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The Wisdom of Teams – By Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith

The central message of the book is that the wisdom of teams lies in the disciplined pursuit of performance and comes with a focus on collective work-products, personal growth, and performance results.

A Team Defined: Is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.

Divided into three parts

Part one “Understanding Teams” looks at team basics and how rigorous attention to the six basic elements: Small enough in number, Adequate levels of complementary skills, truly meaningful purpose, specific goal or goals, clear working approach, sense of mutual accountability contribute to team achievement.

Teams increasingly matter to the performance of large organizations because of their flexibility, utility, and focus.

The rarity of High-Performance teams is due primarily to the difficulty in achieving and sustaining a high level of personal commitment; in other words a personal dedication to the concept of “one for all and all for one”. This attribute is still contrary to survival precepts of most corporate polity. High performance teams are where you find them not where you wish they’d be.

Part two “Becoming a team” addresses the challenges of group performance from both teams and non-teams. From a team’s perspective, what it takes to become a team, leadership behavior and the importance of team basics when the team gets stuck.

There are five points on the team performance curve, starting with working groups, Pseudo-team, Potential team, Real team and High-performance team; Pseudo-teams being the weakest. To move up the curve the following underlying pattern is observed: real teams do not emerge unless the individuals on them take risks involving conflict, trust, interdependence and hard work.

There are six things necessary to good team leadership: keep the purpose, goals and approach relevant and meaningful; build commitment and confidence; strengthen the mix and level of skills; manage relationships with outsiders including obstacles; create opportunities for others; do real work.

Approaches to getting unstuck: Revisit the basics, go for small wins, inject new information and approaches, use facilitators or training, change teams membership including the leader.

Part three “Exploiting the potential” How does top management’s role effect team performance across an organization including teams’ at-the-top. How and why teams are so critical to managing major changes in skill, values and behaviors essential to companies that want to become high-performing organizations.

The most practical path to breaking through to team performance at the top: Carve out team assignments that tackle specific issues; Assign work to subsets of the team; determine team membership based on skill not position; require all members to do equivalent amounts of real work; break down the hierarchal patterns of interaction; Set and follow rules of behavior similar to those used by other teams

In effecting major change: Establish a clear performance-driven vision that commits, Emphasize organizational simplification, provide corporate resources and attention to support people at all levels.

Six characteristics to becoming a high performing organization: Balanced performance results; clear, challenging aspirations; committed and focused leadership; an energized work-force dedicated to productivity and learning; skills-based sources of competitive advantage; open communications and knowledgeable management

What was learned?

- Teams emerge as the result of demanding performance challenges.
- Leadership has a critical impact on team performance both from inside the team as well as from the top of the organization.
- Adherence to team basics will get the team through troubled waters.
- Opportunities for team building exist in all parts of an organization but are most difficult to form at the top of an organization
- More can be accomplished in a shorter period of time as a real team than from other groups or individuals.
- Teams aren't always the best choice to address organizational needs and in fact when misapplied they can be both wasteful and disruptive.
- A positive team experience remains with its members long after the team objective has been met and the team disbanded.
- The term "Team" is used far too frequently when we really mean "work group" or worse a "pseudo-team".
- Best story in the book was the Burlington Northern Intermodal Team Pg# 28 because it shows all of the phases a team goes through and the benefits of participating on a truly "High Performance Team". That story alone was worth the price of the book.

How this can the knowledge from this book benefit your practice?

There are three areas where the wisdom of teams will be invaluable to the wealth advisor.

First, more can be accomplished through a team effort than individually. By its very nature wealth counseling elicits a multi-disciplinary approach to serving the client. Few organizations and still fewer individuals have all of the requisite skill sets necessary to do the whole job to its best. It will be necessary to enroll the requisite talent necessary to complete the task and serve the client. Successfully forming a real team assures the likelihood of better overall performance because everyone is committed to a common purpose (*servicing the client and seeing that they realize their vision*). The book provides the necessary concepts, attitudes and skills to build a real team.

Second, In the course of serving the very affluent it is un-likely we will encounter a client with no other advisors. We have to be prepared to work with pre-existing advisors resourcefully. These advisors will have more history with the client and in many cases an emotional bond as well. To get the vision implemented it will be necessary work with existing advisors and in fact be preferable due to their intimate knowledge, relationship and leverage with the client. The book gives numerous examples and exercises to prepare us for this advisor engagement and shows how real leaders promote safety and opportunity for all members of the team. (*See The New York City Partnership pg#135*)

Lastly in many cases we will be invited to join a team either professionally or personally. The book is an invaluable operational template that provides guidance to those invited to participate on teams. It reveals the benefits of personal growth experienced from development of new skills, sense of commitment and the empowerment of mutual accountability.