

Why Teams Fail

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In today's high-tech workplace, it is virtually impossible to not be part of a team. Projects are too big, too complex, too involved for a single person to do it all. Yet far too often people find teamwork to be frustrating and exhausting. Even when the team successfully ships a product, team members often feel burned out, frustrated, or surprisingly unhappy with their accomplishment.

Many managers have heard of the four stages of team development: Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing. What is not as well known is the importance of that early, forming stage. During this phase, team members determine whether or not they feel emotionally and intellectually safe working with one another; they develop a sense of group identity, or remain a collection of individuals.

There's an old saying that a couple isn't really married until they've had their first fight. The same is true of teams. Part of working together involves arguing with coworkers: put any group of people together, and they are bound to have their own approaches and solutions to problems. If team members feel unable or unwilling to argue with one another, they avoid any conflict. If they are forced to argue but haven't developed effective means for conflict management, the argument can quickly turn personal. In either case, the exchange of thoughts and ideas is blocked, anger builds, tension mounts, and the ability of team members to work together is severely compromised. Instead of developing group identity, team members may become convinced that their best strategy is maximizing personal gain instead of team performance.

The problems are exacerbated when the leader's expertise is not management but engineering. There is a persistent, and ultimately painful, myth that engineers will only respect another engineer. Unfortunately, the very personality traits and skills that make someone a good engineer are often exactly the wrong skills to be a good manager. A team leader needs to have the social skills and empathy to manage the evolving dynamics of his team, and the interpersonal knowledge to apply those skills.

Of those people who do possess both sets of skills, even fewer can do both simultaneously. A good manager spends his time building the team. If he's busy writing code, designing circuits, or what have you, then he's not building the team. If he's like most people thrust into a new situation and tasked with doing something he's really good at, and something he's not good at, he'll gravitate toward the former.

Another problem faced by team leaders is that the storming phase can get, well, pretty stormy. The focus of that storm is often the leader. If the leader feels attacked, she's likely to respond accordingly. This is a perfectly natural reaction. It's also counterproductive. Managing conflict effectively means not getting enmeshed in the conflict in the first place: team progress can be set back weeks, months, or longer. Once conflict is joined, replacing the leader may improve things in the short-term, but can often make things worse long-term. The fundamental team dynamic needs to be repaired.

Unfortunately, more than half the teams in businesses become stuck in conflict or avoidance. When a team becomes stuck, it is stressful and exhausting to the team members. The company pays for this in lower productivity, reduced product quality, increased illness and absenteeism, and higher staff turnover, all of which can be fatal to a business.

The good news is that while taking the right steps early in the formation of a team can save time, money, and headaches later, it's rarely too late to create a functional group dynamic. With patience and appropriate expertise, most teams can develop the skills necessary to function at the highest levels.

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