

VIRTUOSO TEAMS

*Based on Bill Fischer and Andy Boynton's article, HBR, July-August, 2005,
p.117-123*

“High-stakes projects need all-star teams. But all-stars often play by their own rules – and fight like cats and dogs”

INTROCTION

- Teams produce outstanding and innovative results in all areas of human achievement - business, the arts, science, athletics, politics, governance

Virtuoso Teams

- Fundamentally different from ordinary groups that most organizations form to pursue modest goals
- Made up of elite experts in their own particular fields and specially convened for ambitious projects
- Work style has a frenetic rhythm
- Emanate a discernible energy
- Utterly unique in the ambitiousness of their goals, the intensity of their conversations, the degree of their esprit, and the extraordinary results they deliver
- Consists of star performers who are handpicked to play specific, key roles
- Intense and intimate and work best when forced to work in cramped spaces under strict time constraints
- Leaders put a great premium on collaboration; not afraid to encourage creative confrontation to get it
- Assume their clients are sophisticated and smart and so they don't cater to the stereotypical "average"

Risks of Virtuoso Teams

- Tough to keep them together once they achieve their goals
- Most organizations consider experts to be too elitist, egocentric, temperamental, and difficult to work with
- Worried they might come to fisticuffs

Consequently most organizations set up project teams who get along nicely, and end up with mediocrity.



ASSEMBLE THE STARS

Traditional Teams

- More concerned with doing than thinking
- Assume that execution is more important than generating breakthrough ideas
- Team assignments fall to people who seem to be able to get the work done

Virtuoso Teams

- Thinking is more important than doing
- Team members hired for their skills and willingness to take up big challenges
- Team leaders push members to reach their potential within the context of the team objectives

Virtuoso Team Members

- Not shy
- Willing to take on risky ventures away from well-trodden paths
- Love daunting challenges
- Accept the risk of exposure and career damage if they fail
- Give their utmost to assure that innovation happens

Great Performance

- Requires great people
- Virtuoso team members engage in high-energy contests
- Atmosphere filled with “electricity and hate”
- Members have big egos and greedy ambition
- Engaged in nasty tugs-of-war with one another
- Need each other skills, not peace and quiet



BUILD THE GROUP EGO

Traditional Teams

- Operate under the tyranny of “we”
- Put group consensus and constraint above individual freedom
- Team harmony is important
- Conviviality compensates for missing talent
- Has great attitudes and happy members
- *“From polite team comes a polite results”*

Virtuoso Teams

- Individuals are in, group consensus is out
- As the project progresses, the individual stars harness themselves to the product of the group
- Members break through their own egocentrism and become a plurality with single-minded focus on the goal
- Morphed into a powerful team with a shared identity

Norsk Hydro (1)

- Rich in heritage, unwieldy and traditional
- Adopts a Nordic consensus driven approach to decision-making
- Faced a looming investor relation crisis as a result of wrong analysis to find oil at Bloc 34 in Angola
- Kjell Sunde defying precedent set up a virtuoso team to understand what went wrong
- He publicly celebrated the selected members and established a star mentality from its inception

Norsk Hydro (2)

- Sunde set about building the group ego of the team
- He made sure that the members work autonomously, without micromanagement or intrusive scrutiny
- Team members had absolute priority and were given access to any resources they required
- Their conclusions were definitive and there was no second-guessing
- He set a positive tone and bolstered group morale

Norsk Hydro (3)

- There were plenty of early clashes
- To avoid friction, Sunde introduced an overall pattern to the teamwork
- He paired off individual teams members in accordance with their expertise and psychological fit
- Each half of the pair worked on a separate but related problem
- Each pair's problem set fit together with other sets to form the overall puzzle
- Eventually team members understood that if one fails the entire team fails

Norsk Hydro (4)

- The team transformed itself from a collection of egocentric individuals into one great totality
- Individual talents were realized harnessed to the goal



**MAKE WORK A
CONTACT SPORT**

Traditional Teams

- Managed remotely and get together only occasionally for discussion and debate
- All too often spatially dispersed

Virtuoso Teams

- Members energize each other and stimulate ideas with frequent, intense, face-to-face conversations
- Impassioned dialogue becomes the critical driver of performance, not the work itself
- Right messages get to the right people - fast
- Operate much faster than traditional teams

CHALLENGE THE CLIENT

- Virtuoso teams believe that clients want more not less
- They deliver solutions that are consistent with higher perception
- They redefine tastes and expectations



HERD THE CATS

Leaders of traditional teams

- Emphasize consensus and compromise
- Keep stress levels low
- Meet deadlines
- Produce acceptable results

Leaders of virtuoso teams

- More deft and forceful
- Help individual performers, and the group as a whole, achieve their utmost potential
- Balance the need for individual attention and intellectual freedom with the demands and time lines of high-stakes projects
- Assumes different kinds of roles and use different management tools, than do leaders of traditional teams

Leading virtuoso teams

- One way is to be a rigid - even villainous – perfectionist; pushing, prodding, and demanding excellence
- The opposite way is by striving for excellence by fostering intellectual creative freedom in individuals and in the group as a whole; creating a sense mutual respect and unity in the group

Leaders of virtuoso teams

- Exploit time as a management tool
- Make deadline pressure so great that the team had no choice but to maintain its focus on the task at hand
- Make sure that members use strict time limits to maximum effect

Virtuoso teams differ from traditional teams along every dimension, from the way they recruit members to the way they enforce their processes and from the expectations they hold to the results they produce.

Traditional versus Virtuoso Teams

TRADITIONAL	VIRTUOSO
Choose Members for Availability	Choose Members for Skills
➤ Assign members according to the individuals' availability and past experience with the problem	➤ Insist on assigning only those with the best skills, regardless of the individuals' familiarity with the problem
➤ Fill in the team as needed	➤ Assign specialists for each position on the team

Traditional versus Virtuoso Teams

TRADITIONAL	VIRTUOSO
Emphasize the Collective	Emphasize the Individual
➤ Repress the individual egos	➤ Celebrate individual egos and elicit the best from each team member
➤ Choose a solution based on consensus	➤ Choose a solution based on merit
➤ Assures that efficiency trumps creativity	➤ Assure that creativity trumps efficiency

Traditional versus Virtuoso Teams

TRADITIONAL	VIRTUOSO
Focus on Tasks	Focus on Ideas
➤ Complete critical tasks on time	➤ Generate a frequent and rich flow of ideas among the team members
➤ Get the project done on time	➤ Find and express the breakthrough idea on time

Traditional versus Virtuoso Teams

TRADITIONAL	VIRTUOSO
Work Individually and Remotely	Work Together and Intensively
➤ Require individual members to complete tasks on their own	➤ Force members into close proximity
➤ Allow communication via e-mail, phone, and weekly meetings	➤ Force members to work together at a fast pace
➤ Encourage polite conversations	➤ Force direct dialogue without sparing feelings

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CONCLUSION

- To avoid mediocrity, to get breakthrough performance;
- Assemble the very best and let their egos soar
- Encourage intense dialogue and watch sparks fly
- Allow the most brilliant minds in your organization to collide and create, to achieve true excellence