Coaching teams so the whole is greater than the sum of the parts

By Emily Morrow

My friend Donella Meadows, who started an intentional community in Vermont many years ago, once said: "Living in community is neither as good nor as bad as you might think". The same can be said about working in teams.

Unless you really do practise law alone, you are likely to be part of a team at least some of the time. Teams are the basic building blocks of how work gets done in the law. If a team functions well, the outcomes will be significantly better than if a team is under functioning and lacking focus. Sadly, not all teams are created equally and frequently teams function less than optimally.

Common slippage points

Because human beings are social creatures, one might expect that teams, left to their own devices, will function reasonably well. However, this is not always true. Consider the following:

Poor internal dynamics

- Team members don't get along well and have communication problems.
- The team lacks appropriate leadership and direction.
- Temperament differences between team members cause misunderstandings and diversity becomes a problem rather than a strength.
- Factions form within teams and undermine group effectiveness.
- There is a culture of blame, fear, low trust and anxiety.

Poor external dynamics

- Counterproductive competition exists between teams.
- There is a lack of clarity/transparency about the role of different teams within an organisation and "boundary disputes".
- Management fails to provide adequate direction for a team resulting in inefficiencies and poor outcomes.

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Professional skills deficits

- Team members seek to achieve particular objectives but lack the technical skills and/or practical experience to do so.
- The team leader wants to bring in new team member(s), but struggles to determine what is needed.

These are just a few examples of how teams fail to work together well. The common symptoms one observes in a low functioning team include:

- inefficiency/ineffectiveness/burnout;
- poor communication;
- low trust;
- lack of strategic direction/thinking;
- low morale, high turnover;
- low group and individual accountability;
- high emotional reactivity;
- lack of identification with the team; and
- leadership turnover.

A typical intervention; skills and strategic planning

It's been a while since I've written about the fictitious law firm of Smith & Same located in Anywhere, New Zealand.

However, recently I received a phone call from Mary Jones, a partner in the firm who heads up a practice team consisting of four lawyers, two legal executives and a secretary/PA.

She said: "We'd really like to build our practice so we contribute more strongly to the firm's financial performance and client base. However, we just don't seem to be able to get any traction in terms of raising our external profile, hunting as a pack, and converting opportunities into new instructions. Can you help us?"

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When I met with the group, it was clear they all got along well and enjoyed working together. Mary was providing good leadership and the team liked and respected her.

However, when I analysed team members' temperament preferences (after having determined each team member's Myers Briggs Type), it became clear that, as a group, there was a strong preference for introversion and a focus on detail and internal team operations, rather than external relationship building, entrepreneurial thinking and strategic planning. Essentially, there were some fairly obvious "soft skill" deficits in an otherwise high functioning team.

We then discussed what the group had done in the past to build its practice and external profile and evaluated how successful these efforts had been. Although members had written articles, done public speaking and met one-on-one with prospective clients and referrers, there was little follow up after these initiatives. If someone did a seminar, it was an isolated effort. There was no effort to develop relationships with audience members and follow up on potential leads. Similarly, if a lawyer had coffee with a prospect, it was a "one off" interaction. There was no strategic plan for the efforts.

Once we made this "diagnosis", the team discussed and articulated a strategic vision and plan for the development of its practice within the firm and its market area.

Guided by this, it identified specific opportunities to build relationships, create new opportunities and proactively/consistently cultivate those. For example, two team members put together a seminar for prospective clients, and successfully did several such presentations. They got to know audience members, sought introductions to others in the company, followed up with coffees, created the framework for giving a series of seminars on related topics and had successful results.

Similarly, team members began writing articles for industry publications on topics related to the seminars, thereby getting added traction on profile raising. The team started co-ordinating its efforts, consistent with the strategic plan it had developed.

The team is beginning to notice an increase in referrals and instructions from new clients. Members have enhanced their follow up and are much more proactive. The results have been positive and the team is finding that success builds success.

An intense intervention

Not surprisingly, an intervention focusing on building a practice or other "non-interpersonal" issues is typically easier than one involving interpersonal conflict or the like.

Typically, I am asked to intervene after things have noticeably deteriorated and management is painfully aware of a team's problems. This is both good news and bad news. The good news is that team members and management are often highly motivated to address the problems. They have suffered enough to be ready to move beyond denial. The bad news is that the problems are often quite deeply entrenched.

At Smith & Same, the property group has been having some ongoing problems. The team leader, Phil, is very bright and high-powered, but is often out of the office, is somewhat disorganised and his delegation skills are poor. When he does give feedback, it is often critical, if not abrasive. He feels unsupported by the more junior lawyers in his team, and they feel resentful of his leadership style. Communication is of low quality and infrequent.

The matter came to a head when one of the firm's large clients was working with Phil on a major matter. Because of poor communication between team members, an important deadline was missed and, when the paperwork was eventually completed, the quality was less than ideal. The firm is

at risk of losing this client. The firm's managing partner became aware of the problem and invited me to intervene.

At my first meeting with Phil, I told him that our discussion was confidential. I encouraged him to be candid with me. Initially, he spent a lot of time complaining about team members, detailing how hard he had to work and generally feeling quite sorry for himself.

I then asked Phil: "What can you do in terms of how you manage yourself within the team to enhance how the team works as a whole?" and "When was the last time you sat down with your team to discuss what was going well, rather than what was going wrong?"

His answer to the first question was that he needed to think about it and his answer to the second question was that he could not recall when this last occurred.

Finally, I asked: "How motivated are you to get this situation under control so you can provide better client service and personally have a more manageable work life balance?" Phil said he was highly motivated to do so.

Thereafter, I met individually (and confidentially) with each team member to discuss their perspective on how things were going.

They expressed considerable frustration with Phil's work style, but indicated they liked him personally, especially when they engaged with him in a social setting. They perceived Phil to be an unfortunate victim of his own personality. He was clearly an extremely gifted lawyer and they believed they had much to learn from him. They also expressed a strong desire to enhance their interactions with him so the team could be more productive.

Next, I met with the entire team and suggested we schedule a half day team retreat to discuss:

1. What was the team's shared vision for how members might optimally interact and work with each other?
2. What did the team, individually and collectively, need to begin doing immediately so it could function consistent with that vision? What were the next steps that needed be taken?

The retreat was held some weeks later in a pleasant off-site location. The team had a good discussion about the key elements of its shared vision and found that everyone had a common perspective about how the team should function. This came as a bit of a surprise, but a reassuring one.

We then discussed practical next steps to achieve the vision.

I suggested that Phil articulate how he likes to work and his expectations for the team and its members. Phil had never explicitly discussed this and it proved to be a helpful conversation. For example, Phil made it clear he is results oriented. He doesn't care if team members stay late at work, so long as they get the work done on time and correctly. Team members were surprised to learn this, because they assumed Phil wanted them to be physically present whenever he was working late.

The team came up with guidelines for how it wanted to function going forward and a plan to implement those. There was a strong feeling of camaraderie and a noticeable reduction of tension within the group.

Team members are committed to implementing the next steps they identified, minutes were taken and disseminated, and the group has been meeting on a weekly basis to gauge how it is doing vis-a-vis its plan. So far the results have been positive.

Is the whole greater than the sum of the parts?

Here's what I look for in terms of evaluating a team:

- Do team members have complimentary technical and interpersonal capabilities that they use to get the best work outcomes?
- Is there a frictionless level of communication so critical information is shared quickly, reliably and easily?
- Do team members leverage each other's time and delegate optimally?
- Are clients happy with the work product and the amount charged for it? Do clients feel well looked after?
- Do team members give each other accurate and helpful feedback, including having high quality "difficult conversations" when necessary?
- Is the team "low maintenance" so management does not have to spend much time worrying about and discussing it?
- Does the team actively enjoy spending time together socially? Is it a happy group?

If the answer to one or more of these questions is no, then the team may benefit from some external coaching and intervention.

> "High functioning teams don't just happen. They require active and ongoing "care and feeding"

Most teams can, with appropriate support, enhance their level of functioning. Sometimes it is necessary to make personnel changes and, if so, this is usually best done sooner rather than later. Sometimes it is just a matter of utilising existing skills and capabilities more effectively.

High functioning teams don't just happen. They require active and ongoing "care and feeding". That said, working in a really high functioning team is one of life's great pleasures. It's worth the effort. Invariably, in such a team, the whole is naturally and consistently greater than the sum of the parts. ■

Emily Morrow was a lawyer and senior partner with a large firm in Vermont, where she built a trusts, estates and tax practice. Having lived and worked in Sydney and Vermont, Emily now resides in Auckland and provides tailored consulting services for lawyers, barristers, in-house counsel, law firms and barristers' chambers focusing on non-technical skills that correlate with professional success; business development, communication, delegation, self presentation, leadership, team building/management and the like. She can be reached at *www.emilymorrow.com*.