

Insights for Executives

Preventing Group Flu - Mastering the Secrets of Exceptional Teams

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Recognizing “Group Flu”

Work groups often come down with their own version of the flu – and Group Flu can cripple productivity just as severely as an epidemic of the regular sort of flu. How do you know this is what your team or work group is suffering from? The most common symptoms include:

- Erratic or falling attendance.
- Members arriving late for the meeting, leaving early, or stepping out for phone calls.
- Lack of continuity from one meeting to the next.
- Failure to complete tasks and assignments.
- Inability to resolve differences of opinion.
- Low levels of interest, energy and engagement amongst other members.
- Find-the-flaw mentality.
- Low levels of creativity.
- Limited interaction around the content during meetings.

Now, when a voluntary group contracts Group Flu the situation resolves itself; members vote with their feet and the group slowly dissolves.

Within organizations, however, group members generally don't have the option of actually leaving a sick group, so they “quit and stay” – creating a downward spiral of worsening Group Flu through delegating upward, waiting for direction, making only the most minimally required effort and contribution, failing to take accountability, and acting as if they are helpless. The result – poor performance at a time when companies need exceptional results from everyone.

Most groups begin coming down with Group Flu shortly after they have been convened. The good news is that despite the many symptoms, the causes lie in just three areas:

- I. Definition of the group's **task/purpose**
- II. **Leadership** selection and role
- III. Unlocking the secret of **group dynamics**

We are going to explore the major causes – and the prevention or cure -- of Group Flu in all three of these areas.

Step One: Defining the purpose of the group.

Every group (team, task force, etc.) must have a clear reason to exist. You can call it a sharp purpose, vision, mission, charter -- anything you like -- so long as members understand it in the same way and feel individually and collectively committed to achieving it.

One vital point: commitment can only be generated through involvement, and with purpose statements all members need to be involved in the initial content discussions. It is that process of idea generation and dialogue that builds common understanding, alignment and commitment. It cannot be achieved through directives and forced compliance.

Even in established organizations, when a technical or business objective has been assigned, there is still considerable room to build commitment in a new group.

The Top Three Traps and Pitfalls:

Management (with every good intention) completely defines the purpose, objectives, processes and work streams for the team – sometimes ‘pre-thinking’ the solutions in advance -- or encourages the team leader or an inner circle to do so.

In this case, management fears that if they themselves do not explicitly define the purpose in detail, the group may go completely off-track and not achieve the desired objective, may stray into highly sensitive strategic, political, or policy related areas, or may attempt to ‘solve world hunger’.

“[Management] said they wanted a new approach to innovation. They put together a different kind of team than ever before for looking at this goal -- we had people from Organization Development, Strategic Planning, Product Design, Marketing, Quality, Finance, Manufacturing, and in-house inventors who had a bunch of patents. Then at the first meeting our leader gave each of us very specific and detailed silo assignments – mainly doing benchmarking and researching what our functions had done in the past. We ended up analyzing the same old cuts of data in the same way we always had. We failed totally to come up with anything new and creative.”

Management, wanting to give the team autonomy and allow them to be creative, fails to provide a framework for action (the project rationale, big picture, strategy, scope and objectives),

Without such a framework, the group is likely to go astray on priorities, boundaries, or outcomes. The ‘no, that’s not right’ management reviews, backtracking, and zigzag course corrections that ensue lead to rising frustration and flagging commitment on the part of group leaders and members.

“I was really excited to be selected as a member of the MITE project team! The expertise needed was right in my bailiwick, and I initially

thought what we were trying to achieve technically was clear, and could make a big difference to our business. And it looked like [management] really trusted us to come through as they gave us free rein. Then we had the first review with our department manager who changed 50% of what the team had done. Then, a few weeks later, we had a second review with his boss, who changed about another 45%, and it went on like that. We were left trying to deliver something that at the end of the day we had almost zero input into. It was demoralizing, and we thought what we produced was really poor.”

Management or the team leader assigns an individual or sub-group to write a ‘straw man’ draft purpose statement for presentation to the full group.

This seems like an efficient use of everyone’s time but it rarely works out that way. Different members interpret the same words in different ways and no one but the authors ever feels the slightest ownership of the sub-group’s work. The straw man survives as a symbolic document that can neither drive action nor guide behavior. Worse, since it’s the first real work the group does, the straw man sets all the wrong process rules for the group:

- Straw men evoke critical thinking (“find the flaw”) rather than creative thinking.
- Straw men teach members that the real work is done outside the group.
- Straw men teach members that a well presented, lowest-common-denominator political solution is the best way to win over a critical audience.

“... John, Joe, and Britta apparently wrote this draft team charter and introduced it at our second meeting. It sure didn’t reflect any of what I had been thinking, but they got really defensive when I suggested a different direction. Then everyone put on their critic hats and by the time the dust settled what we ended up with was Motherhood and Apple Pie. But I guess that’s what [the manager] was looking for.”

Do It Right the First Time!

When launching your team, two elements are vital to producing a good purpose statement that builds individual and collective member commitment and can enhance the team’s ability to deliver outstanding results:

1. Management provides the group with sufficient information to understand the true scope of the assignment:
 - Project rationale – problem or opportunity and benefits to the company.
 - Big picture strategies and direction into which the Initiative fits.
 - Scope and boundaries – what’s in, what’s out.
 - Desired outcomes.
 - Level of team authority and empowerment/constraints.
 - Support system that exists for team – who to go to for help.

2. The group collaboratively creates a **statement of purpose** for their project – including design statements (what their outcome must be able to do or have within it) and the values that define how the project will be conducted and how the group will operate. This step should also include:
 - Understanding any individual, functional or corporate differences that could either get in the way of the group's success or be leveraged to enhance it.
 - Achieving full agreement on group goals objectives, and individual responsibilities.
 - Agreeing on key internal processes including information flow, decision-making, managing attendance, and follow-up.

In addition to building common understanding and commitment amongst team members, involving the team in developing the statement beyond the goal management wants achieved usually adds immense creativity, depth and richness to the undertaking.

Consider the initial statement of the founder of a successful equine veterinary practice who set out to create something more:

“...a regional equine veterinary center providing high quality diagnosis and specialized, state of the art treatment”

compared to the vision that he and his core team collaboratively developed:

“Our Vision

Equine Sports Medicine, Surgical and Reproductive Services

It is our practice to provide swift, responsive, high quality sports medicine and surgical care that will sustain the ability of our client's horses to do their jobs at their optimum potential.

We strive to improve the lives of both horses and the owners who rely on them.

We believe that pain management and the comfort of the horse is essential to all medical cases.

Our medical care is based on proven, scientific medicine, utilizing advanced diagnostic equipment and therapeutic techniques. We make every effort to get to the root cause of the problem as quickly as possible.”

The outcome: a thriving and profitable state-of-the-art regional diagnostic and treatment center staffed with highly motivated and skilled professionals who live the established values.

Step Two: Selecting the Leaders and Defining the Leader's Role.

Let's look at what great team leadership is. Fundamentally, the role and responsibilities of the team leader are to **manage group process and ensure that the knowledge, expertise and talents within the team are contributed and fully utilized to achieve or exceed its goals.** Unfortunately, with the best of intentions, many companies fall into three major traps when appointing team leaders, that make such an outcome highly unlikely, and severely damage or destroy motivation and commitment along the way.

The Three Leadership Traps

The Technical Expert Leader. This is the number one trap we have encountered in leadership-generated underperforming or failing teams: the person with the greatest level of technical knowledge and expertise is put in charge. This may seem a sound approach, and probably you don't want someone as leader who has no knowledge whatsoever about the subject matter. But here are the most common negative consequences of Technical Expert leadership:

- Even if management has done a good job in the three step process of launching a team and allowing it to create a purpose or vision, TE leaders tend to focus very intensively – even microscopically – on narrow technical elements of the purpose and often ignore the big picture and context into which the project fits.
- As TE leaders believe they know more than everyone else, they will develop the project work plan, and areas of study or research with little if any participation from team members, and will hand out assignments to individual members – using them as pairs of hands.
- TE leaders will also frequently dismiss ideas or different ways of thinking about things offered by team members, and will act as the final arbiter and decision-maker.

“We were a cross-functional team of ‘the best and the brightest’ from a number of disciplines – bringing together very different perspectives and backgrounds. Our company had failed to produce a product that excited customers for years – so this was a high profile, important project. The purpose of our team was to assess what was going wrong with our existing process and come up with something new and truly innovative. However, they made Manager Y the leader. He was a strategic planner, and already had a model in mind. He constantly interrupted members with long-winded lectures about why their ideas were bad ones, and why his model was better. He gave people assignments which were basically refining elements of his model. Attendance began dropping, and at our final meeting, it was just the leader and I. I got the assignment to write the final draft. When it was submitted, it just disappeared and nothing happened.”

The Hierarchical Leader. In this situation, the work group or team is set up as a fractal of the larger organization. That is, a manager or supervisor is appointed as the leader, holds positional power over team members, and is held accountable for driving the team to deliver goals. The leader directs the team, handing out individual assignments. Often the HL is the only one who understands the full scope of the project – holding back important information during the visioning/purpose-setting session and ignoring the outcomes -- and will parcel out information to the team on a need to know basis. Sometimes, the HL leader will create a small inner circle of trusted advisors from the team who meet separately behind the scenes and do all the real work. Meetings of the whole team are generally for the purpose of tracking progress of assignments. HLs tend to act as the team's interface with external resources and with more senior management – frequently making presentations of the team's work themselves.

“Our so called ‘team’ was tasked with simplifying the design of a part to make it cheaper to manufacture while improving quality and reliability. It was a very small team, but our leader broke us up so we weren’t even sitting near one another. Then he would call us individually up to his office to give us our latest assignments, and also to pass long senior management’s latest critique of our work. We did have a few team meetings, but our leader traveled a lot, so they were almost all audios. Even though two of us were subject matter experts on the component, our leader would insist on going to the suppliers by himself – where he asked all of the wrong questions....”

The Extraverted Cheerleader. Many companies believe that there are particular personality types that make the best team leaders: those with outgoing personalities and great interpersonal skills; people who can ‘break the ice’, ask good conversation-starter questions, keep things moving and maintain a good team atmosphere. And in fact, of the three traps, this one actually seldom does harm. There is nothing wrong with an EC leadership style, if the leader also possesses some vital team leadership competencies. However, such personality traits should not be confused with these competencies. The main point is that an EC style is not at all essential to successful team leadership. There are also drawbacks we have observed. The chief ones include:

- The leader, rather than the purpose/vision, becomes the glue that holds the group together. If the leader must be replaced, the team can collapse.
- If the leader is unable to attend a meeting, the meeting often does not proceed and work is delayed.
- Sometimes such leaders are uncomfortable with, and will try to paper over, rather than help the team understand and use, conflicts that inevitably arise.

Doing It Right

Leadership in healthy, purpose led teams looks very different from the Technical Expert and Hierarchical models in which the leader provides direction, structure, assignment of

tasks and monitoring of individual progress on task completion; and team members contribute ideas, take direction and complete assignments.

In the healthy, commitment-based, high performance groups we are talking about the purpose or vision statement replaces these roles. The role of team leader requires a very different set of competencies for success, the most critical of which is a solid understanding of group process. In addition, the basic skill set includes:

Organizing skills:

- Logistics - ensuring the group has the information, facilities, equipment, supplies and resources it needs.
- Expertise - ensuring the group has the members it needs – both ongoing and consultative.

Facilitation skills to identify and agree:

- Individual team member capabilities and interests and how to put them to best use.
- The objectives needed to achieve the overall goals.
- Decision-making process.
- An overall project or program work plan and time-line.
- Work streams needed to achieve the purpose and goals.
- Building agendas with the group and leading the discussion.
- Agreeing leadership and membership of the work streams based on: who are the subject matter experts; who will have to make it happen; and who will be impacted by the outcomes.

Resource Providing Skills:

- Providing tools and processes.
- Providing technical or business inputs.
- Acting as the fall-back for tough decisions.
- Liaising with senior management.

Applying the Skills: Leading Successful Team Meetings

A few simple group processes can be powerful aids to both the team and the team leader. A basic rule of thumb is that the process used should enhance the team's ability to accomplish an end. We have observed far too many meetings in which the only process used was for the leader to introduce an agenda topic and throw open the question, "so what do you think?" or even worse, to hand out lengthy materials that a presenter literally read word for word to the team while they follow along, then soliciting responses.

Leading the Agenda.

A well constructed agenda is a powerful group process aid to teams and their leaders. Agendas should flow from the team's purpose, progress on its project, and what team members believe would be of added-value to them. Each meeting should have a focused purpose – ideally agreed by the team at the end of the previous meeting. Once the team has determined the overall purpose of the meeting, it is time for the leader to build the agenda.

The most common pitfall we see in agenda construction is trying to cram the kitchen sink into one agenda, destroying continuity and allowing far too little time for serious discussion or group work on any topic. Also, there is often little or nothing to guide participants as to what is expected of them. Hence, we recommend that the leader set aside at least twice the time allotment they believe an agenda item will require. Each agenda item should also clearly specify what is required from team members: Is the item information only, or does it require idea generation, problem-solving or a decision? The agenda, along with any back-ground materials, visual aids or guidance that will assist team members in contributing their best thinking should be distributed in advance.

Leading Group Process.

The other important aspect of group leadership is knowing how to select the right process tools to achieve the different desired outcomes of agenda items. **These processes act as road maps to assist all members of a team to get aligned and progress together from starting point to destination.** In addition to good agenda building, there are four simple group processes that will stand leaders in good stead. It should also be noted, that there may be other team members with these skills who can lead processes.

Leading problem-solving, generating plans and alternatives, and soliciting input.

A good process is to initially break the large group up into sub-groups, with report-backs and final large group discussion around the outcomes. Although many managers and team leaders are at least initially uncomfortable doing it, this process, in addition to generating richer outputs, offers the following benefits:

- Everyone gets more air time and can be more active.
- Breaks down barriers and professional faces; builds individual relationships and rapport.
- People within sub-groups are generally more candid and less guarded about what they say, as they are protected – the outcome will be a group product.
- It begins the synthesizing. If you have a group of 12 broken into 3 subgroups of 4, by the time they report back to the large group they will have synthesized their members' views. Hence, in large group only 3 sets of views (many of which may already be aligned) must be synthesized instead of 12.

Leading idea generation. Brainstorming or mind-mapping is a simple and effective way of generating ideas. Unless the team is very small, we recommend breaking it into small sub-groups, as suggested above. Many people are loath to speak up in front of a larger

group, but will feel safer in a small group. There are a number of different approaches in use – ranging from unconstrained brainstorming in which people call out ideas as they occur to them and scribes record them on flip charts; to recording ideas on post-its notes; to going around to each person in the group and allowing them to pass if they don't have an idea ready. For the most creative outcomes, we recommend the unconstrained option. One additional important point: Don't try to pull quiet people into participating. It is quite likely they are not shy, but are introverted thinkers who need to 'go inside' and process thoughts and information into fully formed thoughts before they contribute. They make excellent synthesizers, but will feel trapped and intruded upon if called upon before they are ready.

Leading group decision-making. Rather than plunging into the merits of different options, first get agreement on the criteria for a good decision – not generalities, but specific needs and conditions the decision at hand has to satisfy. These can be weighted and formed into a matrix. Second, look for areas of agreement/common ground, before moving into differences. Then generate alternatives (using sub-groups), and assess them against the matrix. If a majority agrees with an outcome, but there are a couple of minority hold-outs, ask them under what conditions they would be willing to support this decision.

Leading conflict resolution. Conflict that is not personally directed, but rather members expressing passionate disagreement around solutions, decisions or actions is an invaluable resource for a team. As a leader, there are four fairly easily managed approaches to using and resolving conflict:

- First make sure everyone really understands what everyone else is talking about. Test for understanding, through asking clarifying questions. There are many occasions when we have discovered a group that has been arguing for hours is actually in violent agreement.
- Notice when members are simply re-stating their arguments without adding anything new. At this point summarize the main points – ideally on a flip-chart or white board.
- As with leading decision-making, help the team arrive at agreement on the criteria for a good solution/action – what each member's high priority needs (versus nice to have's) are – and assess alternative proposals against the criteria.
- If there is still an impasse, ask the members in opposition questions such as, "Under what conditions would this solution work for you?" or "What exactly makes this solution impossible?" Questions such as these move people away from becoming stuck in one solution and enable them to explore and find ways around underlying and unspoken assumptions that are creating obstacles.

One final element that is vital to team meeting process is accurate minute taking. Someone should be appointed to take minutes, and the task can be rotated. Ideally, key discussion points and agreed actions should be recorded on flip-charts as they occur. Then they can be validated at the end of the meeting. In any case, it is critical that the minute-taker accurately reflect exactly what was said and done rather than producing an edited version.

Step Three: Unlocking the Secrets of Group Dynamics.

Now we turn to the final and most vital aspect of on-going team success - **understanding and managing group dynamics**. Even when aligned behind a common purpose, with capable leadership and robust processes, teams take on a life of their own that is more than the sum of their individual members.

If we use an ice-berg analogy, a substantial portion of group life is hidden below the water line. These 'underwater' dynamics are normal and absolutely predictable, generally unconscious (at first) and unavoidable. They cannot be trained, managed, or facilitated away. Think of it as two parallel groups in the room - the 'work group' focusing on the task at hand, and another group (the underwater group) that we will call the 'as if' group. The consequence of unchecked 'as if' group dynamics is to actually prevent real work being done, and the 'work group' from successfully achieving its objectives.

The Top Three 'As If' Dynamics

Wilfred Bion identified three arenas for 'as if' dynamics: Dependency, Fight-Flight, and Pairing. Let's take a more in depth look at what these are, and how they manifest themselves in 'as if' group dynamics.

Dependency: The team acts 'as if' it is helpless, powerless, and must depend on others to manage it, secure resources, make decisions and/or be responsible for it.

Dependency can manifest itself as total reliance on the leader - acting 'as if' the leader is (or should be) omnipotent, has close ties with senior management (hence has inside information), and has all necessary knowledge and skills. The team blindly follows his or her guidance - even if individual members possess divergent views, information or expertise - never challenging the leader's judgment or decisions. The leader colludes in this, acting 'as if' the team members are helpless, inexperienced, and weak children who must be both micro-managed and protected, and using them as 'pairs of hands' to carry out assignments.

Teams in this dependency mode often appear quite healthy and productive initially - there is little if any conflict, and rapid progress is made - for awhile. However, when the team experiences failure or disappointment in the leader (which often happens at the first review with management), it generates frustration, hostility and anger with the leader, which leads to counter-dependency, aka Kill-and-Replace-the-Leader mode. A team can cycle through this dynamic a number of times if no intervention is made.

Another manifestation of dependency: the group cannot make progress and will project blame and fixate on the inadequacy of other people and/or on missing resources. Common real examples include:

"We are stuck, but we could move forward/accomplish our goal if only....

...we had a stronger leader/better facilitator!"

...senior management would tell us what they really want."

...we had been given a member from Finance."

...we had CAD facilities (or other technology)."

...we had better data."

...we had more capable members."

Usually, teams in this mode are obviously stuck, frustrated, and will loudly re-iterate what they believe is lacking, resisting all efforts to focus on task. However, the leader and/or management will find that providing the missing resource will only result in another insurmountable problem being identified.

Fight - Flight: Teams act 'as if' the group has to protect itself either by running away or fighting internally or with others. The chief outcome is to prevent the team from moving on with its work - avoiding taking the next step, confronting a major problem or arriving at the end of its project and disbanding. It manifests in several ways:

- Fighting over minor items.
- Acting 'as if' it is working, when in fact it is avoiding. Symptoms include: Sudden bursts of energy and harmonious discussion in directions different from the one the team was planning or pursuing, which ultimately bog down - leading to new bursts of energy which bog down.
- Obsessing endlessly over trivial details in a step of the group's work.
- Acting 'as if' understanding and working through its group dynamics and processes are a big waste of time.
- Acting 'as if' action/movement is essential (ready, fire, aim).
- Acting 'as if' frustration and/or discomfort cannot be tolerated.
- Finding and fighting external adversaries who are perceived to be blocking progress.

Pairing: Teams act 'as if' a miraculous, conflict free solution will appear for major issues or dilemmas, and look toward a sub-group which seems to 'have the answer'. Often there is more than one sub-group vying for leadership, pulling the team in different directions and paralyzing it. This 'as if' dynamic can be largely dealt with initially if time is spent by a team to collaboratively identify and gain alignment behind their shared vision/purpose/charter and operating values, and understand members' individual and corporate cultural differences. Manifestations include:

- A sub-group assumes leadership for and dominates the team. The group colludes, acting 'as if' the sub-group represents all members' views thus avoiding painful conflict.
- Individual members (often new) who are not committed to the team's objective/purpose/vision join together to disrupt or undermine it, or pursue different objectives.

- In teams still in the process of forming, potential members with common views, objectives or needs will join to influence others to move in their direction.

Case Study: Debriefing the Chiefs' Meeting with Luke

So much for theory, now let's look at a real example of the "as if" group at work. (Names have been changed to preserve anonymity). Luke, one of my clients, had come back to tell me the outcomes of a meeting we had planned to surface key issues amongst his senior management leadership team.

"Well," says Luke, "Steven (the senior executive) struggled a bit to understand why things aren't working, but said if not having a core Chiefs' meeting was the root cause, we could have half an hour to an hour every Monday. I did bring up using professional help, but they don't think it is necessary because everyone agreed they could talk openly."

I said, *"As they were able to do in this meeting?"*

Luke says, *"Yes, exactly."*

I said, *"And did you consider what you wanted to do in the one hour meetings to begin working differently as a Leadership Team?"*

Luke says, *"Yes - Hadley led us in a brainstorm on what we wanted to do. Everybody was really energized and really together on it. We listed all the initiatives we need to pursue."*

"Well," say I, "Can you tell me what people actually said, or at least the themes?"

Luke said, *"Well, it was more like a couple of people made some observations and everyone else agreed. And, let's see, we agreed there was a problem that when we made decisions we don't always carry them out. And, we are operating too much in chimneys, and...."*

"And?" I prompted.

"...well that was about it," says Luke.

I said, *"Luke, I have spoken to all of the chiefs about issues within the Leadership team, and I know you have spoken with everyone, too. So, did the issue that Steven does not trust the Chiefs or share 'secret' information with them come up?"*

"Well no," says Luke.

"How about the issue expressed by Hadley that Steven is the most dictatorial, directive, micromanaging manager Hadley has ever had in her career and she can't take it much longer?"

"Well, no," says Luke.

"The fact that the Chiefs think Steven's facilitative style is fake, and that they actually can't influence his decisions -- much less arriving at collaborative team decisions?"

"Errrrrr, no" says Luke.

"How about the issue that Hadley and Andrew completely distrust Eric and view him as politically manipulating things to achieve his own ends instead of acting in the best interests of the organization?"

"Errrr...no."

"How about Eric seeing Hadley as circling the wagons to protect her turf and not interested in the customer? Also hogging up more than her share of resources?"

"Err...no" says Luke, "But we only had 30 minutes."

"So," I said, "these things are going to be explored during these one hour meetings?"

"Ummm, no," says Luke.

"I'll bet the plan is to leap right into task and handle the list of initiatives, instead?" I say.

"Mmmmmmmmm, well, that's right" says Luke.

I said, "Help me understand how you think the team is going to be successful in pursuing these initiatives given all of these profound issues?"

Long pause.

Luke says, "I'm beginning to see where you are coming from....hmmmm you're totally right...that was NOT a good meeting at all! HOW did that happen? How come I forgot all the issues we talked about and then thought that it was?"

What Happened in the Meeting?

Let's explore the 'as if' dynamics that emerged in this meeting. At the very beginning, we see dependency - specifically, if only they had a core Chiefs' meeting they could operate as a good leadership team. Next, is pairing: a couple of people made some observations and everyone else agreed. The dominant dynamic, however, was flight which became apparent immediately after. The group avoided any discussion of the real, highly sensitive, and very major issues that all the

The group acted 'as if' it was working when in fact it identified only comparatively superficial issues ("*...we don't always carry decisions out, and work too much in chimneys.*") and displayed a sudden burst of energy and harmony in their off-topic discussion of initiatives versus exploring issues. ("*Everybody was really energized and really together on it. We listed all the initiatives we need to pursue.*") Luke's final realizations clearly underline the unconscious nature of the 'as if' group at work. And in

fact, the group did continue fight/flight avoidance dynamics into the core Chiefs' meeting that was established.

What Do You Do?

The bad news is that there are no quick fixes or silver bullets for 'as if' group dynamics. They are normal, unavoidable, and they can prevent teams from fulfilling their potential and achieving their goals. They are unconscious and difficult to recognize -- masquerading as other issues or dynamics which dupe teams and their leaders into focusing on the wrong things - or even believing that everything is going swimmingly.

The good news is that (as with most of the problems with groups and teams that we have already covered), there are a finite number of 'as if' group manifestations, which I have listed.

The challenge is to help a team learn to recognize when it is operating in an 'as if' mode, label it, explore and understand what is really happening, and to manage or reconcile it. In our own experience, all high performing teams that have consistently delivered exceptional results have developed this awareness and skills. This is one area in which - for maximum impact and best attainable team outcomes - it is advisable to bring in professional help to get started. And our clients have found that the ROI in transferring such learning and skills sets to team is well worth the initial investment.

Conclusion: Do It Right the First Time: Launching Teams for Success.

Healthy, high performing teams are easy to spot:

- Members hold themselves accountable for achieving the group's objectives.
- Members are willing and able to fully contribute their knowledge and expertise.
- Members understand, value, and exploit diverse skills and abilities within the group.
- Members engage in open and honest dialogue around areas of disagreement, finding solutions that enable the group to progress.

Getting there involves three basic steps:

Defining the purpose of the group is a necessary precondition for success. Every group (team, task force, etc.) must have a clear reason to exist. Call it anything you like, so long as members understand it in the same way and feel individually and collectively committed to achieving it. One vital point: commitment cannot be achieved through directives or forced compliance. All members need to be involved in the initial content discussions. It is that process of idea generation and dialogue that builds the common understanding and alignment that leads to shared commitment.

Team leadership is all about managing group process. The leader's job is to ensure that the knowledge, expertise, and talents within the team are available to and fully utilized by the team in achieving or exceeding its goals. A well constructed agenda, embodying the team's purpose, driving progress, and facilitating members' contributions creates a structure for success. Managing the team's process brings the structure to life, creates confidence, and unleashes creativity. Knowing when and how to lead the team in idea generation, problem solving, decision making, and conflict resolution are the essential skills for the effective team leader.

Understanding and managing group dynamics: even when aligned behind a common purpose, with capable leadership and robust processes, teams take on a life of their own that is absolutely predictable, generally unconscious, and unavoidable. Because "as if" dynamics are difficult to recognize teams and their leaders are often duped into focusing on the wrong things, or even believing that everything is going swimmingly. The challenge is to help a team learn to recognize when it is operating in an 'as if' mode, label it, explore and understand what is really happening, and to manage their behavior.

Despite some of the issues 'as if' dynamics can create for teams, the investment of time and effort in a simple team launch process – beginning with team formation, the selection and training of the leader, and the team's creation of their statement of purpose -- will avoid the common schedule-wrecking pitfalls and set the stage for the exceptional performance and greater creativity you expect.