A Crash Course in Team-Building
An excerpt from *Hit the Ground Running*

If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.
--Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Over the past 25 years, I've worked with hundreds of groups ranging from multi-month wilderness journeys to the executives and boards of major companies. Each group had wildly different members, goals, and dynamics, but they shared certain characteristics common to all team anatomy. There are three absolute truths about teams.

1. Teams That Start Strong Are More Likely to Succeed in the Long Run

Teams move through a maturation process to arrive at optimal performance. Groups naturally travel through several stages, including a period of conflict. Your job as team leader is to help guide the team through these phases as efficiently as possible.

Whether it's the city symphony or a professional football team, the quality of the first few meetings can have a lasting impact on the team's long-term performance. A thoughtful agenda for Day One will help you start strong and maintain team energy.

The first 50 days are the "ritual sniffing" stage, as one friend of mine calls it. Many conversations during this period are shallow or noncommittal, but there is plenty going on at the unspoken level. Members are engaged, but they are privately wondering what the new team will be like, how much of their discretionary effort they want to invest, and how they fit in. They may feel some anxiety, and they are looking for your direction.

Your first meetings with the team help set the right tone and guide the team into the next stage. Your initial meetings should include the communication of your leadership values, the development of group working agreements, and expectations of the team. In the second 50 days, it is possible your team will begin to shift. Re-inforce the collective goal and your leadership values to shepherd the team through its "growing pains."

During this second stage of team development, hope bumps into reality. The excitement of having a new chief ebbs. The velvet rubs off to display some rough edges. You'll notice a subtle jockeying for power, frustration between individuals, annoyance at slow progress, or a questioning of the group's (and maybe your own) competence. Brace yourself. It's inevitable as teething, and just as uncomfortable.

Over the past 25 years, we have witnessed this phase many times. Team-development theorist Bruce Tuckman called it "storming." Some typical examples:

- You feel a quiet tension in the meeting. Afterwards, small groups cluster in animated conversation in the parking lot or around the latte machine.
- Sarcastic remarks or provocation replace open confrontation ("Hey, Sharon, to what to we owe the honor of your appearance?").
- Arguments erupt. When someone offers a new idea, others chew it up like hyenas on a wildebeest.

This phase is "group development hell." The team will be edgy, perhaps eager to blame. You are a likely target. You'll want time to make the right operational decisions, while they want leadership and action . . . pronto.

To manage this phase, first keep in mind that *it's perfectly natural*. In fact, consider it progress. Remember: to get to that ideal level of high performance, the team must move through this phase.

What's Important to Women
Women may take the conflict stage personally--especially when the group is lashing out against leadership. Don't fall into this trap. Evaluate feedback within the context of what's going on with the team as a whole. If you are hearing it consistently, if people you trust agree, and if the feedback resonates with you, then make adjustments. However, don't let the noise get in your way. You are guiding a group through a squall, and with persistence and a good sense of direction, you will get through to clear weather on the other side.

Do you know how you respond when cornered? Awareness of your negative reactions will help limit their effects. One executive we interviewed keeps a list in her right-hand drawer of behaviors she resorts to under extreme stress. She can periodically refer to this list to make sure she's not instinctively acting out.

An aggravated group needs strong direction. This can be tough to manage if you haven't finalized your long-term agenda. Provide that "meanwhile" sense of direction by:

- Reinforcing your leadership values…how you want to work together.
- Reminding the team of their working agreements. Recommit to them.
- Encouraging the team to vent as stress release, but do not permit wallowing in negativity or "practicing misery." Discuss specific issues, then recommit to your direction.
- Developing short-term goals (like your first wins) or projects that stand a good chance of early success. If the first wins you select do not include the entire team, find other projects that you can work on with key players.
- Letting them know when you will have more information or a direction.

People want to know what's next. If you can't tell them yet, let them know when you can. Suppose you are flying to Cleveland, but get delayed in Chicago. Your annoyance grows in direct proportion to the lack of information about the delay. Would you rather hear, "Good evening ladies and gentleman. We have an unexpected delay. Please stand by."; or, "Good evening ladies and gentleman. We have just heard from the cockpit that Flight 237 to Chicago is delayed due to weather around O'Hare. We do not know the exact schedule but have set a departure time of 5:45 p.m. We will have an update for you in 15 minutes. We apologize for the delay."

Once you have successfully managed through this turbulent stage, the group will begin to relax. Differences of opinions will be openly and respectfully discussed. Team members experience increased satisfaction, trust, and mutual consideration. If you reach this stage in your first 100 days, provide a lot of support and recognition for their accomplishments, and keep the team involved in decision-making, including the creation of goals and standards

Of course, life and work is not so linear. Changes in priorities, circumstances, or personnel can cause the team to bounce back to another stage. However, with observation and responsiveness, you can accelerate their progress to higher performance.

2. Team Problems Don't Begin with Personality Conflicts

Team leaders often call and ask me to "fix" someone--a team member who just doesn't get along with colleagues. Most team problems are *not* about personality. They are usually the result of more fundamental, structural causes: lack of clarity or lack of alignment. If there is tension or low team performance, conduct the following diagnostic.

Clarity

Determine if each team member is clear on the following.
- Our goals and direction.
- Individual roles:
o   Who does what; who is accountable for what.
o   How each team member contributes to the overall goal.
- Systems:
o   How we get the work done.
o   How we are rewarded for our accomplishments.
- Decision-making process; the levels at which different decisions can be made.
- How work flows through the organization.
- Feedback; how individuals and the team are doing relative to goals.
- The resources and information needed to do the job.

Alignment
- Do individual goals line up with team goals and strategic direction?
- Do the skill sets of individuals and the collective meet the requirements of the job?
- Does the goal reflect the team-member values?
- Do team members agree:
o   About the goal?
o   About the approach?
o   About the division of labor and responsibility?
- When there is disagreement, is it addressed with sensitivity and candor?
- Do the systems support the work? For example, does compensation adequately reward people for the job required?
- Does resource allocation support the work that needs to be done?

If you feel confident that you can answer yes to the above questions, then perhaps it is appropriate to send your "problem child" to charm school.

3. Teams Without Common Goals Will Seek a Common Gripe

The most important way to accelerate a team's performance is to present a common, compelling goal. Conversely, if your team does not feel passionate about their objectives, or if protecting turf replaces collaborative efforts, they will find common enemies to rally against: labor versus management, nursing versus doctors, operations versus marketing, your staff versus you. One ideal example of unifying to accomplish a common goal is the way squabbling agencies and departments work together during an emergency or disaster.