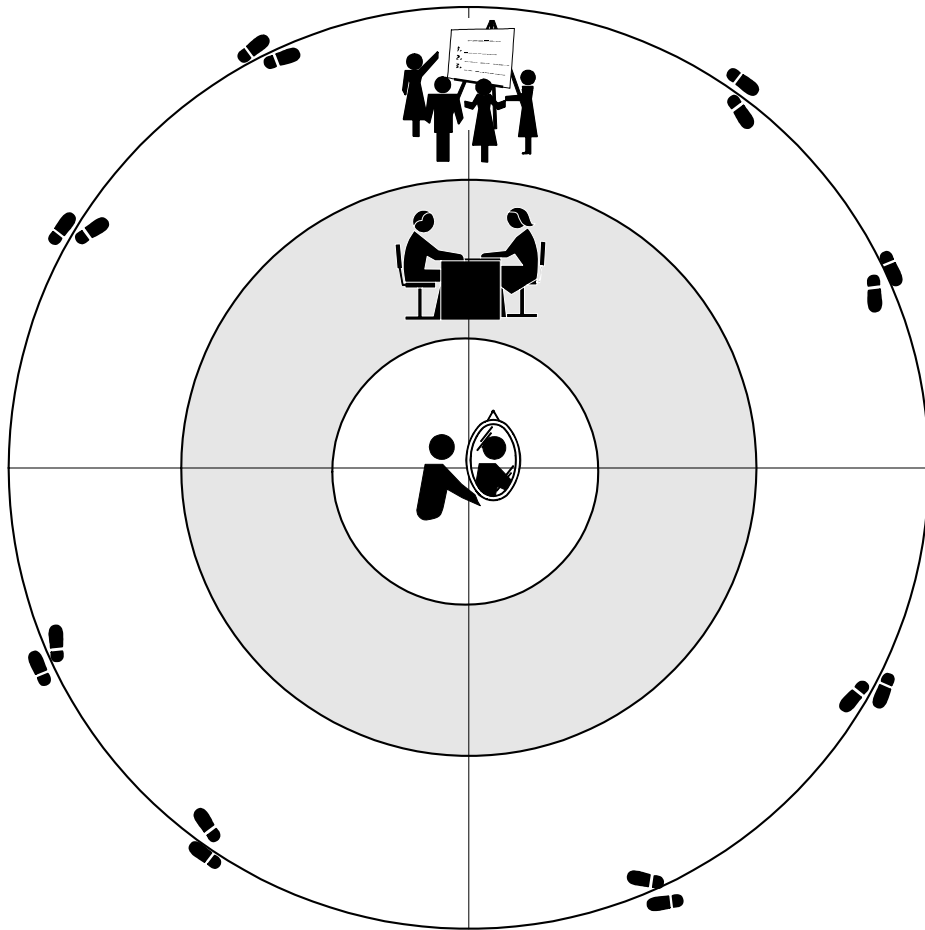


# **Teamwalk vs. Teamtalk:** *Let's Get Real About Teamwork and Get Past the Hype*



**by Anna Carroll**

## **Teamwork vs. Teamtalk: Let's Get Real About Teamwork and Get Past the Hype by Anna Carroll**

### ***Are You Sick of the Word "Team?"***

Most of us in leadership positions have had a lot of experience with teams. We've either worked on them or been in charge of them. So it's a good idea to review where we are now and look at what still needs to be done to make teams work. Some of us may be so sick of the word "team" and talking about "teamwork" that we don't want to hear any more about team culture or a team approach. Some organizations are even trying to get away from the word "team" because it has lost its meaning. They try to use some other word to describe the need to communicate and collaborate. Many of us are burned out on teams because teams haven't really worked for us.

Half-baked teams cause problems. In most cases, a partial team effort is worse than no team effort. It really doesn't work to "sort of" have a team approach and "kind of" communicate with people around "somewhat" shared goals.

With all the problems with teamwork, we may be tempted to go back to the old, simpler method of individual accountability, without all the meetings, without all the conflict, and without all the frustrations we experience today in trying to work in teams. *Can we go back to the old approach?* We really ought to consider that we may have been wrong all this time. Above all, we need efficiency and effective implementation of corporate goals. If individual work monitored efficiently by managers is the best approach, we should own up to that and get rid of all this fluff about teams.

### ***We're Stuck with the Need for Teamwork***

Unfortunately, the conditions we're operating in today won't cooperate with simple solutions. The huge growth of technology in our businesses brings competition closer to our doors. Customers have access to information that links them to a far greater range of options. It is clear that we can't go back to a simpler world where each person just did their job well and each manager had to master the work skills of everyone reporting to them. In this day and age, a slow, vertically-structured hierarchy just cannot compete with quicker, smarter, adaptable organizations. If you add to that deregulation and other global factors, you realize that individuals working alone--although they may be brilliant and technically skilled--cannot achieve what we need.

Every large and mid-sized American company is having to learn how to live with leaner staffing and flatter structures. The only way this can really work is through increased employee empowerment and organizations formed around teams. Companies that have successfully restructured know the efficiency and competitive advantage that teams can provide. If we look at who's done best over the last decade--in profit growth and stock valuation--it's been companies who have become fixated on speedy delivery of service and product innovations, whether they are multinational players like GE, Hewlett

Packard, or AT&T, upstart giants like Microsoft or up-and-comers like Sun Microsystems or Starbucks Coffee. Upon further examination, it turns out that these organizations are places where the specific focus of leaders has been on the creative use of employees' energies to drive the technologies and quality methods so necessary for being able to compete. *This is why we cannot turn our backs on teamwork.*

The "secret" to success these days is employees who understand and are committed to the goals, and who have been provided the training and the freedom they need to be accountable in the new environment. In this way, employees gain the decision-making authority they need to either do the job better and faster than it had been done before or to learn from their mistakes and make improvements. A two-way "contract" demands from employees and their work teams a direct contribution to the corporation's profitability. The employer kicks in the trust, delegated authority, and resources needed.

What it all boils down to is that we can't turn back the need for communication and collaboration. As it turns out, human interaction is the greatest opportunity we have today for efficiency. With all the technology and world-wide communication tools that are available, it still boils down to people being able to set priorities, reach smart decisions faster, and measure and improve their own processes. This is the resource that we as managers have to leverage in order to do it better than our competitors out there.

### ***How Can We Do It 100%?***

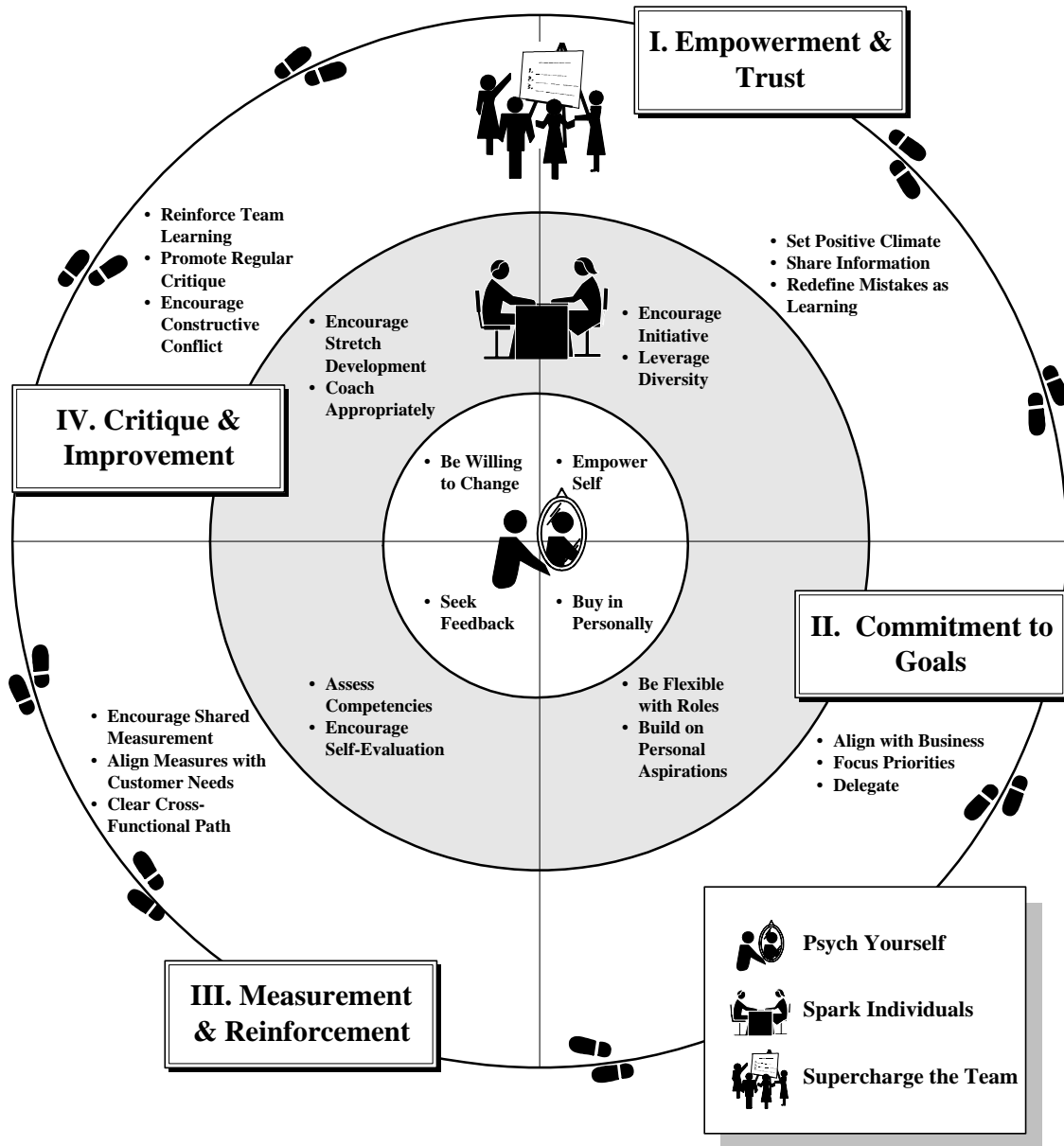
The conclusion then is that we are stuck with teams and leading teams whether we want to or not. So, if we are going to do it, let's figure out how to do it fully and completely. After all, we have already established that half-baked teamwork may be worse than no teamwork at all. The major responsibilities of the team leader are illustrated in the cycle on the attached page. Let's look at what each of these means when it comes to leading the whole team, coaching an individual on the team, and even managing your own attitudes.

### ***I. Empowerment & Trust***

**Supercharge the team** As a team leader, you need to set a positive climate that gains the whole team's enthusiasm for working toward high achievement. Translated into action steps for the leader, it means:

- Sharing massive amounts of information with the team and in some cases summarizing it for ease of use
- Letting the team know they are trusted and boosting their self-confidence
- Supporting their actions and decisions
- Helping them handle mistakes as learning opportunities rather than punishing or embarrassing them so that they will never take the risk again

Organization Teamwalk Leadership Cycle



An empowered culture has to pervade the whole team and be addressed through meetings and communications. Think for a minute about the climate created in your team by your manager. It may be great or it may be mediocre, but recognize how important it is that your manager creates an atmosphere of trust in the group. This does not mean naive trust so that everything anyone does is endorsed and thought to be OK. Trust may mean confrontation of tough issues, but done in a way that is open, fair, and non-secretive. The challenge will be to have an open flow of information within the team without overload, bureaucracy, or wasted time. This is probably the biggest challenge you face as a leader.

**Spark Individuals** In handling issues with individuals, it is very important to be completely open, even when you may not have a good solution to the problem. Disclose your own concerns. Give examples of when you were in a learning mode and didn't have all the answers or when you took a wrong step. This will go a long way in establishing trust and credibility. Leaders who display vulnerability as they coach individuals will often be seen as star leaders. Those who come off as know-it-alls, tight-lipped and in control, are often seen as weak, and disempowering leaders. If you withhold information from people, you are sending a message that they are not trusted. While it may seem to you as precedent for minimizing risk, this does massive damage to their commitment level and to their belief that you are "walking the talk" of teamwork. "High risk" honesty becomes the "low risk" option for building your team.

**Psych Yourself** Your own feeling of personal empowerment is perhaps the greatest foundation and the greatest strength you have in helping teams deliver the goods in an empowered and accountable environment. Do you feel free to speak up about your own ideas? Are you secure that you have or can gain the skills needed to be successful in your organization? Do you feel a sense of security that comes from within yourself rather than a need for a constant pat on the back from others in the organization? It is interesting to think about the fact that working on yourself in these areas can be the very best thing you can do to become a better manager. You have probably observed with past bosses that people who are the most insecure about themselves are the quickest to judge, harshly attack, and disempower team members. These are the people most likely to upset the applecart of a true team environment and create the conditions for upward delegation which we all dread so much. If everyone wants their boss to look over every little decision in order to avoid getting in trouble, pretty soon leaders are doing everyone's work in addition to their own!

## ***II. Commitment to Goals***

**Supercharge the Team** The whole issue of shared goals is the greatest problem seen in corporations today, and the greatest explanation for why groups are not achieving superior results. The snag here isn't that goals aren't discussed. Indeed, most departments have extensive, strategic and short-range plans with tools, budgets, stacks of paper, and many meetings to communicate corporate, department and even individual goals. The place where executives and other leaders tend to miss the mark is in underestimating the time and energy that must be expended in order to get people to commit to goals. As a simple exercise, you may want to go around and talk to each individual in your group and ask them for their rendition of the number one goal of the team. It will be interesting to note that each may have a very different view even if you have emphasized goals constantly in meetings and other discussions. It is so easy for people to get out of alignment and have their own interpretations of where we are headed, what we should be focusing on, and even who our customers are.

Whatever the amount of time you are spending on gaining commitment to goals should probably be tripled or quadrupled. The investment of time in this effort will dramatically pay off. For instance, think for a minute about a group whose goal it is to improve

customer service. They may each be able to spout off that goal, but each person's understanding of what constitutes better customer service may be drastically different. Even when they understand that they will be measured on customer satisfaction indicators, they may not have deeply thought about what actions will create improvement in customer service.

Commitment to goals is different from setting goals, because it gets into the issues of "What do I mean by a certain goal?" and "What am I supposed to do towards achieving this goal?" Look out for individuals working at cross purposes. You may have a situation where people are actually in competition for resources (such as clerical or legal) in the group to achieve their own personal goals at the expense of others in the group. A key role for leaders is to root out alignment problems and, if necessary, go back to your boss and negotiate a structure or recognition system that will support the team's effort toward the corporate goals.

**Spark Individuals** Working with individuals on their goals requires patience and the expenditure of adequate time to have people go away really understanding what their goals are. Your employees will appreciate your taking the time, probably several times a year, to sit down with each individual to coach them. Listen to their understanding of their goals and how they should be prioritizing their efforts. It is a very high payoff investment. In the new environment, it's perhaps *the* most important way you can spend your time.

How can you carve out time to do this? This may be a very tough question because you probably end up doing a lot of technical work these days yourself. Doing more with less creates the conditions for leaders to be roped into day-to-day tasks and left without enough time to lead effectively. But there is no alternative to coaching people on goals; without it, even more time is wasted!

One problem that you may run into is helping someone who is stuck doing what they do well or what they like to do rather than what is needed in the organization. Helping them make this transition is a big challenge because when people gravitate toward what they really enjoy doing, there is never enough time to carve out the new areas that are required in the new environment. The way to handle this is to talk it through and coach people about what it takes to make the change, how to break down the new tasks, how to get the training necessary to do it, and then to check back with them at regular intervals in the early phases to make sure they are being reinforced for doing the right things. This will help them get the message faster about what is required.

**Pysch Yourself** You may want to examine your own findings about the goals that your team is committed to and whether these are in full alignment with the larger corporate goals as confirmed by your manager and peers. In other words, is your group taking on something that another group would be better at and more interested in doing? What is best for the organization? It is important for you to check your own commitment and to work through any problems or issues of your own in understanding the goals.

### **III. Measurement & Reinforcement**

**Supercharge the Team** We are hearing a lot of talk these days about measures, and rightly so. If teams are to be empowered and accomplish a lot, they will need to measure themselves and get feedback to check their progress. A big clash now is how the teams versus individuals are measured. For instance, the team may be told that increasing customers is the number one priority, while individuals are evaluated and promoted on the basis of "attitude," speed, or efficiency in handling paperwork.

It is also a challenge to find measures that take into account the complexities that you face. However, let's not let that be an excuse for not measuring. Often the things we measure are from data already available to us--traditional, expected, and easy to measure --while the things we really need to measure would take far more factors into account. Therefore, it is a big challenge to us as leaders to find team measures that really help people track what they're supposed to be doing and make smarter decisions.

Rather than finding the one perfect measurement that does all of this, something you can implement right away is to define several factors that you and the team can measure regularly. You may have a mixture of customer satisfaction measures via surveys, oral interviews, complaint calls; cost measures via fixed costs, labor costs, capital expenditures; or profitability measures such as return on capital. For customer satisfaction, it is helpful to be able to track what you are doing for your customer's business. To do this, you may need to interview customers and determine the impact you have had on *their* business and *their* ability to deliver services more effectively and efficiently.

It is important to make data regularly available to the team so that they can track it and discuss ways to make mid-course corrections. It's fairly useless for them to track what they have no control over, so make sure that the measures check areas where their decision making has an impact. Be as creative as possible in finding as many measures as possible. This is best done in the team context in a discussion you lead about how the team can be measured. Tracking yourselves with your customer using organization programs such as CSP and other processes is absolutely critical.

**Spark Individuals** It is often necessary to provide regular, quantifiable measures for them to use to really see the impact of their actions. So many people, particularly in our industry, spend a lot of their time doing what they think ought to be done based on what has been done in the past even though it may now be a waste of time and energy. Therefore, everyone needs to see how their work impacts the greater goals. The biggest crime you can commit as a leader is to not provide feedback or measures for people to track themselves on.

You can launch a cross-functional team effort that gets people enthusiastic and excited. Towards the end of the project, however, people get extremely disillusioned when they realize that none of this counts in their "real" job. Even though it's for the greater good of the company, what's really measured is the number of calls taken per day or a narrow

subset of their job description. In this situation, the company may have done a good job on praising the benefits of cross-functional collaboration. However, without a reward system in line with the effort, people will not change their behavior. This will not lead to true teamwork. To get a handle on what you as a leader need to focus on, think for a minute about what you as a team member need from your boss to accomplish your own team's objectives. For example, if you and your peers are to address a new corporate initiative, you need your team leader to help align how you're measured. Talk to other leaders and find ways to give everyone in the group credit for what they're doing so that you do not punish them for straying from their "normal" day-to-day work.

The key element of coaching individuals is positive reinforcement. The most authentic way to deliver positive reinforcement is to let people know the value added by their actions. For instance, if a customer thanks you for something one of your employees does, it is critical to pass it along in a way so that they really understand *how* their work delivered better service, saved the customer money, or helped in the customer's ability to enhance their business. For people to be given just a pat on the back for being a "great asset" or a super smart guy or gal is inadequate if we want them to understand that their behavior has a specific impact on the business and that we would like them to keep doing the behavior that works well. When an employee selects, for instance, a cost-saving way of delivering information or documents, it is good to ask them how they made the decision and to compliment them in front of other people about how much time and money they saved.

**Psych Yourself** Not only is it important to be open to feedback when leading a team, you must actually *seek* feedback and discover how you are affecting your team and what you can do to improve your impact. Are you clear on the measures you as a leader will be held accountable for? New tools such as the Leadership Review can provide a daily reminder of how you need to allocate your time. This may push you a little to figure out how to delegate better. Measurement of yourself requires you to take an honest look at what you think is important about your job and compare it to the goals of the organization. You may be spending 50% of your time on something that, in the new environment at the organization, is less strategic than something else. This calls for a dialogue, not only with your boss, your boss' boss and other leaders in other functions, but also with peers on your team and with colleagues across the organization. There will be no one magic day, even performance review day, when your entire definition of your job is magically made clear. It is an ongoing process of discussing, prioritizing, negotiating roles across boundaries, and defining what your function can best do to contribute toward overall corporate goals. If you are somewhat worried about whether you are spending your time doing the right things, you are probably more on track than someone who is so sure of what their measures are that they end up spending 80% of their time on low priorities.

#### ***IV. Critique & Improvement***

**Supercharge the Team** You know that empowerment has fully taken hold when people are using critique directed toward themselves and their whole team on a regular basis. You can facilitate this effort by leading critique sessions and encouraging people to look at the measures that count. The use of inquiry is vital here so that members of the team look at their own results--good or bad. You have probably observed that a team that is motivated judges itself more harshly than you would. Making the measures available, making sure they have the knowledge of how to use critique, and setting aside regular time for people to get together will create the proper conditions for improvement planning.

A key factor you will want to ensure is to turn good intentions for improvement into names, dates, deadlines and specific action steps. So, make sure people record improvement plans and hold people accountable for accomplishing them.

To facilitate team critique and improvement, it is important for you as the coach to provide emotional support for those who speak out and bring up problems that need to be addressed. So, for instance, if someone says, "I'm really worried that we haven't allocated enough time to address this customer situation," support that person. Ask for more input and provide a shield when others sometimes act may defensive attack back and say, "What! We've got that under control!" You want to create a culture that makes it always okay to ask questions, to raise the standards, and to push for improvements continuously.

**Spark Individuals** It is important for individuals in the new empowered environment to be their own best source of feedback and improvement planning, using the organization coaching tools such as the Performance Review and Development Review. It is useful to get their input about their strengths and improvement needs. Most people, when given the right criteria and provided an environment of trust, will be open about what they need to work on and relatively objective about what they are and are not good at already. Certainly we all have blind spots. It is useful to point out specific behaviors to people as well as the impact of those behaviors on the team's results. In a few cases, it may be necessary to become very explicit and to document problems that occur on an ongoing basis. For the most part, however, people are motivated to achieve and help one another toward the team's best possible outcomes. You can be their greatest cheerleader in showing that you have confidence in their abilities to learn and prove their success. Let the measurement criteria speak for themselves. Encourage them to receive feedback from one another in the team and use team coaching sessions to help each individual grow and contribute to the best of his/her abilities.

**Psych Yourself** As always, managing yourself is the toughest part of being a leader. Becoming truly objective about your own impact is tough, but as you gain more experience with critique and improvement, you realize that spending enough time to understand what you need to learn and devoting time to changing helps total team output. On the other hand, too much time wallowing in past mistakes or how you look

"politically" in the organization can derail you from your team's path to success. In other words, being objective and participating in the learning organization means that you learn to critique your strengths and weaknesses in a way that is constructive without wasting time and creating self-doubt.

With this and all of the leadership actions described in the teamwalk mindset, balancing opposites is required. For instance, the concept of empowerment can be misinterpreted and distorted if people feel that it is license to do anything they feel like while over-reliance on central control and constant checking with others in the organization can paralyze and demotivate us. Knowing when to give support and knowing when to back off requires a certain art. The easiest point of reference you can use is to think about your own self and what is helpful--how leaders have helped or hurt your efforts in the past. Mastering this balance is what becoming a true leader will require in your continued professional growth.