INTRODUCTION TO TEAM DYNAMICS

Key Points

1. Effective Team Building Practices
2. The Three Stages of Team Development
3. The Role of Learning in Developing Team Excellence

All United States military doctrine is based upon reliance on the ingenuity of the individual working on his own initiative as a member of a team and using the most modern weapons and equipment which can be provided him.

GEN Manton S. Eddy, Commanding General, XII Corps, World War II
Introduction

You’ll hear it again and again: The Army is a team. Every Soldier in every unit must have a sense of belonging to this team. On the battlefield, the sense of belonging to a team may be all that holds a unit together—the national cause, the mission’s purpose, and all other concerns may not be at the forefront in the heat of combat.

Building a team that will train and win under the toughest conditions takes hard work, patience, and an ability to deal with changing dynamics as people work together under stress. Your investment in learning how to apply team building practices will yield the ultimate reward: Good teams get the job done. Good teams finish their missions on time with the resources they have and with little wasted effort. In combat, good teams are the most effective and take the fewest casualties.

**Good Teams—**

- Work together to accomplish the mission
- Execute tasks thoroughly and quickly
- Meet or exceed the standard
- Thrive on demanding challenges
- Learn from their experiences and are proud of their accomplishments.

Soldiers Are Our Credentials

In September 1944 on the Cotentin Peninsula in France, the commander of a German stronghold under siege by an American force sent word that he wanted to discuss surrender terms. German MG Hermann Ramcke was in his bunker when his staff escorted the assistant division commander of the US 8th Infantry Division down the concrete stairway to the underground headquarters. MG Ramcke addressed BG Charles D. W. Canham through an interpreter: “I am to surrender to you. Let me see your credentials.” Canham pointed to the dirty, tired, and disheveled but victorious American infantrymen who were crowding the dugout entrance and replied, “These are my credentials.”

Critical Thinking

Think back to when you were part of a newly created team. Can you identify distinct stages or phases throughout the team’s evolution? At what point did the team really begin to work well together to get things done?
Effective Team Building Practices

As an Army leader, you’ll employ many practices to build effective teams. Strong leadership is key at all levels. Individual coaching reinforces positive behavior and strengthens the team as a whole. Demanding training builds team competence and cohesion. Finally, mutual trust and respect cement the bonds of loyalty that sustain the team through crisis and combat.

Small Team Leadership Is Fundamental

If the leaders of the Army’s small teams are competent, and if team members trust one another, those teams and the larger team to which they belong will hold together and get the job done. When you belong to a successful team, you look at nearly everything in a positive light. You see problems as challenges rather than obstacles. Your winner’s attitude is infectious, especially when you are part of a small team. A cohesive team gets the job done more efficiently than an uncoordinated group of individuals. Just as a football team practices to win on the gridiron, so must a team of Soldiers practice to be effective on the battlefield. They must also learn how to live in a dynamic environment where roles and attitudes often shift. You, as their leader and coach, must develop them into a team that will succeed in this environment.

Coaching Is Key to Small-Unit Success

Coaching involves you as a leader observing your subordinates, assessing their performance, and communicating with them to ensure they develop and execute individual plans of action to reinforce strengths and overcome weaknesses. Through effective coaching, you continually support your subordinates and the plan. When you are an effective coach, your Soldiers perform—for you, for other people in the squad or section, for others in the team or crew, or for the person on their right or left. This is the fundamental truth of human conduct in warfare: Soldiers perform because they will not let their buddies down. When your Soldiers trust you and the coaching you give them, the strengths of the team make the weaknesses of individuals insignificant.

Training Together Builds Trust

When Soldiers train together, they gain competence together. Trust is a product of that shared competence. As your team becomes more experienced and enjoys more successes, it becomes more cohesive. Subordinates will learn to trust you as a leader if you know how to do your job and act consistently—if you say what you mean and mean what you say.

What It Takes to Build Strong Teams

People will do the most extraordinary things for their friends. It’s your job—your way of life—as an Army leader to draw each member into the team because someday, possibly tomorrow, you may ask that person for extraordinary effort. You must apply interpersonal leadership skills that transform individuals into reliable team members. If you’ve done your work, the team member won’t let you down.

Remember that within a larger team, smaller teams may be at different stages of development. For instance, members of First Squad may be used to working together. They trust one another and get the job done—usually exceeding the standard—with no wasted motion. On the other hand, Second Squad in the same platoon may have just received three new Soldiers and a team leader from another company. As a team, Second Squad is less mature. It will take the members some time to get to the level of First Squad.

New team members have to learn how things work. The existing team must bring them on board and make them feel part of the team. They must learn the standards and the
climate of their new unit. They’ll have to demonstrate some competence before other members really accept them. Finally, they must practice working together. As a leader and coach who must build and oversee the team, you'll be better equipped if you know what to expect. Make use of the information on the next few pages. Learn what to look for—and stay flexible.

The Three Stages of Team Development

Use the following list as a guide to what you must do to pull a team together, move it in the right direction, and keep it moving until it reaches the goal. The foundation for success in the work ahead—as you get your team to pull together—is that your subordinates must strongly feel that they’re a part of the team, that their contribution is essential to survival and success. They must know that you'll train them and listen to them. When they bond with you and their teammates, they will not let you down with shoddy work or half-baked efforts. To develop this bond of teamwork, you must constantly observe, counsel, develop, listen, and lead. You must be every bit the team player you want your subordinates to be—and more.

Stages of Team Development:

- Formation
- Enrichment
- Sustainment

Teams do not come together by accident. Leaders build and guide them through the stages of formation, enrichment, and sustainment. While our discussion in this chapter may make the process seem orderly, the dynamic reality is more complicated. Different teams develop differently, and the boundaries between stages are not hard and fast. Recognizing this, you must be sensitive to the characteristics of the team you’re building and of its individual members—your Soldiers.

Trust Earned

In a 1976 interview, Congressman Hamilton Fish of New York told of his experiences as a white officer with the 369th Infantry Regiment, an all-black unit in the segregated Army of 1917. Fish knew that his unit would function only if his Soldiers trusted him; his Soldiers, all of whom had volunteered for combat duty, deserved nothing less than a trustworthy leader. When a white regiment threatened to attack the black Soldiers in training camp, Fish, his pistol drawn, alerted the leaders of that regiment and headed off a disaster.

“There was one thing the African-American Soldiers wanted above all from a white officer,” Fish recalled in an interview nearly 60 years later, “and that was fair treatment. Even in New York City [home of most of his Soldiers] they really did not get a square deal most of the time. But if they felt you were on the level with them, they would go all out for you. And they seemed to have a sixth sense in realizing just how you felt. I sincerely wanted to lead them as real Soldiers, and they knew it.”

It’s your job as an Army leader to pull each member into the team because you may someday ask that person for an extraordinary effort.
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<tr>
<th><strong>FORMATION STAGE</strong></th>
<th><strong>Subordinate Actions</strong></th>
<th><strong>Leader &amp; Organizational Actions</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Team Building</td>
<td>Learn about team purpose, tasks, and standards.</td>
<td>Design effective reception and orientation.</td>
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<td>Learn about leaders and other members.</td>
<td>Create learning experiences.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Achieve belonging and acceptance.</td>
<td>Communicate expectations.</td>
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<th><strong>TEAM BUILDING FOR DEPLOYMENTS</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Adj to uncertainty across the spectrum of conflict.</td>
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<td>Talk with each Soldier.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cope with fear of unknown injury and death.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reassure with calm presence.</td>
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<td>Adj to separation from home and family.</td>
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<td>Communicate vital safety tips.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>ENRICHMENT STAGE</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>General Team Building</td>
<td>Trust leaders and other members.</td>
<td>Trust and encourage trust.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cooperate with team members.</td>
<td>Reinforce desired group norms.</td>
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<td>Share information.</td>
<td>Establish clear lines of authority.</td>
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<td>Accept the way things are done.</td>
<td>Establish individual and unit goals.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Adjust to feelings about how things ought to be done.</td>
<td>Identify and grow leaders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrate competence.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Demonstrate competence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Become a team member.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Prepare as a unit for operations.</td>
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<td>Learn about the threat.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Know the Soldiers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learn about the area of operations.</td>
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<td>Provide stable unit climate.</td>
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<th><strong>SUSTAINMENT STAGE</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>General Team Building</td>
<td>Trust others.</td>
<td>Demonstrate trust.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Share ideas and feelings freely.</td>
<td>Focus on teamwork, training, and maintaining.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Assist other team members.</td>
<td>Respond to subordinate problems.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sustain trust and confidence.</td>
<td>Devise more challenging training.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Share missions and values.</td>
<td>Build pride and spirit.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjust to continuous operations.</td>
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<td>Observe and enforce sleep discipline.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cope with casualties.</td>
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<td>Sustain safety awareness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjust to enemy actions.</td>
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<td>Inform Soldiers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overcome boredom.</td>
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<td>Know and deal with Soldiers’ perceptions.</td>
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<td>Avoid rumors.</td>
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<td>Keep Soldiers productively busy.</td>
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<td>Control fear, anger, despair, and panic.</td>
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<td>Use in-process reviews (IPRs) and after action reviews (AARs).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Act decisively in face of panic.</td>
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Compare the characteristics of your team with the team building stage descriptions. Your comparison can help you determine what to expect of your team and what you must do to improve its capabilities. Teams, like individuals, have different personalities. The leader’s job is not to make teams that are clones of one another: The job is to make best use of the team’s peculiar talents, get it to work up to its full potential, and motivate it to aggressively fulfill its missions.

**Formation Stage**

Teams work best when new members quickly feel a part of the team. The two critical steps of the **formation stage**—reception and orientation—are dramatically different in peace and war. In combat, a good sponsorship process can make the difference between life and death for new arrivals and the entire team.

**Reception** is the leader’s welcoming the new member to the organization. Time permitting, it should include a handshake and a personal introduction. In the **orientation** stage, the new member meets other team members, learns the workplace layout and schedule, and generally gets to know the environment. In combat, you may not have much time to spend with new members of your team. In that case, you assign new arrivals a sponsor. That person will orient them until they “know the ropes.”

In combat, you have countless things to worry about, and the mental state of new arrivals might seem low on the list. But if your Soldiers cannot fight, your unit will suffer needless casualties and may fail to complete its mission.

**Replacements in the European Theater of Operations**

Most historians writing about World War II agree that the replacement system that fed new Soldiers into the line units was seriously flawed, especially in the European Theater of Operations. Troops fresh from stateside posts were shuffled about in tent cities where they were just numbers. 1LT George Wilson, an infantry company commander who received 100 replacements on December 29, 1944, in the midst of the Battle of the Bulge, remembers the results: “We discovered that these men had been on a rifle range only once; they had never thrown a grenade or fired a bazooka [antitank rocket], mortar, or machine gun.” PVT Morris Dunn, another Soldier who ended up with the 84th Division after weeks in a replacement depot, recalls how the new Soldiers felt: “We were just numbers, we didn’t know anybody, and I’ve never felt so alone and miserable and helpless in my entire life. We’d been herded around like cattle at roundup time. On the ride to the front it was cold and raining with the artillery fire louder every mile, and finally we were dumped out in the middle of a heavily damaged town.”
Discipline and shared hardships pull people together in powerful ways. SGT Alvin C. York described cohesion clearly and simply:

_The war brings out the worst in you. It turns you into a mad, fightin’ animal, but it also brings out something else, something I jes don’t know how to describe, a sort of tenderness and love for the fellows fightin’ with you._

**Enrichment Stage**

In the **enrichment stage**, the new team and the new team members gradually move from questioning everything to trusting themselves, their peers, and their leaders. As the leader, you learn to trust by listening, following up on what you hear, establishing clear lines of authority, and setting standards. Training takes a group of individuals and molds them into a team while preparing them to accomplish their missions. Although training occurs during all three stages of team building, it’s especially important during the enrichment stage. It’s at this point that the team is building **collective proficiency**—the ability to work together smoothly and competently.

**Sustainment Stage**

During the **sustainment stages**, members identify with “their team.” They own it, have pride in it, and want the team to succeed. At this stage, team members will do what needs doing without being told. Every new mission gives you, the leader, a chance to strengthen the team’s bonds and challenge it to reach for new heights of accomplishment. You develop your subordinates because you know that they will be tomorrow’s team leaders. The team should continuously train so that it stays proficient in the collective and individual tasks it must perform to accomplish its mission.

**The Role of Learning in Developing Team Excellence**

The Army is a learning organization: It harnesses the experience of its people and organizations to improve the way it does business. Based on their experiences, learning organizations adopt new techniques and procedures that get the job done more efficiently or effectively. Likewise, they discard techniques and procedures that have outlived their purpose.

You must remain flexible, however, when trying to make sense of your experiences. Leaders who work day after day and never stop to ask, “How can I do this better?” will not learn and will not improve themselves or their team. Leaders at all levels—from those in cadet leadership positions to major-command commanders—who daily look at their experience to find better ways of doing things will constantly and rapidly improve.

Challenge how you and your subordinates operate. Ask, “Why do we do it that way?” and never accept “Because we’ve always done it that way.” Look closely at teams’ habits. Just because a team has found a way that works doesn’t mean that way is the best. Unless leaders are willing to question how things are, no one will ever know what might be.

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For most men, the matter of learning is one of personal preference. But for Army leaders, the obligation to learn, to grow in their profession, is clearly a public duty.

GOA Omar N. Bradley
“Zero Defects” and Learning

As a learning organization, the Army must guard against a “zero-defects” mentality. Leaders who are willing to learn will welcome new ways of looking at things, examine what’s going well, and not be afraid to look at what’s going poorly. When you stop receiving feedback from your subordinates, it’s a good indication that something is wrong. If the message you hammer home is “There will be no mistakes,” or if you lose your temper and “shoot the messenger” every time there’s bad news, your Soldiers eventually will stop telling you when things go wrong or suggesting how to improve. That will guarantee you unpleasant surprises. Any time you have human beings in a complex organization doing difficult jobs, often under pressure, they will make mistakes. Effective leaders use those mistakes to figure out how to do things better and to share what they have learned with other leaders in the organization—including subordinate leaders, peers, and superiors.

Occupations That Require a Zero-Defect Standard

But the profession of arms also requires a zero-defects standard when training and combat do not allow for mistakes. Take a parachute rigger, for example. If a rigger makes a mistake, a parachutist will die. Helicopter mechanics live in a zero-defect environment as well. They can’t allow risky aircraft to fly.

Of course, organizations and people make mistakes. Mistakes are part of training and may be the price of taking action. As a leader, you must make your intent clear and ensure your Soldiers understand the sorts of mistakes that are acceptable and those that are not.

Critical Thinking

Apply the concept of a learning organization to the Army. Based on your current knowledge of the Army, in what ways does it foster organizational learning? In what ways might it inhibit organizational learning?

Critical Thinking

Consider the following two statements: “There is no room for a zero-defects mentality in the organization,” and “The profession of arms requires a zero-defects standard when training and combat allow for no mistakes.” Are these statements contradictory? Explain your answer.
Strive for Organizational Excellence

Leaders can create a harmful zero-defects environment without realizing it. Good leaders want their organizations to excel. But if you’re not careful, your organizational “standard” of excellence can quickly degenerate into a zero-defects mindset. For example, the published minimum standard for passing the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) is 180 points—60 points per event. If commanders routinely assign your unit to perform missions requiring highly strenuous physical activity, however, you must train your Soldiers to a higher-than-average fitness level. If you use APFT scores as the primary means of measuring physical fitness, your Soldiers will focus on the test rather than the need for physical fitness. A better course would be to train your Soldiers in mission-related skills that require the higher level of physical readiness, while at the same time motivating them to strive for their personal best on the APFT.

Barriers to Learning

Fear of mistakes isn’t the only thing that can get in the way of learning. So can rigid, lockstep thinking and mental laziness. You can get so used to these learning barriers that you don’t even notice them.

Fight this tendency. Challenge yourself. Use your imagination. Ask how other people do things. Listen to subordinates.

Helping People Learn

As an Army leader, you must create conditions that help people learn. First, you must motivate the Soldier to learn. Explain why the subject is important, or show how it will help the individual perform better. Second, involve the subordinate in the learning process—make it active. For instance, you would never try to teach someone how to drive a vehicle with classroom instruction alone; you have to put the person behind the wheel. That same approach applies to much more complex tasks. Keep lecture to a minimum and include as much hands-on time as possible.

Learning from experience isn’t enough; you can’t have every kind of experience. But if you take advantage of what others have learned, you get the benefit without having the experience. An obvious example is when combat veterans in a unit share their experiences with Soldiers who haven’t been to war. Another is developing a professional reading program for your self-development. A less obvious, but no less important, example is when leaders share their experiences with subordinates during developmental counseling.

Critical Thinking

Describe the habits that create barriers to learning, along with practices that can help people learn.
After Action Reviews and Learning

Individuals benefit when the team learns together. The after action review (AAR) is a tool good leaders use to help their teams learn as a group. Properly conducted, an AAR is a professional discussion of an event, focused on how well units performed. It enables people to discover for themselves what happened, why it happened, and how to reinforce strengths and improve on weaknesses. Like warning orders and rehearsals, the AAR is a technique that all leaders can use whether on post or in the field. When your team sits down for an AAR, make sure that everyone participates and understands what the other participants are saying. The input from the whole team will teach your Soldiers more than if they just think about the experience by themselves.

Critical Thinking

Two lieutenants assemble their units after a training exercise in which the teams performed poorly. One gives his unit a “locker-room” lecture about what they did wrong. The other invites various team members to explain from their point of view what went wrong and how to fix it. Are both approaches valid? Which approach seems natural to you? How do you think each unit will respond and which will be more motivated to improve? Why?
CONCLUSION

Today’s Army demands cohesive teams—teams that pull together. Leaders at all levels must know the stages teams go through—especially leaders who are closest to training or combat. Encourage your subordinates to strive for unit excellence. Challenge team members by involving them and seeking their input for building on team strengths and reducing team weaknesses.

Learning Assessment

1. Identify two effective team building practices.
2. List the three stages of team development.
3. Why is organizational learning important to building team excellence?
4. Identify two effective means for promoting organizational learning.

Key Words

formation stage
reception
orientation
enrichment stage
sustainment stage
developmental counseling
after action review

References

Department of the Army. (1972). *Quotes for the Military Writer*. Washington, DC.