



## An Overview of the Eight Characteristics of Highly Effective Teams

Researchers have studied team effectiveness in a variety of settings and fields, including government, medicine, sports, and private enterprise. These studies demonstrate that there are eight characteristics of highly effective teams.<sup>1</sup> These characteristics are described briefly below. Subsequent chapters of this binder contain more detailed descriptions of each of these characteristics, as well as teamwork exercises, tips, and other tools to support high effectiveness in each of these areas.

### ***A Clear and Elevating Goal (Vision)***

High performance teams have both a clear understanding of the goal to be achieved and a belief that the goal embodies a worthwhile or important result; teams with a “clear and elevating goal” understand that whether the team succeeds clearly makes a difference.

### ***Results-Driven Structure***

The importance of structure is not in its presence or absence. More important is whether a structure is in place that is appropriate for the achievement of the performance objectives. To be successful, a team’s structure should be designed around the results to be achieved.

There are three kinds of teams:

- *Problem resolution teams* are established to resolve problems on an ongoing basis. Their most necessary feature is trust; members must believe in the integrity of their colleagues and feel secure in an atmosphere of collegiality and respect.
- *Creative teams* are established to innovate. Their necessary feature is autonomy from systems and procedures. In other words, they must have the latitude to explore new possibilities and alternatives, be willing and able to abandon normative thinking, and serve as the incubator for new ideas.
- *Tactical teams* are established to execute well-defined plans. Their most essential feature is clarity in task and an unambiguous role in the carrying out of the plans.

There are four necessary features to team structure:

- *Clear roles and accountabilities*—Each member’s relationship to the team is defined in terms of the role to be assumed and the results the role is to produce.
- *An effective communication system*—Opportunities for team members to discuss team issues in a relaxed environment (social and informal interaction opportunities) are essential; methods for documenting issues raised and decisions made are important as well.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from concepts in *TeamWork: What Must Go Right/What Can Go Wrong*, by C. E. Larson and F. M. LaFasto, 1989, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications

- *Monitoring performance and providing feedback*—Establishing systems of checks and balances to ensure that performance meets expectations is a must.
- *Fact-based judgments*—Objective and factual data should be the basis of the team’s sound decision-making.

### **Competent Team Members**

Competency is defined as the necessary skills and abilities to achieve the desired objective (technical competencies) and the personal characteristics required to achieve excellence while working well with others (personal competencies).

- Technical competencies are minimal requirements of any team. They include substantive knowledge, skills, and abilities related to the specific tasks to be accomplished.
- Personal competencies refer to the qualities, skills, and abilities necessary for individual team members to identify, address, and resolve issues.

There are three common features of competent team members:

- The essential skills and abilities to conduct the work,
- A strong desire to contribute, and
- The capacity to collaborate effectively.

### **Unified Commitment**

A unified commitment is best characterized by “team spirit,” or a sense of loyalty and dedication to the team. It is often exhibited by an unrestrained sense of excitement and enthusiasm for the team and its work, a willingness to do anything that has to be done to help the team succeed, and an intense identification with the people who are on the team.

There are two significant features of this characteristic:

- Commitment to the effort—Teams do not excel without significant investment of individual time and energy.
- Unity—Group spirit and teamwork are indispensable to superior performance.

### **Collaborative Climate**

A collaborative climate is most commonly described in the adage “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” Teams operating in a truly collaborative climate work well together, and trust is a mainstay virtue.

Trust is produced in a climate that includes three elements:

- Honesty (i.e., integrity and truthfulness),
- Consistency (i.e., predictable behavior and responses), and
- Respect (i.e., treating people with dignity and fairness).

### ***Standards of Excellence***

Standards define those expectations that eventually determine the level of performance a team deems acceptable. Standards determine the type of technical competency required, the amount of initiative and effort required, how people are expected to behave with one another, how firm the deadlines are, and how the results will be achieved. Ultimately, standards dictate the rewards for success and the consequences for failure.

Pressure to perform can come from a variety of sources:

- Individual standards,
- Team pressure,
- The consequences of success or failure (i.e., reaching the clear and elevating goal/vision),
- External pressure, and
- The team leader.

Three variables are integral to establishing and sustaining standards of excellence. They are the extent to which:

- Standards are clearly and concretely articulated,
- Team members require one another to perform according to the established standards of excellence, and
- A team exerts pressure on itself to improve.

### ***External Support and Recognition***

External support and recognition is measured by the extent to which those individuals and agencies outside the team who are capable of contributing to the team's success acknowledge and support the work of the team. (Interestingly, the external support and recognition factor seems to be more an effect of team success than a cause of it. It is noted more for its absence in poorly functioning teams than its presence in highly effective teams.)

### ***Principled Leadership***

Leadership can add tremendous value to any collaborative endeavor, even to the point of sparking the outcome with an intangible kind of magic. Effective leaders draw together the team's vision, a belief in the opportunity for change, and the ability to meaningfully involve others.

Effective leaders:

- Establish a vision of the future,
- Enlist others to embrace the vision,
- Create change, and
- Unleash the energy and talent of contributing members.

## A Clear and Elevating Goal

One critical ingredient of a successful collaborative effort is the development of a common vision that captures the ultimate purpose and direction of a team's work. A vision is a description of a team's preferred future. It answers the question "Where does the team want to be long into the future?" Because visions are expressions of optimism that are lofty and compelling, they pull teams forward and help inspire productive work and action. A vision does not describe how it will be achieved and it does not include action steps. Rather, it concisely articulates a team's ideal destination.

A clearly articulated vision can be a useful tool to a team that encounters challenges in its day-to-day work. For example, when disagreements arise among team members, a review of the team's larger vision can be a helpful way to refocus members on the "big picture" and to move past the specific issue or challenge they are facing, which so often is tangential, or even totally unrelated, to the vision. Alternatively, a well-crafted vision often refocuses team members on the ultimate destination—and the values it represents—and facilitates focused discussion on, and resolution of, difficult issues.

Our nation's history is filled with lofty and compelling visions. Leaders in various fields (e.g., politics, civil rights, sports, environment, etc.) have used visions to inspire those with and for whom they worked. The following are some examples of visions from our history:

- *I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.* (Martin Luther King, Jr., August 28, 1963)
- *Down the long lane of history yet to be written America knows that this world of ours, ever growing smaller, must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate, and be, instead, a proud confederation of mutual trust and respect.* (Dwight D. Eisenhower, January 17, 1961)
- *Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean's depths, and encourage the arts and commerce.* (John F. Kennedy, January 20, 1961)
- *The great American forest, since our nation's founding, has provided the resources to build our homes, our schools, our churches—it has provided the inspiration for our philosophers, our poets, our artists. Working together we can continue to improve, enhance, and protect this great natural resource to help ensure that we have healthy forests with clean water, clean air, abundant wildlife, wilderness, and working forests in harmony with the needs of all Americans for the generations yet to come.* (7th American Forest Congress, proposed vision statement)

Similarly, collaborative teams across the country that are committed to making their communities safer and improving the way in which justice is administered in their jurisdictions have developed visions to guide their work. The following examples serve as illustrations:

*Everyone Safe at Home...Families Free from Violence!* (City-based, multidisciplinary collaborative team working to coordinate services and activities related to the investigation, prosecution, and management of perpetrators of domestic violence)

*We are committed to creating a county that is absent of juvenile sex offenders and their victims, and where:*

- *All sexually aggressive youth and their families have access to a comprehensive continuum of very high quality services that addresses their specific needs, reduces the likelihood of further abuse, and enhances community safety;*
- *All victims (children, adolescents, and adults) and their families have access to appropriate services and support; and*
- *Comprehensive sexual abuse prevention and education services exist in every community (county-based, multidisciplinary collaborative team works to improve the way in which the juvenile justice system responds to and manages juvenile sex offenders and their victims).*

## **A Results-Driven Structure**

A second important characteristic of high performing teams is a results-driven structure. This characteristic reflects the need of every team to organize itself in a way that will enable it to be productive and, ultimately, to achieve what it has set out to do.

As teams are establishing themselves and initiating their collaborative work, members often ask what their team should “look like.” Should the team have a chair? Co-chairs? A designated facilitator? Should the team organize itself into subcommittees? What is the “right” number of people to have on the team? Eight people? Twelve people? More? Less? The answers to all of these questions depend on what specifically the team is trying to achieve. All teams must have a structure—it is not effective to be disorganized—but the structure should reflect the results that the team intends to achieve.

Although the organizing of teams often happens by default, the structure of every team must be examined and discussed by all team members. One industrious and motivated team member might agree to develop a meeting agenda or record and distribute the meeting minutes. Someone else—perhaps the person who calls the meeting—serves as the team leader and/or its facilitator. However, conversations rarely occur about the development of a team structure that will enhance and support the efforts of the group over time. These are discussions that teams must have as they embark on their collaborative endeavor.

The ways in which teams structure themselves to conduct their work vary based on their mandates and their reasons for being. In their work, Larson and LaFasto (*TeamWork: What Must Go Right/What Can Go Wrong*, 1989, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications) identified three different kinds of teams, each of which has a different purpose and, therefore, a unique structure. They are:

- *Problem resolution teams*—These are teams that are established to resolve problems on an ongoing basis. An example is an epidemiology team that responds quickly and with maximum efficiency when a disease breaks out in a particular location. Their most essential

feature is trust. If there is no trust among team members, there will not be honesty, and honesty is necessary if the team members are going to understand fully the roots or causes of the problem (in this case, the disease) they need to solve. Members of these teams must believe fully in the integrity of their colleagues and feel secure in an atmosphere of collegiality and respect as they problem solve together. Given the nature of their work, problem resolution teams are organized to move forward very fast to contain and, ultimately, solve the problems they are addressing. This requires efforts to make sure that the correct people are involved or prepared to be involved in the work of the team, and clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of team members before the team begins its work on the problem at hand.

- *Creative teams*—Other teams come together to create something new—to innovate. An example is a product development team, such as the McDonald’s Chicken McNugget Team. An important feature of creative teams is autonomy from systems and procedures. Unfortunately, this is not something that is easy to come by in criminal and juvenile justice system work, but freedom from these constraints is necessary to promote creativity and innovation. Members of creative teams have the latitude to work beyond their traditional professional boundaries and barriers to generate new ideas about how their own and their organizations’ work can be accomplished in more effective and impactful ways.
- *Tactical teams*—The purpose of tactical teams is to execute and operationalize well-defined plans. Their essential feature is clarity regarding what they are supposed to do; a shared understanding of each member’s role and sense of responsibility for successfully carrying out the plan are essential.

Many communities/jurisdictions/agencies have several different types of teams in place that focus on a variety of specific criminal and juvenile justice issues. In these cases, it is important for each team to not only be clear about its own function and purpose, but also to understand how its work is related to and impacts the efforts of other teams, and the larger criminal or juvenile justice system.

While there is no single structure that is appropriate for all teams, there are elements or features of team structure that need to be considered and in place in order for teams to be maximally effective. The following are the four necessary features of team structure that are defined by Larson and LaFasto:

- *Clear roles and responsibilities (or accountabilities)*—Each member must be clear about his or her function on the team, and understand the tasks and activities for which they are responsible and accountable. Individuals who do not understand fully why they are participating in a group may not be as committed to the work of the team and may not be willing or able to assume as much responsibility as those who know what they are expected to contribute. Therefore, at the outset of a collaborative team’s work and as new members are invited to participate, it is critical that members’ roles and responsibilities are discussed and clarified.
- *Effective communication system*—Collaborative teams must establish and maintain effective communication systems. This does not mean access to email lists and scanners or fax machines, or the development and distribution of meeting minutes. While these are all very important, an effective communication system requires that teams function in an

environment where members can talk honestly and openly with one another about issues that are important to them and to their collaborative effort. Collaborative relationships cannot be achieved unless members are willing and able to be candid with one another about their work, their successes and achievements, and, more importantly, the problems and challenges they are facing.

- *Monitoring performance and providing feedback*—It is essential for teams to establish mechanisms and strategies to monitor over time their performance and effectiveness, and to use the feedback they generate from these efforts to enhance and improve the work that they are conducting. Teams must ensure that they are making progress over time, that they are achieving interim objectives and moving towards their long-term goals, and that all team members are participating actively and contributing constructively.
- *Fact-based judgments*—Finally, the research indicates that a necessary feature of team structure is fact-based decision making. Teams must be thoughtful, deliberate, and comprehensive in the plans they develop to gather and develop the information necessary to inform their work and their judgments. Members must agree that they will make decisions based on the best information available and not on personal agendas, or how they think and feel about a particular issue.

### Competent Team Members

Competency is defined as the necessary skills and abilities to achieve the desired objective (technical competencies) and the personal characteristics required to achieve excellence while working well with others (personal competencies).

- Technical competencies are minimal requirements of any team. They include the substantive knowledge, skills, and abilities related to the specific tasks to be accomplished.
- Personal competencies refer to the qualities, skills, and abilities necessary for individual team members to identify, address, and resolve issues.

There are three common features of competent team members:

- The essential skills and abilities to conduct the work;
- A strong desire to contribute; and
- The capacity to collaborate effectively.

One of the necessary characteristics of high performing teams is the participation of competent team members. In this case, “competent” is not defined as general social or intellectual competence; instead, it refers to the presence of individuals on the team who are best able to achieve the team’s collective objectives.

There are essentially two types of competency involved in collaboration:

- *Technical competency* is defined as having the skills and abilities necessary to fulfill the needs of the team. As such, an important question to consider as you put together a team or evaluate the effectiveness of an existing team is: Do we have people with all of the technical skills that are required for this task? If not, what critical skills are we missing?

Where else might we seek out individuals who possess the technical competency that is currently missing from our team?

- The other type of competency needed for a successful team composition is *personal competency*. There are many people who are excellent at what they do, but are happiest when they are working independently rather than with others or in groups. This is simply a reflection of an individual's preferred working style. However, it is important to remember that a person who prefers to work alone may be technically very competent, but lack the desire or the people skills necessary to work effectively in a collaborative environment. Having too many individuals with this work style can pose barriers to completing the team's work. Personally competent team members, on the other hand, are those who are both capable of interacting well with others and who are willing to do so. It is critical to have at least some personally competent individuals as members of your team.

To summarize, competent team members share three common features: they possess the essential skills and abilities to accomplish the work, they have a strong desire to contribute (ideally because they believe in the team's vision), and they have the demonstrated capacity to collaborate effectively.

Research indicates that when these three factors are in place, the group's confidence begins to grow, and this confidence gives the team the ability to meet challenges and adjust to adversity. Essentially, the competence of individual team members becomes the competence of the collaborative team as a whole. As a result, the team develops greater confidence in its ability to achieve its elevating goal.

In addition, teams that possess these features develop a greater ability to self-correct. They are more effective at monitoring themselves as individuals in their collective work and they can refocus each other on the issue at hand when necessary.

Therefore, it is critical that teams ensure that they have the right balance of stakeholders on their team—individuals who bring both technical expertise and knowledge, as well as those who are able to work well as members of a collaborative effort.

### **Unified Commitment**

A unified commitment to address a particular issue or problem is another important characteristic of high performing teams. Larson and LaFasto (1989) observe that this characteristic is the most difficult of the eight to explain and describe; to be understood fully, it must be experienced directly by team members. There are, however, a number of factors that strongly suggest the presence of a unified commitment. Teams that include members who respond in the affirmative to the following questions probably possess a unified commitment:

- Do you feel a sense of belonging to your team?
- Do you consider yourself very loyal and dedicated to the work of your team and, more specifically, to its mission and goals?
- Do you experience on a consistent basis excitement and enthusiasm about the work of your team?

- Do you look forward to being involved in the work of your team?
- Do you look forward to working with your fellow team members?

A unified commitment might manifest itself as team members' willingness to do whatever needs to be done to ensure that the team succeeds in its work. Contributing to the larger team's accomplishments becomes every person's primary focus; as a result, members often stop saying "It's not my job" or "It was my turn last week" when difficult work must be done. Other individuals who have been members of teams that have achieved unified commitment describe an intense identification between their colleagues and the emergence over time of an "all for one and one for all" mentality.

When a unified commitment is present, team members may also experience a loss of self. That is, in the context of the collaborative, they are no longer focused on personal or agency performance. Instead, the team's efforts and its outcomes become a priority for everyone involved. This is common with many successful sports teams, where members believe and have operationalized the old cliché that "there is no I in team." It does not matter how individual players perform, but rather, whether the team wins.

A unified commitment can also be characterized by a belief among team members that they are a part of something special and that they are sharing with other people something that is very important. As such, a unified commitment can evoke strong emotions among those involved, as well as an unusual sense of connectedness among individuals from different agencies and disciplines.

There are a great many ways to describe unified commitment, but it is highly experiential and, as a result, it is very challenging for teams to create unified commitment. Larson and LaFasto indicate in their research that consistent and substantive involvement in the work of a team is critical in the development and maintenance of it; there is a direct and very positive relationship between involvement and commitment. The more involved someone is in something, the more committed he or she is likely to feel. The inverse is also true. The more a team allows its members to remain uninvolved or only marginally involved, the more likely members are to be passive observers of the team's activities and the less committed they will be.

At the outset of their collaborative work, team members must be willing to be broadly inclusive. All those involved must be provided with opportunities to voice their concerns, ask questions, and contribute actively in the development of the structure and articulation of the shared values, vision, mission, and goals of the team. Those who are not fully committed to the work of the team may attempt to use the team as a vehicle to pursue their own or their agency's goals. If collaborative team and individual member goals are not compatible, the team's performance can be disrupted and other members' confidence and commitment to the team's work can be compromised.

Team member involvement does not cease with the articulation of shared values, vision, mission, and goals. Instead, as the team's work plan is developed and specific next steps are identified, every team member must be involved in a meaningful and very active way.

### *Developing a Mission Statement*

As a result of your efforts to develop a statement of shared core values and a vision of the future, there will emerge among the members of your team a strong sense of commitment to your collaborative undertaking. The focus of this exercise is the development of a clear, time-specific mission and specific goals for your group that support your values and vision.

Identifying problems that keep you and your colleagues from moving in the direction of your vision is a critical undertaking for a team. If your team can clearly articulate these problems, then you can begin to work on solutions to these problems. Sometimes, the problem or set of problems that teams are supposed to work on have already been established by the person or entity that created the team. Often though, a team is only given a topic to work on, such as “reducing overcrowding,” “improving communication,” “enhancing offender management,” or “facilitating offender reentry.” Issues such as these focus the work of teams, but they do not tell teams about the nature of the specific problems associated with them. Until teams understand the problems that are impeding progress on the topic, they will not know how best to utilize their time and energy.

Unfortunately, it is common for teams to employ quick-reflex methods to solve significant problems, thereby failing to recognize and understand the nature and extent of the problems. For instance, when an issue arises concerning the failure of a criminal justice agency staff to accomplish a particular task, there is often someone who quickly suggests that the staff needs more training. This assumes that people do not know what to do; that if they knew what to do, they would do the right thing; and that training will teach them the right thing to do in a given situation. Of course, there may be many reasons why people do not do what their supervisors want them to do, such as disagreement with the tasks required, lack of adequate staff to do the work, a belief that the task is unnecessary, a lack of clarity about how to respond to a particular issue, or a lack of guidance in policy. As such, teams must first spend time analyzing the nature and cause of the problem before they leap to and begin to implement solutions.

A team’s desire to quickly resolve all matters of concern often leads them to focus on the most visible problems. These are often called surface issues, because they are easy to see. However, the forces or concerns that create or drive these surface issues are what teams should be striving to understand and resolve. For instance, an employee may often be late for work. We can respond to this surface issue by disciplining the employee in some manner. This might correct the problem, or it might not. If we want to be more thorough in determining the most appropriate way to respond, we would need to invest some time trying to determine why the employee comes to work late. There might be time-oriented problems, such as having to wait until the child care center opens, or transportation difficulties; or there might be motivational problems, such as not liking the work or having problems with coworkers, or many other possibilities. The good manager—and the effective collaborative team—always wants to know what drives the problem or causes the problem to occur. This always provides them with a much better chance of resolving the problem effectively and managing it appropriately in the future.

Effective teams must, therefore, be willing to invest significant time identifying the problems that are keeping them from advancing in the direction of their vision. The identification of these

problems (and the development of a time-specific mission statement based upon them) will help teams determine exactly what they need to spend their time and energy addressing.

A mission statement should help your team understand what it is going to accomplish. It should provide a clear, short-term destination for your team. In other words, you should be able to know if you have accomplished your mission. A mission statement should also help your team focus on a particular set of issues, and it should convey information about what your team believes and what your team members value.

In order to complete your mission, there are critical goals that must be achieved. These might include the collection and review of pertinent data, the mapping of your system in order to identify gaps or needs, or having the right individuals or agency representatives on your team. A critical goal is one that, if not accomplished, will prevent your team from satisfactorily completing its mission. The identification of critical goals will further focus the particular work that will be undertaken by your team. Often, critical goals are assigned to particular members of your team or to subcommittees to accomplish.

Once your team has identified its mission and the critical goals that must be accomplished, you will see the need to perform a variety of specific tasks or objectives. Achieving these objectives will aid you in reaching or completing your goals. A collectively developed mission statement with goals and objectives is also something around which team members can be unified. Everyone is clear about what the mission is, and they are highly committing to it.

The following are two examples of mission statements:

- To improve mental health services for incarcerated adults and juveniles; and
- By December of next year, to meet or exceed all appropriate national correctional and community standards regarding the provision of mental health services for adult and juvenile offenders who are incarcerated in our state.

The first mission statement does not provide sufficient clarity. Based on this statement, team members would not know if their mission has been accomplished. The second example is more useful because it clearly describes the team's future work. By December of next year, there will be no doubt about whether or not the team accomplished its mission. Based on this time-specific mission statement, it is possible for a team to develop clear goals that can be used to achieve the mission and, ultimately, help the team move towards its vision or preferred future.

A team's mission statement is different than its vision statement. A vision is a broad or global aspiration, likely only achievable in the long term and by many separate efforts. A mission statement addresses the piece of the vision on which a team is working and describes how a team will begin to work toward its vision.

## **A Collaborative Climate**

A collaborative climate is most commonly described in the adage "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Teams operating in a truly collaborative climate work well together; trust is a mainstay virtue.

Trust is produced in a climate that includes three elements:

- Honesty (i.e., integrity and truthfulness);
- Consistency (i.e., predictable behavior and responses); and
- Respect (i.e., treating people with dignity and fairness).

The hallmarks of a collaborative climate can be defined in the following way:

- Team members work well together;
- The team has a structure that is clear and well-defined; and
- Team members respect and trust one another.

The ability for team members to trust one another is the foundation of a collaborative climate. To assess whether team members fully trust one another, consider the following questions and issues:

- Do we trust that we are all working toward the same end—toward the collective goals of the group—and are not seeking individual gain?
- Do we trust that each member is equally invested and is willing to be an active participant and contributor to our work, or do we fear that we are going to produce and others will not?
- Do we trust that if things start to go wrong everyone is going to stand together to try to turn things around and to address whatever issues arise as a collective entity? Or do we fear that someone is going to stand on the sidelines, point fingers, or assign individual blame for our problems?

In sum, trust is a central, foundational aspect of effective collaboration. Without it, teams are likely to face insurmountable difficulty in conducting their work. Team members may not feel free to voice their opinions, commit to work assignments, challenge one another when necessary, or embrace a collective work process. These problems can be avoided, however, by making a concerted effort to enhance trust among group members. Although this may be a difficult process for those who have not worked as members of a collaborative team in the past, a failure to establish trust will only impede the work of the team.

*What are some ways that trust can be enhanced?*

- Team members must be willing to be honest with one another. Being honest translates into being forthcoming, forgoing exaggerations, demonstrating personal integrity, being willing to accept and not to cover up or minimize mistakes, and possibly most important, not ignoring any “elephants” that may be in the room. In other words, being open with one another is critical to establishing trust. Team members will appreciate honest observations that are shared in a respectful way. Ignoring problems that may be unspoken but that are obvious to anyone in the room is a critical mistake that teams often make. It is preferable to address issues that are affecting any member of the team, rather than simply avoiding the problems and hoping they will resolve themselves in time.

- Team members must also be open and willing to share and receive. This means stepping outside of our traditional “comfort zones” and being willing to listen to different perspectives and ideas that we may not have considered before. After all, we selected diverse team members to ensure that a wide variety of perspectives were represented. So it should be seen as positive when divergent points of view emerge. Remember that the perspectives of other team members is as important as our own, and that participating as a member of a collaborative team can teach us about how other disciplines may be impacted by a particular problem, or what their ideas are about how the problem might be resolved. Being open to not only sharing thoughts and ideas but also to taking in information that has not previously been considered—or may even have been resisted—is part of our obligation to the team.
- The notion of consistency also helps enhance trust. Being consistent does not mean that team members should never change their minds, but rather that they agree to behave in ways that are predictable, responsible, and reliable. Doing so helps team members know what to expect from one another and establishes expected parameters for how members will behave and interact with one another.
- Finally, team members must always demonstrate respect for one another. Our teammates should always be treated with dignity and fairness—not only in our spoken language, but also in our nonverbal, or body, language. Respecting opinions different from our own may be a challenge at times, but doing so is a vital part of establishing and maintaining trust. Every team member deserves the same respect that we expect for ourselves.

One of the ways that teams can begin to engender this kind of trust is to generate ground rules for their work together. Ground rules should be developed as a full team during one of its initial work sessions together. These rules are a written agreement for how team members will conduct themselves and work together as a group. They will provide not only a framework for future interactions, but also a way to help teams create the kind of environment that members want to work in.

### **Standards of Excellence**

Standards define expectations that eventually determine the level of performance a team deems acceptable. Standards determine the type of technical competency required and the amount of initiative and effort required, as well as how people are expected to behave with one another, how firm the deadlines are, and how results will be achieved. Ultimately, standards dictate the rewards for success and the consequences of failure.

Pressure to perform can come from a variety of sources:

- Individual standards;
- Team pressure;
- The consequences of success or failure (i.e., reaching the clear and elevating goal/vision);
- External pressure; and

- The team leader.

Three variables are integral to establishing and sustaining standards of excellence:

- The extent to which standards are clearly and concretely articulated;
- The extent to which team members require one another to perform according to the established standards of excellence; and
- The extent to which a team exerts pressure on itself to improve.

We have already established that engendering trust among team members is critical to the ongoing success of a team. Another way to establish and maintain trust is to focus on accountability, or standards of excellence. Teams should aim to create standards (or, like deadlines, they can be created for us) and hold each person accountable to act or perform in accordance with the standards.

Often what happens with teams is that things go wrong and everyone knows that there is trouble but no single team member is willing to confront the problems. If you were to talk to people individually, you would likely hear them articulate a wide range of problems (individuals who don't show up consistently, someone who constantly holds side conversations and does not seem to pay attention, a leader who does not run meetings effectively, etc.). The problem is that team members don't know precisely how, are simply not willing, or don't have a mechanism to confront the issue with the team as a whole. Team members may not want to bring about conflict, may worry that they are the only ones who perceive the issue as a problem, or might be waiting for another team member to take on the problem. Often team members are willing to leave things as they are rather than address them head on because they fear confrontation would be detrimental to the group.

In order to alleviate such problems and support team members if they wish to respectfully confront an issue, there needs to be in place a work environment in which we can articulate our standards and hold one another accountable to them—not in a blaming way but in a helpful, productive way that helps the team move forward. Standards can help teams to do just that.

Like ground rules, standards give us a framework for our process of working together, as well as a structure under which to accomplish the team's desired outcomes. Standards should exist for individual performance (e.g., ground rules) as well as team performance (e.g., a memorandum of understanding that sets forth the team's purpose in working together and outlines the commitment of each participating agency). It is important to make our standards clear and to revisit them often. Failing to develop standards and to hold people accountable to what they have agreed to do as members of the team can have quite a negative impact on the group's work.

Consider the following example: Perhaps someone on the team has gotten the idea that there is no standard for the form or accuracy of the meeting minutes, so they volunteer to prepare the notes, and feel that, as a volunteer, they should be able to do a quick job and the team should be appreciative. However, these notes may be part of an official record and they need to be in a certain format, spell-checked, and approved by the whole team. Shouldn't everyone be

made aware of that? And, what if no one says anything? Will that person's performance influence the performance of others who volunteer at subsequent meetings? Or will everyone quietly resent the individual for not performing?

When standards are established, the tone is set for what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in a variety of arenas—technical, interpersonal, and professional. Having standards that are consistent with the values and principles of team members—whether those are set by the team leader, by the agency sponsoring the team, by the high or low profile of the team's purpose, or by the individuals who make up the team—is important to building team unity and team confidence, which will ultimately contribute to team success. Teams should refer back to the standards they have set, and should measure their progress against those standards, continually reevaluating what can be done to improve their work together and, ultimately, accomplish their goals.

### **External Support and Recognition**

Another critically important characteristic of effective teams is external support and recognition. In order to sustain themselves and achieve their missions, it is essential that teams gain and maintain support from agencies and individuals who are not involved in their work but who can impact their success.

In many instances, external support and recognition seem to be an effect of team success rather than a cause of it. That is, support and recognition from external entities often come after a team has begun to move forward and has achieved something significant. In other words, teams are often recognized and supported more fully after they accomplish something.

This characteristic is noted by teams more often because of its absence than its presence, and more often by teams that are not doing well than by those that are. As such, external support and recognition are often not major barriers to the work of a team, but rather benefits that can enhance performance and effectiveness, and sustain the collaborative endeavor over time.

As teams embark on their collaborative work, they should develop approaches to ensure external support for, and recognition of, their efforts over time. The strategies that teams employ to do this vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, based on teams' unique needs and the specific agencies and individuals from whom they need external support and recognition.

The following examples illustrate how two collaborative criminal justice teams have worked proactively to guarantee support and recognition from outside entities:

- A county-based, multidisciplinary policy team that is organized to enhance the management of a certain type of criminal offender in the community conducts periodic presentations to the county's larger, multidisciplinary criminal justice advisory board. These presentations include updates on the policy team's activities, with a focus on recent successes and accomplishments, and the members' upcoming collaborative work. Early on in its existence, the policy team correctly recognized that it would need the advisory board's support in its efforts to change and enhance the county's offender management policies and practices. This proactive and ongoing communication approach between the two groups provides an

opportunity for the advisory board to offer feedback and input to the policy team, guarantees that the final recommendations of the policy team will not surprise the advisory board when they are presented, and significantly increases the likelihood that the board will be supportive of the recommendations.

- A court-based collaborative team responsible for administering a drug court recognizes and celebrates its successes on a very regular basis. When offenders complete the rigorous program, community members, county commissioners, state legislators, state Supreme Court justices, and local news reporters are often invited to the graduation ceremonies. This highlights for key stakeholders the positive impact of the program on participants and the community, and increases the likelihood that the drug court team will be able to secure local and state resources to support itself when its federal funding has been expended.

### **Principled Leadership**

The final characteristic of high performing teams is principled leadership. As teams initiate their work, it is important that they are guided by highly motivated individuals (often referred to as “champions”) who possess a willingness to set aside narrow and parochial interests in order to identify and achieve a vision and mission that are larger than any one individual or agency. Effective, principled leaders focus their efforts on the collaborative process of how people from different disciplines and agencies work together rather than on a particular point of view (or the content of the problem being addressed). If leaders bring the right stakeholders together in constructive ways (the process) with good information, the team will generate appropriate responses and solutions to the problem or issue at hand (the content).

Leadership of the collaborative process is undertaken and exhibited in many ways, including:

- Keeping key stakeholders at the table through periods of frustration and skepticism;
- Acknowledging small, but important, successes throughout the life of the team;
- Assisting members to negotiate and reach consensus on difficult and contentious issues;
- Unearthing the energy and talents of members and channeling them into the pursuit of the team’s vision, mission, and goals;
- Facilitating productive, ongoing communication among team members;
- Ensuring that all participants are active contributors to the work of the team; and
- Monitoring and enforcing the operating norms and ground rules developed by the team.

Ultimately, and ideally, all team members become leaders who work to keep one another at the table, celebrate their successes on a consistent basis, remain committed to reaching consensus, value the contributions of everyone involved, and uphold agreed-upon norms and ground rules. Champions and effective leaders of collaborative endeavors, therefore, work to develop the leadership qualities of others and, over time, share their responsibilities. If members of a team do not know how to work together, then leaders teach them. When teams lose sight of their vision and mission, leaders bring these back into sharp focus and highlight their importance. When new leaders emerge, seasoned, principled leaders enthusiastically partner with them.

The most effective leaders are also inspiring. They make others want to be part of the collaborative effort. Individuals gravitate towards them because they want to be involved in everything that the leaders are doing. Leaders imbue everything they do with a spark, a spirit, and a confidence in the initiative's importance and success. They set a positive example for other team members, and set and uphold standards of excellence that the team will follow. When leaders establish high expectations, amazing things can and do happen.