COMMITTED

TEAMS

Three Steps to Inspiring Passion

and Performance

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PREFACE

Our teamwork philosophy is easy to describe. You get organized, schedule regular times to check on your progress, and make adjustments when necessary. Three steps.

Simple.

The hard part is actually following the steps during your typical workday: time-crunched and stressful, deadline-driven, often chaotic, and full of quirky characters who have surprising motives. Not so simple—but that is a common reality. We wrote this book for teams who have to deliver results under these difficult conditions. Though it originated in the research we conducted at the Wharton School of Business, we organized our findings in the form of a how-to guide.

In Part One, we describe the three-step process for creating and maintaining a *committed team*. The process begins with establishing the three foundations of successful teamwork: goals, roles, and norms. Combine the three foundations with the three steps, and you have what we call the 3x3 Framework—or the 3x3, for short. We recommend you read Part One from beginning to end, so that you understand the whole 3x3 and how to apply it. Each chapter includes a tool that you can start using right away.

Part Two is about five common types of teaming: virtual teams, startups, innovation projects, leadership groups, and committees. If you are especially interested in learning how to manage a particular type of teamwork, you can go right to the chapter about it in this part after reading about the basic 3x3. Of course, you are welcome to read straight through Part Two, and we hope you will after finishing Part One. Each chapter in the second half of the book offers lessons you will find valuable no matter what your team needs to accomplish.

INTRODUCTION
"CAN I MAKE MY TEAM WORK?"

Intense!

Twisting your features into a mask of pain, you dig your heels into the soft grass. A rope tears into your palms. Sweat runs down your face as blood seeps from spidery cracks in your skin and onlookers gawk and yell.

A clear, tiny voice speaks to you amid the cacophony of confused thoughts swirling in your head: "So-o-o-o ... what am I learning from this experience?"

Well, you should be learning about teamwork. You are in the middle of a typical organizational development exercise. This one happens to entail pulling a large rock 30 feet. Your supervisor decided to start by having you try going it alone. Yet, despite all of your 5 A.M. Crossfit workouts at the gym, you failed to move the boulder even an inch. To achieve a different result, you clearly need to work with others.

Teamwork gets things done, right?

As others join you, one by one, the collective rope-pulling effort seems to demonstrate the point. Little by little, the boulder starts moving until it nudges over the 30-foot mark. Cheers erupt. But you notice something odd. With each additional person who contributes to the effort, the boulder moves a little bit faster, but not as fast as you would have imagined. By the time the tenth person steps up, you feel the group is barely pulling harder than when it was only six, even though everyone seems to be working hard.

Afterward, you ask others if they noticed the same thing. Everyone says: "*I* was pulling my weight, but it sure seems that others weren't."

1 + 1 = ... 1.5? If the boulder exercise sounds like something you have experienced on your own team, then you have encountered a well-known phenomenon first identified by Max Ringelmann in the early twentieth century: social loafing.[1] It names the tendency to apply less and less effort to a task as more people become involved with it.

In the original studies of what became known as the Ringelmann Effect, the French engineer analyzed the amount of energy expended by his students in a rope-pulling contest. As each side expanded its team, each person became less committed to the task, subconsciously slacking off more and more. No synergies here: 1 + 1 equals something less than 2, as illustrated in Figure I.1. This is just one in a long list of bad habits that most teams tend to cultivate over time, even though they might not be aware of it.

Teamwork Everywhere, All the Time

Flawed or not, teams show no signs of going away. Increasingly, in fact, being good at teamwork is synonymous with simply being good at work. And for a valid reason: the complexity of today's world—shaped by rapidly accelerating technological, economic, and cultural trends—demands that organizations of all kinds seek out the
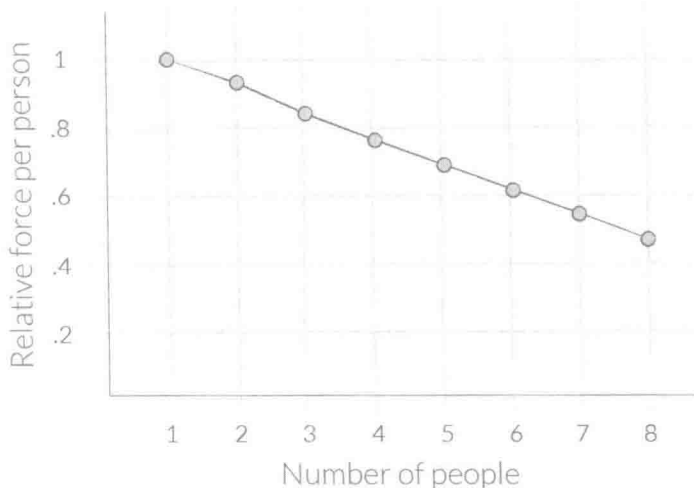
Figure I.1   Effects of Social Loafing on People Pulling on a Rope

synergistic potential of teams. But too often what teams deliver is a lot of talk and little accountability. How many team kickoff meetings have left you, just a few minutes afterward, not quite sure of what the heck was accomplished? And wait—when is the next meeting, anyway?

Hence the basic question that led us to write this book: How do you create a team that is committed to high performance when few teams end up being truly greater than the sum of their parts? Our answer is a simple framework: the 3x3. It is built on three foundations and supports an interactive three-step process. By helping you get better at leading teams, the 3x3 will help you get better at virtually all aspects of your work.

A Teamwork Laboratory: Creating the 3x3 Framework

Our own team came together through the Executive Development Program (EDP) at the Wharton School of Business. We were a group of assorted organizational specialists—social scientists, MBAs, and management consultants—with decades of combined experience researching and solving problems related to group dynamics. Mario

Moussa, co-director of Wharton's Strategic Persuasion Workshop and an EDP faculty member, gave us one goal: produce a field-tested process for creating and leading High-Performing Teams (HPTs).

Wharton's EDP, an immersive two-week experience, attracts leaders and rising stars who come from all around the world to develop a broad range of business skills. Participants learn under the guidance of top faculty and Academic Director Peter Fader, the Frances and Pei-Yuan Chia Professor of Marketing. One of the core components of the program is a highly realistic business simulation that creates a living teamwork laboratory. Because EDP participants are the best of the best, the program is an ideal environment in which to stress-test our theories about what makes teams tick and how they get better.

To give you a sense of how this "laboratory" works and why it helps crystallize the key features of high- and low-performing teams, let us bring you into the world of the simulation, entering the way hundreds of participants do every year. At the beginning, you sit huddled in a conference room with six other executives from nearly every continent on the planet. They are your teammates. But you have never met any of them before and, given the number of languages spoken in the room, you may have trouble communicating with them about even the most basic topics.

To make matters worse, you know next to nothing about your company's industry, and neither does anyone else, because it is organized around medical devices that don't exist in the real world. Nevertheless, all of you have to quickly ramp up and, as a team, make a series of business decisions. Biggest issue: Sales are down in your company's most important region. Why? Is it product quality? Poor marketing? Your team needs to do research into the possible causes before it can determine what to do and where to invest. Your peers will scrutinize your team's decisions and results in a public forum.

Do you want to join this company? Probably not, because it sounds like a nightmare. But we would strongly encourage you to spend a few days of your life working in it. You would learn a lot there. We certainly have.

In this setting, we took on the challenge of creating a process that any team can use to boost engagement and continually improve performance, no matter how diverse the group, or how unwieldy its challenges. We knew that if the approach we created worked in the chaotic world of the EDP simulation, it could work anywhere. So far, we have observed, analyzed, and supported the development of more than 100 of these EDP teams. With each running of the program, we have assessed and made adjustments to our team-building framework. Combining our insights from the simulation with our own individual experiences as researchers and consultants, we created the 3x3 Framework for producing team results that are greater than the sum of individual members' efforts.

Step One: Commit
Establish Commitments
Step Two: Check
Check Alignment
Step Three: Close
Close the Saying-Doing Gap

The first 3 stands for the Three Foundations of HPTs: clear goals, roles, and norms. If you have read or heard anything about good teamwork, you are probably familiar with some version of these foundations. We bet you have also felt frustrated in trying to establish them. Even with the best of intentions, teammates quickly stray from commitments. At times, getting everyone on the same page can feel like endlessly translating your thoughts into a language you barely understand and communicating with a group of people from strange and unfamiliar cultures—such as finance, IT, sales, and manufacturing. Research shows that, in the workplace, these internal subcultures matter at least as much as national ones and cause just as many communication headaches. You collaborate across these functional cultures many times a day, and often through emails and conference calls. The key to getting the most out of your team is to understand this boundary-crossing and why it often seems like the work of getting aligned is always just out of your grasp.

To address the issue of alignment, we created a three-step process for resolving differences and deepening commitment. We call the three steps Commit, Check, and Close. The steps may seem

simple—because they are. Which is the whole point: complicated flow charts and high-level mantras are not going to help you ignite passion and improve your team's performance in the real world of work. The three-step process will help keep your teammates on track and stay committed to their goals, roles, and norms. In this sense, HPTs play by the rules: the commitments they make to the Three Foundations.

High-Performing Teams Play by the Rules—But Which Ones?

Stop us if you've heard this joke before.

Two young fish are swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way. The older one nods and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" The two young fish keep going and eventually one of them looks over at the other and asks, "What the heck is water?"

This particular version of the joke is adapted from a college graduation speech given by the late novelist David Foster Wallace.[2] But the challenge he illustrates is a universal one. The hardest things to notice are often right in front of our faces—things like our own and others' thoughts and feelings, and also the implicit rules that govern how we interact with others. Virtually all teams underperform because of this disconnect between psychological awareness and the reality of a group's social environment.

We call this phenomenon the illusion of insight—insight into the motivations that produce our actions. What we think we know about others and ourselves is, more often than not, surprisingly misguided. But we jump to conclusions anyway.

Decades of psychological research reveal that we believe we know our own minds far better than we actually do, and it also turns out that we have as much difficulty knowing others' thoughts as we do understanding our own. Psychologist Nicholas Epley describes a famous experiment in which couples were asked to answer a series of

questions about each other's preferences, and then guess how accurate they were.[3] The participants were right about 30 percent of the time, but they guessed they had been right about 80 percent of the time. In other words, they were shockingly overconfident about how well they knew each other—and these were couples in long-term relationships. Imagine how much tougher it can be to understand co-workers.

The bottom line: we often think we understand ourselves and our team even as we miscommunicate and misinterpret intentions, overestimate our ability to perform a task, and fail to recognize our own assumptions about the way work should be done. Every team needs clear rules. The trick is to make the rules explicit so that everybody understands what they are and remains committed to them.

Teamwork Rules = Culture

We human beings are wired to create rules that enable us to live and work together. These rules help solve problems big and small, such as: "How do we build a fire to keep from freezing?" or "Where should we go out for dinner tonight?" or "How are we going to get this project done on time and on budget?" In short, such rules govern collective behavior. Many social scientists claim that the ability to create and follow collective problem-solving rules is a defining human characteristic. Because all of us have this ability, we co-exist harmoniously—most of the time anyway—in tribes, villages, cities, and countries. Furthermore, in work-related settings, we are able to collaborate in teams and organizations.

A long line of anthropologists defines these problem-solving rules as "culture," which groups express through language, symbols, and behaviors. Put two or more people together and a culture starts to take shape automatically. As the venerable social theorist Clifford Geertz observed, culture is what defines humans as social beings. Without it, attempts to collaborate would degenerate into "*a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions.*"[4]

> **Culture has many definitions used for many purposes.**
>
> The dictionary says culture is "the attitudes and behavior characteristics of a particular social group."
>
> Lou Gerstner of IBM said, "Culture isn't just one aspect of the game. It is the game."
>
> Our research reveals:
>
> *Culture = Rules for Solving Problems*

Long story short: human beings need culture to get along, and your team needs its own culture to get work done.

Therefore, the first step in creating a high-performing team is establishing its culture. In the most practical sense, culture is the set of rules—or commitments—that govern how you work together with your teammates to solve problems. A shared culture helps teams adapt and thrive in challenging environments in both the natural and the business worlds. But culture causes problems, too. We often misinterpret our own group's rules for collaborating and are blind to ingrained behaviors that actually undermine performance.

Thus, a puzzle: Why is culture both the most important aspect of team success and the biggest barrier to it? Answer: familiarity equals invisibility.

Try a small thought experiment: Imagine you and a friend have stepped onto a crowded elevator in a tall building as your workday is starting. As people rush on, one person stands directly in front of the buttons. After a few "Ahem"s and "Excuse me"s, this person moves away from the buttons, squeezing right between you and your friend and staring at the back of the elevator. The crowd eventually empties out, yet the stranger is still standing shoulder to shoulder with you, even though there is plenty of space to move away.

How would you describe this person's behavior? As "bizarre," of course. Imagine how we felt when we conducted this experiment—acting as the stranger—in an undergraduate anthropology class.

Now consider why this stranger's behavior seems so bizarre. Everyone knows you are supposed to face the front rather than the back of the elevator. You were probably told how to behave in this situation by a parent when you were little, or you simply watched others and learned through trial and error what you were supposed to do. And then, at a certain point, you stopped having to think about it. You just knew how and where to stand in an elevator without

anyone telling you. The formal, explicit rules governing your behavior became informal and unspoken—even unconscious. This is how culture works.

As a group's rules accumulate over time, a culture forms in ways that can be largely invisible to team members, and individuals often begin operating by new rules that conflict with the team's explicit rules in ways they are not aware of.

Comprehensive and often contradictory, all of these rules just become "the way we do things around here." People may not even be aware of or remember why certain ways of doing things developed in the first place. Culture often works wonders and makes social life more efficient, as in the case of elevator-riding. But there is another side to the story, too. Imagine being on a startup team with a laid-back culture where everyone shows up to meetings 10 minutes late. This behavior might help boost morale and create group rapport at first, though it could become a major liability as the startup grows and the volume of work increases.

Becoming aware of your culture and managing it effectively is more than just a fun team building activity. *It is the key to your success.*

Make the Rules

Creating and leading a team affords a rare opportunity to consciously and deliberately cultivate a few key cultural rules for getting work done. Research on group dynamics shows that teams perform best when they agree on rules related to goals, roles, and norms—or what we call the Three Foundations. *Commit*, the first step in the process of creating an HPT, produces basic agreements about these foundations. (see Figure I.2).

1. Goals: Rules guiding the team's direction   Do you have a shared vision and specific goals that not only establish clear performance targets, but also tap into the *values* that are meaningful to individual members?
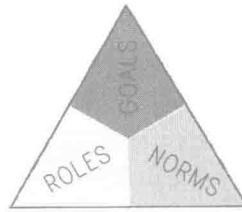
Figure I.2   The Three Foundations

2. Roles: Rules defining each member's contribution   Do you have clearly defined roles that include both the *formal* and *informal* aspects of teamwork, such as facilitation, coaching, and mediation?

3. Norms: Rules determining how members interact   Do you have mechanisms for making decisions, sharing information, and resolving conflicts so that clear expectations are set for team *behaviors*?

While rule-making is an essential first step, it is one that must be continually revisited. Team members inevitably create new rules that can undermine the original foundations of the team. This is why Steps Two and Three of the HPT process—*Check* and *Close*—involve checking on alignment with the original commitments and closing the gap between stated commitments and actual behaviors.

The Case of the Diamondbacks

As an example of how this process works, consider a team we observed in EDP: the Diamondbacks. The Diamondbacks were eight guys with big personalities who immediately clicked when they met and decided to form a team. Former soldiers and athletes, the Diamondbacks adopted the "Git-R-Done" motto. Made famous by the blue-collar comedian, Larry the Cable Guy, the catchphrase (and maybe philosophy of life) is all about just putting your head down and doing the job. In other words, for the Diamondbacks, speed and action—livened up with a heavy dose of locker room humor—were priorities over long-range planning.

They were an energetic group that meshed right away, and they established their culture up front. Git-R-Done guided the rules that would align this group of doers and propel them to dominance in the simulation—or so they thought. But by the middle of the first week, the Diamondbacks were struggling and their commitment to the team was flagging. Their turbo-charged culture had pushed them to make deal after deal. In fact, they did so well, they oversold. In the process, they incinerated relationships with other teams by failing to deliver on the sales they had promised. Their big personalities that helped to grease the wheels of making deals were suddenly viewed as political and untrustworthy.

Despite their Git-R-Done approach, the Diamondbacks unfortunately ended up getting little if anything done for the first half of the workshop. Their team observer helped them become aware of ways the rules they had created were out of sync with the environment of the sim. The team culture was dragging down performance. Drawing on the power of their brotherhood, however, the Diamonbacks pulled together during more than one come-to-Jesus moment. At the end of the two-week EDP, they were on an upward trajectory and in high spirits. In a word, they were committed. They are still one of the most legendary of EDP teams, a great example of the benefits and dangers of a strong culture and its rules.

The Diamondbacks saw firsthand that even when you make the rules and build consensus, team members can just as quickly fall out of alignment once they get into the flow of their day-to-day work. For this reason, we agree with group dynamics experts like the late Harvard professor J. Richard Hackman,[5] who has demonstrated that teams need to establish the right foundational factors like goals and roles to be successful. But we also have found that building these foundations—the first step in the HPT process—is not enough to ensure that a team consistently amounts to more than the sum of its parts. As we saw with the Diamondbacks, and as you have probably seen on your own teams, a disconnect between team commitments and team behaviors inevitably begins to appear.

Become Your Own Observer

Alignment is a stubborn problem, and its roots lie in the failure to regularly check in about commitments. The second step in the process—checking in—can be hard because of what we called the illusion of insight, which blinds your team to underlying conflicts. An outside observer can help you see these conflicts. On your own team, however, you may have to cultivate the ability to be your own observer. But this step takes more than pointing out shortcomings.

When you first address the fact that members are not fulfilling their commitments, chances are you will be met with denial, blank faces, or a few bland responses. For one thing, your team members may not be aware they are falling short of their collaborative potential and thus see no need to address the problem. Even if they do, they still may be unwilling to address it, because they fear retribution, feel embarrassed, or simply want to avoid looking stupid.

Researchers Amy Edmondson and Jim Detert have shown that people are hard-wired to evade perceived threats to their psychological or material well-being.[6] Inspiring others to devote their best effort to a task is hard enough, but just encouraging them to share their true thoughts and feelings about it might be even harder. As much as you would like your colleagues to leave their egos at the door and focus solely on doing the right thing for the team and the organization, the ego is a constant companion who never takes time off or waits patiently outside the conference room.

In order to be successful in the second step of the process, you have to create a psychologically safe space for your team to have tough conversations and push each other to become a high performing team.

Even when teams start by establishing commitments, like the Diamondbacks did, they often experience a growing gap between what their team *says* and what it *does*. We call it the *saying-doing gap*, and it is the reason why most teams never push the metaphorical boulder as hard as they could. Changing behaviors to close the saying-doing gap is the third step in the process (Figure I.3).