Open Teamwork

Building Compatible and Productive Teams

An Edited Excerpt from
The Human Element

Will Schutz

Few managers would say that teamwork is unimportant. In fact, most leaders spend a good deal of their time worrying about and trying to improve teamwork, as part of the overall drive toward greater efficiency and productivity. Nevertheless, it's important to clarify a misconception about teamwork that often leads to disappointing results. That misconception results from the failure to see the close relationship between team compatibility and productivity.

Starting in the 1950s, with my earliest research on internal group relations, I had been trying to get to the bottom of why teams do or do not work well together.1 As I tried different approaches to improving team performance, I found that none of my assumptions was right. At first I had thought that harmonious groups would be more efficient, while conflicted groups would be inefficient. But that didn't hold up. Raucous groups and quiet groups alike sometimes excelled and sometimes failed. Then I thought that group success depended on how the members dealt with disagreement. That proved to be a bit closer. Effective groups tended to bounce back from conflict, while ineffective groups disintegrated after they disagreed.

Next, I looked into the notion that teams must have common goals to work well together. But I worked with a computer group that had just spent three years developing a new machine, only to be told that there was no market for it. The members were crushed, and they struggled to recover. Many, ready to quit, were already looking for other jobs, but suddenly the team members realized that they really wanted to work together. Their relationships within the group, not the common goal of building a computer, held them together. Once they realized that, they were confident that they could create another product to build together.

So much for the "common goal" assumption. I asked myself, "What about the belief that a team needs someone of each psychological type in order to function?" That one didn't match my observations of a self-directed team at a large manufacturing plant. When that team lost a member, the others would replace the person, shift roles to cover the lost member's specific function, or reorganize.

Effective teams seemed to have great flexibility, which made the need for specific people in specific roles secondary. As I kept looking for the ingredients of successful teams, I examined the idea that a strong authoritarian leader or a life-threatening situation
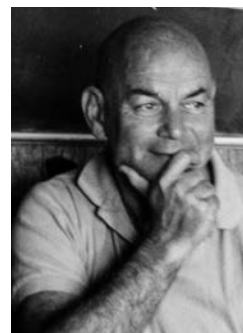
Will Schutz (1925-2002), creator of The Human Element, FIRO® theory and the Elements of Awareness.

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could force teamwork. Research, however, showed that coercion sometimes worked in the short term but not over a long time. Later I saw confirmation of the research experiments, when several new computer companies worked feverishly and successfully to turn out new products, succeeded, and then almost folded because so many of their people no longer wanted to work for them. Was it the crisis, the pressure, that had dissolved the teams? I still didn't have a clear answer.

Then I became interested in the possibility that self-esteem might be a key to good teamwork. I recalled a common situation, in which a lengthy labor-management dispute is eventually settled on almost the same terms the two sides fought over in the beginning. I had already seen how rigidity leads to defensive, unproductive individual behavior. Connecting that work to my thinking about teamwork suggested that good teamwork occurred when team members[1] were open enough to one another and to themselves to recognize when they were personally threatened and[2] were willing to acknowledge those feelings to the whole team. Team members who feel threatened but who are not aware of it become rigid—and that stops teamwork.

In other words, teams do not fail because they disagree, or because they do not have common goals, or because their members' approaches to solving problems differ, or because they do not include certain personality types. They don't work because one or more people are rigid, and a person is rigid because his or her self-concept is threatened.

Understanding the connection between compatibility and productivity is crucial to understanding the vital role of good teamwork.

What a wonderful irony. If we want to improve team performance, we must work on individuals.

Most real interpersonal struggles—peace negotiations, labor issues, divorces—have to do mainly with feelings, fears, insecurities, and rigidities, not primarily with the logic of a situation. Understanding the connection between compatibility and productivity is crucial to understanding the vital role of good teamwork.[3]

Compatibility—the ability of people to work well together—is positively related to productivity. A common organizational myth is that there is no time to deal with personal relationships; there are deadlines, bottom lines, and payrolls to meet, and they take priority. But ignoring teamwork problems in favor of "practical" matters is the expression of a massive organizational self-deception. It is more true to say that an organization cannot afford not to take the time to deal with relations between people; otherwise, those relations inevitably affect productivity, often in a devastating way.

When interpersonal problems exist but are not dealt with, the organization's productivity inevitably diminishes; how much depends on the task. Some tasks require cooperation in order to be done well. Other jobs can be done by one person just as well as (and sometimes better than) by a group. Many jobs can be organized either to require cooperation or to be accomplished independently. The effect of compatibility on productivity is greatest for tasks in which cooperation is necessary to the achievement of results. Experiments[4] have demonstrated that compatible groups perform even better under time pressure than they do without pressure, while incompatible groups become less effective.

Compatibility

Lack of rigidity is basic to good teamwork, but my ability to work with others depends to a large extent on our compatibility and complementarity—that is,

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on the ability of our personalities or styles to enhance each other, supply each other's missing traits, and support each other. The phrases "birds of a feather flock together" and "opposites attract," apparently contradictory, can thus be reconciled. The "birds of a feather" maxim is related to *atmosphere compatibility*—that is, the climate, ground rules, or stage setting within which we interact. The "opposites attract" maxim has to do with role compatibility—that is, the parts we wish to play.

Atmosphere Compatibility

In an organization, I may prefer different types of atmospheres that can be located along the dimensions of inclusion, control, and openness. The term atmosphere refers to the working environment and approaches to decision making. The atmosphere is composed of shared behavior, beliefs, values, and settings and may incorporate different levels and types of inclusion, control, and openness. No one type of atmosphere is necessarily good or bad. Each type has advantages and disadvantages, which depend on the organization, the people, and the tasks. Brainstorming is usually best in a high-inclusion, low-control atmosphere. Getting work done in a short time is more efficient in a high-control, low-openness (that is, structured and businesslike) atmosphere, where everything is planned and well organized.

Incompatibility in *inclusion* occurs when some of us like a high-inclusion atmosphere while others prefer a low-inclusion atmosphere. I may want to get together and interact with you, while you want to be left alone.

Control preferences can likewise affect compatibility within teams. Incompatibility can arise when some members want a clear power structure, with everything planned out ahead of time, and others want an egalitarian structure, with everyone participating in decisions.

Openness in atmosphere has to do with preferences about the expression of feelings. Incompatibility arises when you want an emotionally open atmosphere and I want to stick to business. The issue is not so much our disagreement itself as our lack of agreement over how to resolve our differences. Our difficulty persists when you or I hold rigidly to our position.

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Role Compatibility

Role compatibility involves the parts we play with respect to each other as we interact in the work atmosphere. There are two types of role incompatibility: you and I are confrontive (that is, we both want to initiate behavior, but neither of us wants to be the recipient); or we are apathetic (that is, we both want to be on the receiving end of behavior, but neither of us wants to initiate it).

Confrontive incompatibility is usually overt and obvious. It leads to open confrontation, power struggles, and turf wars. Apathetic incompatibility is covert and difficult to identify. Its most noticeable symptom is that nothing happens when it should. Nobody does anything, because someone else is supposed to do it. Role incompatibility can likewise be explained in terms of the dimensions of inclusion, control, and openness.

Where inclusion is concerned, compatibility means that I like to initiate being together to the same degree that you like to be asked to get together. Confrontive incompatibility arises when we both strongly want to initiate inclusion, but neither of us wants to be included; we both want to choose our own com-

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pany. Apathetic incompatibility arises when we both want to be included, but we both hang back, waiting for an invitation, without offering one ourselves.

Where control is concerned, role compatibility means that each of us likes to give orders to the same degree that the other likes to take them. Confrontive incompatibility arises when we both like to be in charge, and neither of us likes to take orders. Apathetic incompatibility arises when we are both submissive and want to be told what to do.

The Open Teamwork method relies on a new level of consciousness to break through conflicts and stalemates.

In the openness dimension, role compatibility means that each of us likes to initiate openness to the same degree that the other likes to have it initiated. Confrontive incompatibility arises when we both want to initiate openness, but neither of us wants to have it initiated toward us. Apathetic incompatibility arises when we both want to have a more open relationship, but neither of us will risk initiating it.

If blocks to teamwork are due to individual rigidities and unresolved issues between people, how can these difficulties be overcome to create highly productive teams? Traditional approaches—coercion, compromise, and complementarity—try to solve the problems of teamwork through logic or power. But trying to solve them by deciding whose argument is more logical does not always yield the best solution.

The Open Teamwork method relies on a new level of consciousness to break through conflicts and stalemates. If all parties to a disagreement become more self-aware, we have an entirely new basis for resolving our differences.

Openness as a model for teamwork is a radical notion. Typical organizations do not often reward openness and self-insight. They are more likely to foster such behavior as denial and "spin control," as well as a general strategy of my getting what I want from people without their knowing what I have done. To reveal a weakness, or to tell you directly how I feel about you, is a rare and often risky act.

Yet it does work, often magically. If I want to improve teamwork, I must know all the human factors blocking it and then remove them by getting them out in the open for the whole team to see and deal with. I can then enlist the abilities of the entire team to create a solution that incorporates all these factors, including satisfying the feelings that created them.

Open teamwork has proved to be the key that unlocks a great productivity surge. It has resulted in decreased time to market, greatly reduced time required for meetings, more efficient and satisfying working conditions resulting in higher motivation, greater union-management cooperation, and increased profitability. For example, the "traditional packing start-up curve—the time between the concept and full production—is about 22 months …. The in-case fill start-up at Baltimore [using The Human Element approach] took about four months. This saved the company … $9 million compared to the average start-up." Or, as another client reported, "Union and plant leadership attended the [Human Element] workshop. Two weeks after the workshop the union and the company signed an unprecedented amendment to the current contract …. Both the union and plant leadership attribute the success of the negotiations … to the workshop. Headquarters was prepared to shut down the plant if there was no signed agreement."[4]

Behavior That Enhances Teamwork

1. I am open at all times about my feelings and my ideas. I keep no secrets from myself or others.

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2. I say what I feel about whatever is relevant at the moment when I feel it.

3. I stay aware of myself—of what is motivating me and of what I am feeling at every moment. I am aware of the deepest levels of truth. I do not deceive myself.

4. I assume that all team members are on the same side, trying to produce the best solutions to the team's problems, and not trying to protect themselves or blame others.

5. I make sure that each person fully agrees—with head, heart, and feelings—on each decision.

6. I listen to others' thoughts and feelings. I empathize with each person's point of view, acknowledge it, and state my honest reaction to it.

7. When I understand each person's point of view and feelings, I begin to seek a solution that integrates all the ideas and feelings of all team members.

8. I am aware of differences in atmosphere preference and am sure to say, in a timely fashion, how I feel. I stay in touch with my deepest levels of truth.

9. I make sure that we agree on our mission, vision, and goals. I am aware that these often change as we get farther into a task. I do not hesitate to change them if we all agree that change would be appropriate.

10. I participate in meetings to decide specifically how decisions will be made. These meetings are about the process of our decision making, not about any of our specific decisions.

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