to continuously make sense of the past and to understand what needs to happen going forward.

Team members have a tremendous amount of respect for each other as individuals and as technical experts. They have developed a healthy

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