

# The StraightTalk Coach

## Insights for Leading From Strength

### Team Building for Tomorrow: A Model for Effective Collaboration

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The global marketplace keeps throwing new and faster curve balls, driving the need for greater diversity and agility. This may seem contradictory: Including more people and ideas would seem to slow an organization rather than make it more nimble. The solution lies in effective teams and their potential to efficiently synthesize diverse perspectives into innovation and results. How can leaders best think about, form and evaluate such teams?

An effective team is a high-performing group that consistently progresses towards setting and/or achieving the organization's strategic goals. Effective teams are built on applying outstanding functional skills to address complex challenges or opportunities and leveraging strong, trusting relationships to deliver innovation and results.

Over many years of advising leaders, we have developed a framework to help them evaluate and build teams for better performance. This continuum of team development progresses from Embryonic to Collaborative based on four components:

◆ **External Orientation:** Analyzing outside forces and aligning them with internal capabilities to address emerging challenges and opportunities.

◆ **Continuous Learning:** Constantly synthesizing new ideas from broad and deep sources and using them to drive innovation and change.

◆ **StraightTalk:** Genuine, direct, open, respectful dialogue about important issues.

◆ **Team Orientation:** Formally and informally partnering with other experts to address challenges or take advantage of opportunities.

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Coming together  
is a beginning.  
Keeping together is  
progress. Working  
together is success.

~ Henry Ford

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#### The Cornerstone of Team Performance

The external orientation, continuous learning, StraightTalk and team orientation that define each stage of our effective collaboration model represent different levels of a team's ability to apply its expertise and relationships for greatest impact. These four elements are inextricably linked ± a team cannot grow from one level to the next without

addressing all of them ± but external orientation is the cornerstone of team effectiveness.

The reason is simple. Although a team with weak external orientation might excel at StraightTalk, engaging in dialogue about current internal issues will have a very limited impact on the team's performance and the organization's market position and long-term success. In contrast, improving a team's focus on and dialogue about external issues will have a considerable effect on innovation, market position, results and long-term success.

#### The Embryonic Team

At the Embryonic stage, a team's objectives tend to be narrow and its behavior tends to be polite. Such teams may work hard, but their internal tactical focus prevents them from delivering strategically valuable results.

◆ **External Orientation:** Individuals work from the inside out and do not consider external perspectives. The team is focused primarily on tactical implementation.

◆ **Continuous Learning:** Learning is linked to specific knowledge needed to do one's job. It comes primarily from the internal environment and supports current plans.

◆ **StraightTalk:** Polite exchanges between team members produce little meaningful dialogue. Colleagues do not challenge each other's thoughts or ideas. Everyone avoids talking about sacred cows.

◆ **Team Orientation:** Team members' tasks and relationships are not aligned with each other or linked to a mission. Clarity about roles and responsibilities is low; trust and respect are fragile.

### **The Adolescent Team**

Adolescent teams begin to consider external forces and broader issues. However, peer pressure and a desire to not rock the boat remain strong influences.

◆ **External Orientation:** A team at this stage of development works from the inside out. Members factor in limited external functional and industry perspectives to develop strategic and tactical plans.

◆ **Continuous Learning:** Learning remains linked to what one needs to know to perform. The avenues employed to learn are broadening, although the team continues to rely largely on internal resources.

◆ **StraightTalk:** Team members challenge each other more often, but not consistently. There is a high risk of group think, and one hears more serial monologue than interactive dialogue. Individual agendas compete for attention.

◆ **Team Orientation:** A stronger sense of task and relationship focus is linked to a mission. Roles and responsibilities are clearer. Team members begin to understand and execute their assignments more consistently.

### **The Mature Team**

Mature teams exhibit a stronger external orientation and learning that begins to incorporate both the present and the future.

◆ **External Orientation:** The team works from an external perspective that considers knowledge of current investors, customers and competitors to develop strategic and tactical plans.

◆ **Continuous Learning:** Learning is

linked to change and what one needs to know to help implement the next generation of strategies and plans. Learning includes external resources.

◆ **StraightTalk:** The emphasis is on dialogue. There is greater encouragement of constructive conflict, and a range of issues is surfaced and debated.

◆ **Team Orientation:** The team balances its focus on tasks and relationships with plans aligned around a common mission. Trust and respect are growing. Processes are in place to work together.

### **The Collaborative Team**

Collaborative teams are most effective at achieving and enhancing an organization's strategy. Their efforts are firmly grounded in external and future orientations, in harnessing conflict productively, in constantly accelerating the pace of learning and change, and in delivering innovation and results.

◆ **External Orientation:** The Collaborative team works from the outside in, considering a global range of existing and potential investor, customer, competitor and community factors to develop innovative strategic and tactical initiatives.

◆ **Continuous Learning:** Learning is future-focused and precedes change, shaping the next generation of strategies and plans. Sources of learning are global, external, broad, deep and creative.

◆ **StraightTalk:** The team engages in high levels of interactive dialogue without any sacred cows. Each team member is expected to have a perspective, to express it, and to actively listen to and consider colleagues' views.

◆ **Team Orientation:** The team is highly diverse, mission-driven and constantly raising expectations. Strong trust and respect are built on each member's credibility and competence. Clear operating beliefs and processes are actively applied to achieve innovation and results.

### **Making the Model Work**

Focusing on a few critical success factors can help leaders apply the effective collaboration model for maximum improvement in team effectiveness.

First, a team's progression from Embryonic to Collaborative is not automatic. Teams need leadership support, resources and often facilitation to help them grow from one stage to the next. Any team can become Collaborative with enough time, energy and focus, but even a Collaborative team that is operating well needs ongoing attention and support.

Second, external orientation, continuous learning, StraightTalk and team orientation are inherently linked. Improving only one will not measurably improve a team's effectiveness; improving all four will have a considerable impact. That said, enhancing a team's external orientation may help advance its performance on other attributes.

Third, a team is only as good as its members. Building teams carefully from among people who have outstanding functional skills is essential to allow a team to accomplish increasingly complex tasks and encourage respect between team members to build trust and honesty.

Fourth, team building is ongoing, constantly seeking to more fully leverage strengths and address gaps in effective collaboration.

Last, alignment between the team's objectives and the organization's strategic goals is crucial. Even the most exemplary team will not noticeably affect an organization if its goals are not closely aligned with the organization's externally informed mission, vision and strategy.

Teams have become a permanent feature of today's fast-paced global marketplace. Leaders who want their organizations to thrive cannot afford to be limited by unproductive, poorly aligned or internally focused teams.

In contrast, leaders who strive to develop Collaborative teams that are closely aligned with the organization's strategy will find the time and effort to build those teams a worthwhile investment — one that drives change and innovation, and delivers high-impact results and profitable growth. **HK**

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