



repressed narcissism and the values of high-performing teams

Although the historical view of human accomplishments tends to worship individuals, perpetuating a cultish, heroic, and rock n' roll, perspective on leadership and innovation, every valuable product of civilisation is the result of collective rather than individual efforts.

Indeed, even Michelangelo and Leonardo owed their success to their patrons and assistants; Steve Jobs to Apple's engineers and designers; and Pep Guardiola to Messi, Xavi and Iniesta. This begs the question of why certain teams are more effective than others, even when they possess the combination of individual skills that should, in theory, allow them to excel as a group. And that question concerns the role of values or key drivers of teams.

So, what are the values of high-performing teams? Well, the obvious answer is that

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different teams have different values. For example, some are driven by financial rewards, others by altruistic motives; some are focused on the pursuit of fun, and others are interested in creative disruption. However, whatever the values of a team, they must be clearly shared by individual team members or the team just won't perform. The similarity of values is important because it reinforces our own self-concept and values. And the simple reason for liking people who are similar to us is that it makes us feel good about ourselves.

This is especially noticeable when we meet people who are very different from us, particularly if their values are incompatible. Why is it hard to like people with opposite values? Because doing so would create a "cognitive dissonance" or logical incongruence: how can I like X when X hates Y and I love Y? For the same reason, it is extremely easy to like people who love the things we love... it is a socially acceptable form of narcissism. Whenever we say that someone is great, we are really trying to persuade ourselves that we are great, too.

At the same time, there is a universal driver of successful teams, namely the desire to attain something good for the team rather than oneself. In other words, high-performing teams are comprised of individuals who have chosen to make their own accomplishments the accomplishments of the team. For each team member, the success of the team is an essential precondition of individual success.

Accordingly, the paradoxical explanation for high-performing teams is that they have the ability to both unleash and repress our innate narcissistic tendencies. How so?

Here's how...

Wanting to contribute to the wellbeing of people who are like us is a culturally accepted manifestation of narcissism: "I want others who are like me to succeed (because they are like me)". Furthermore, because this goal is achieved by suppressing our selfish agendas at the expense of the collective benefit of the team, successful teams are not only fuelled by narcissism, but also its cure. What begins with a subliminal self-centred agenda soon turns into an altruistic quest. This is especially noticeable in the case of underperforming teams, which are characterised by skilled individual contributors who cannot function properly as a unit because they fail to identify as a team. This reversed synergy is caused, first, by individuals' inability to love themselves through other team members; and second, by their inability to replace their individual needs with the needs of the teams.

In short, narcissism provides the raw materials for effective team performance, so long as teams can keep it in check, by transforming individual into collective narcissism.

This means going from "I am the best" to "we are the best", and usually requires the help, guidance and coordination of a leader.

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Tomas is a keynote speaker at CRF's 2014 International Conference in Berlin. Click here for details.