J. Richard Hackman in conversation with Sarah Powell

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Abstract

Presents an interview with J. Richard Hackman, Cahners-Rabb Professor of Social and Organizational Psychology, Harvard University. Covers areas of the selection of leaders in companies and the way that personal attitudes and behaviour patterns of team members complicate the chances of a team’s success. Also discusses the definition of a self-managed performing unit, and whether the design and support of a successful self-managed team typically take into account the individual skills and characters of team members. Concludes with a discussion of how productivity gains from self-managed teams can be assessed.

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problems such as the loss of generators or an engine fire. This training also helps with development of a training agenda to improve aspects of behaviour that are not optimum.

While this is not the practice, there seems no reason why airlines should not also use simulation as a device for selecting among candidates for promotion to captain. In most airlines around the world seniority and proof of the requisite technical skills determine promotion to captain. But captains could also be selected according to their potential as flight-deck team leaders through examination of their behaviour in simulated, and particularly stressful, situations.

Having said all this, the key to leadership selection is, of course, to identify good “raw material”: this is the responsibility of a well-designed behaviourally focused selection process. But the process should not stop there. Many believe that when good people are selected you can simply give them their head. But I disagree. The selection of the best people for team leadership roles should be followed by a process of development to ensure that areas in which they are already strong can be further strengthened, while help and coaching can be provided in areas where weaknesses have been identified.

**Spotlight:** Accepting that, as you note, there is no way to “make” a team perform well, to what extent do the personal attitudes and behaviour patterns of perhaps highly individualistic team members complicate chances of success?

**J. Richard Hackman:** We have to recognize the existence of “team destroyers” – people who will undermine any team you put them in. Such people may be so unskilled in working collaboratively with other people, or so individualistic in their focus, that they should be invited to make what may be an excellent contribution to their organization as solo performers. However, there are many fewer such people than one might think.

The reality is that, when teams encounter problems, or things aren’t developing smoothly, team members frequently engage in a process of “scapegoating”. They will pick on an individual to whom they assign personal responsibility for the difficulties. That person may then be labelled a “team destroyer”. Scapegoating is not random. The individual selected tends to be different to the majority of the team, perhaps because of age, functional speciality, gender or ethnicity. Knowing this, we must guard against blaming individuals for problems that are team problems.

So, what can we do to decrease the chances that somebody who may have a more individualistic orientation will actually hinder the team in its work? In my book I discuss some key conditions that increase the likelihood of team success. Three of these strike me as critical. First, is the team actually a clearly bounded group of people who accept a shared collective responsibility for the outcome, i.e. a real team? Second, has the person who created the team or the team leader established some basic norms of conduct and made these explicit, ensuring that all team members understand that certain behaviour is unacceptable? Third – and this can be a sticking point – is the reward system of the larger organization such that collective team performance is recognized and rewarded, or is the team operating in a context in which only individual successes really “pay off”? The risk of individual team members disrupting the team is much reduced if the answer to the first two questions, and first part of the third question, is “yes”. Team success and a good group exert a powerful restraining influence on the behaviour of team members.

**Spotlight:** “Team leadership can be – and, at its best, often is – a shared activity”. Is this what is meant by a “truly self-managed performing unit”?

**J. Richard Hackman:** A “truly self-managed performing unit” is one where the team as a whole has responsibility not just for doing work, but also for monitoring and managing how that work gets done.

In a self-managing team there is scope for all members to participate in accomplishing the critical leadership functions. When I talk of team leadership *per se* I am not referring to the particular personality traits or behavioural style of any one person – not even the person who occupies the role known as “team leader”. What I am discussing is whether the kinds of functions that need to be accomplished for a group to do well are being accomplished.

If the leadership “wheel” can rest on multiple shoulders, so much the better. This increases the chances that the group will be effective in monitoring its environment and any changes in this, and in assessing how it is doing internally, and where corrections need to be made. It will then be more likely to develop and refine a performance strategy that is well attuned to requirements.

I am not saying that shared leadership is what defines a self-managing team. What defines it is the amount of authority it has for managing and monitoring its own performance. If you are a self-managing team, you can get much more leverage out of sharing leadership functions across members.

**Spotlight:** Do the design and support of a successful self-managed team typically take into account the individual skills and characters of team members?

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3. Richard Hackman: Certainly. When you compose a team, you need to pay great attention to ensure that the team includes members who have the knowledge, the skills and the experience that are required for doing the work. But you also need to ensure that the team has a diversity of knowledge, skills, perspectives and experience. A team cannot derive the real benefits from being a team if all team members are the same whether demographically, or in terms of their knowledge base or skills repertoire. To derive real benefits you need diversity. One of the most common problems in teams is that people aspire to be “comfortable” with one another, believing harmonious relations are a facilitator of team performance (which they are not). When members themselves select who’s going to be on the team, they tend to choose people who resemble themselves. But it is the diversity of knowledge, skills, perspective and experience that is so important; to try to build a team that has the “right mix” of personalities or behavioural styles is a fruitless exercise.

Another problem is that teams tend to be too large. This often occurs because team-builders want to ensure that the team has adequate resources or to establish representation on the team of every function or constituency that will receive the team’s output. This can too easily lead to formation of a team of 18 people or more, which may be politically correct and cover every eventuality but is far too large to accomplish anything. As a rule of thumb I advocate single digits in team numbers – my preferred group size is six people. With more than ten members you are almost certainly going to have difficulties.

Spotlight: You have stressed that there is no single recipe for success in launching a team, and emphasized the need for flexibility and creativity in approach. Does this not indicate that good leaders need to be exceptionally skilled people?

3. Richard Hackman: I would certainly endorse that people who are given the role of leading a team should have skills; if they have exceptional skills, so much the better. That is, however, not the same thing as saying that these individuals must be “heroic” persons who can handle everything themselves. Even the people we typically label as heroes, the people highlighted in the press, turn out to have weaknesses. They may be really terrific as pacesetters, for example, but they may not be as effective in leading the organization in terms of its future capabilities.

Winston Churchill, for example, was clearly a heroic individual. But, if you look at the waxing and waning of his responsibility and popularity, he did not change much. In some circumstances his style and orientation and way of dealing with things was just what the nation needed. At other times it was not. Even the people we view as the most heroic leaders do not have in their repertoire all the different skills and approaches that great leadership requires. To develop good leadership in a team and an organization requires that other people in the team or organization be encouraged and supported in developing their skills as these can supplement, complement and even compensate for the weaknesses of the “heroic” leader.

It is rare to find anyone who devotes the time, expends the energy or has the self-knowledge required to develop strong leadership on the part of his or her peers to compensate for, supplement or complement his or her own weak side. This is particularly true if the established leader is already getting considerable acclaim. Such a leader may come to believe that he or she really is the heroic leader who can turn the company around and lead it on to great things.

It takes exceptional individuals to recognize that, despite their personal success and acclaim, part of their job is to develop other individuals to compensate for those areas where their own knowledge, skills, experience or style are less satisfactory. Yet this is a critical requirement for a successful senior executive team. This said, it is not possible to identify all the pieces of the required skills “jigsaw” ahead of time; nor can one simply administer personality tests and then assemble a team as you would the pieces of a jigsaw.

Spotlight: In your book you mention the initially outstanding performance of People Express Airlines and the problems it encountered as it grew. Is there an optimum size for a team approach?

3. Richard Hackman: People Express was an extraordinary young organization. Much of the coordination required was effected in aeroplanes or at the company’s airport headquarters. This worked extremely well, particularly because of the proximity of the founder, Don Burr, and managing officers. For a small organization, this way of working was a great success, which led to growth. As the company grew, however, there was a need for more structures and infrastructure to assist and facilitate the coordination that took place informally in the organization’s early years.

The problem was that the company could not see the need for change when it was doing so well. There was a fear that introduction of additional structures would change the company into a traditional, bureaucratic airline with all the problems that could entail.

A good example of a successful response to growth is that of Mondragon which is, I believe, the largest and most successful true workers’ cooperative conglomerate in the world. Based in
the Basque region of Spain, this self-governing cooperative organization developed a rule that when any of its units needed to expand beyond a workforce of 250-350, it would “cell divide”, giving rise to another unit. This in turn is limited in size. Such a strategy ensures the organization does not fall victim at an organizational level to the dysfunctions of size.

Extrapolating from this, where an organization or team is successful and grows, becoming too big, the possibility of cell division should be considered. This would provide the necessary infrastructure support around information systems, educational systems, reward systems and so forth that help a larger unit do well. I do not see any limit on the size of an organization, but I do think that, as an organization expands, operating units within it must stay at a reasonable size – such as Mondragon’s limit of 250-350 people.

Spotlight: Do the principles underlying the rehearsal and performance of the conductor-less Orpheus Chamber Orchestra offer lessons for self-managing corporate teams?

J. Richard Hackman: My answer would be “yes”, but I fear that sometimes the wrong lessons may be assumed. The lesson that I believe has the most relevance to other kinds of organizations, including corporate teams, is the way in which Orpheus uses every scrap of talent among its 26 members. Members of the orchestra know exactly who’s good at what. They’re all superb musicians, but they have different strengths. Some may be experts in, say, chamber music from the romantic era, while others are more interested in contemporary or new music. This means that, if the orchestra were rehearsing a Rossini overture, the musicians would turn to different people for interpretative guidance than they would if they were playing a piece of music by a contemporary composer. The musicians are attentive to the diversity of expertise within the orchestra, drawing on this in deciding who will be given special responsibilities for guidance and leadership.

By convention, an orchestra’s concert master is a violinist. But, while they are all superb instrumentalists, not all the violinists in Orpheus are asked to serve as concert masters to lead the rehearsal. The Orpheus concert master must be someone who is not just a superb instrumentalist – which goes without saying – but someone who can lead the process, and who fully understands and has some interpretative ideas about the kind of work that is being played.

In corporate teams we have so much wasted talent. I would like to see corporate teams learn from Orpheus that such talent can be harnessed just as well in the service of collective objectives.

Having said this, one of the things that is characteristic of Orpheus, by the very nature of its business, is that the musicians are interpreting musical works composed by other people. We are not talking of a 26-person group attempting to compose a new piece. If Orpheus attempted this level of creativity, it would not work. A composer, novelist or poet works alone. The equivalent in corporate life is the leader who assumes the creative task of determining the direction in which the enterprise will move. So there are certain acts of creativity unsuited to a team approach. What a team can do, like Orpheus, is to take such initiatives and bring them to life in an amazing way, stretching them far beyond what might have been thought possible.

Spotlight: You mention your scepticism at the reported achievements of self-directed work teams. How can productivity gains be assessed?

J. Richard Hackman: One cause for scepticism is the tendency to attribute all improvements to the efforts of self-directed work teams. For example, over time organizations do become inefficient. In the process of introduction of self-directed teams sometimes other issues – such as inefficiency – are noticed and addressed, improving the “figures”. But this improvement can be purely incidental rather than an intended or actual result of the introduction of the team. I am concerned at the absence of adequate research designs to interpret some of the amazing gains reported in the literature on self-directed teams.

This of course then begs the question: how would I assess how well a team is doing in terms of its productivity, quality and so forth? Well, there seems no way to do this other than to study developments over time. Typically, the tendency is to focus on available figures, e.g. financial measures used to assess how the company is doing. These are then used to plot trends, i.e. basically to see whether the numbers go up. But, of course, there is no particular reason to believe that these numbers are directly responsive to how well a team is working, at least not in the short haul. In addition, such a focus on numbers and short-term objectives brings in the additional complication that “results” can be achieved in ways that violate ethical standards – as seen in the USA in recent weeks – or that undermine the team in its relations with the client.

Personally, I prefer to focus unambiguously on the team’s clients, whether within the organization or outside, my goal being to obtain data allowing me to determine how well the team is doing at meeting the legitimate needs and expectations of these clients. I am willing to bet that a team that does well over time at meeting and exceeding the legitimate expectations of its clients will turn in
good numbers too. But I do not initially look at the numbers because they are generally not designed, intended or appropriate to assess team outcomes.

My assessment focuses on the client, on the team itself and on the individual within the team. Is the team meeting or exceeding the legitimate expectations of its clients? What is happening to the team as a performing unit over time, i.e. is the team improving its performance, becoming better at assessing its environment and developing a strategy that is uniquely appropriate to it? Is it also drawing, as Orpheus does, on all the talents, skills, knowledge, experience and perspectives of its members, promoting learning and personal and professional growth?

So, my simple three-item checklist for assessing how well a team is doing is: are the clients happy? Is the team getting stronger as a performing unit over time? And, do the individual members of the team find in their work more learning and fulfilment than they do frustration? If the answers to these three questions are “yes”, I guarantee you that, over time, barring any catastrophic external event, the numbers will be fine as well.