

3D TEAM LEADERSHIP

A New Approach for Complex Teams

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and T. Brad Harris

Stanford Business Books
An Imprint of Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free, archival-quality paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kirkman, Bradley Lane, author. | Harris, T. Brad, author.

Title: 3D team leadership : a new approach for complex teams / Bradley L. Kirkman and T. Brad Harris.

Other titles: Three-D team leadership

Description: Stanford, California : Stanford Business Books, an imprint of Stanford University Press, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016057431 | ISBN 9780804796422 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 978080479xxx (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Teams in the workplace. | Leadership.

Classification: LCC HD66 .K574 2017 | DDC 658.4/022—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016057431>

To Allison, who makes everything I do possible and meaningful.

To Lynn, who, despite my own doubts, always believed.

—Brad Kirkman

To my favorite team: Melanie, Hudson, Annie, and Jack.

To my favorite leaders: The teachers and staff
at the KinderFrogs school at TCU.

—Brad Harris

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Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE TO write without the influence of and friendships with the many colleagues with whom we have shared our team leadership journey over the years. We are forever grateful to Murray Barrick, Brad Bell, Jeremy Bernerth, Bill Bigoness, Gilad Chen, Ying Chen, Zhen Xiong (George) Chen, Michael Cole, Jason Colquitt, John Cordery, Stephen Courtright, Deanne den Hartog, Chris Earley, Dov Eden, Crystal Farh, Ravi Gajendran, Michele Gelfand, Cristina Gibson, Lucy Gilson, Carolina Gomez, Ricky Griffin, Stan and Nur Gryskiewicz, John Hollenbeck, Laura Huang, Susan Jackson, Timothy Judge, Steve Kozlowski, Jeff LePine, Kevin Lowe, Steve Lucas, Luis Martins, John Mathieu, Dan McGurrin, Bud Miles, Luke Novelli, Larry Peters, Ron Piccolo, Christopher Porter, Ben Rosen, Chris Rosen, Denise Rousseau, Sara Rynes, Ed Salas, Debra Shapiro, General (Ret.) H. Hugh Shelton, Piers Steel, Greg Stephens, Vas Taras, Paul Tesluk, Anne Tsui, Mary Uhl-Bien, Jack Walker, Mary Waller, and Jing Zhou.

We also give credit to a set of big thinkers whom we have long admired for their tremendous impact on our thinking and writing about teams, as this book attests. We are especially indebted to Amy Edmondson, Linda Hill, Larry Hirschhorn, Chuck Manz, and Hank Sims and to those that are no

longer with us: Susan Cohen, Paul Goodman, Richard Hackman, Bob House, and Keith Murnighan.

From Brad Kirkman: I also give thanks to my former Ph.D. students who constantly push me to think differently in ways that I didn't think possible, including Richard Gardner, Brad Harris (my coauthor of this book), Andy Hinrichs, Kwanghyun (Harry) Kim, Ning Li, Sal Mistry, Troy Smith, Adam Stoverink, Brian Swider, Gary Thurgood, and Maria del Carmen Triana.

From Brad Harris: I am incredibly grateful for the support from my family and friends throughout the writing of this book. Some additional individuals (not listed above) who deserve specific thanks include Wendy Boswell, Nichelle Carpenter, Tom and Nancy Harris, Amit and Karen Kramer, Rich Lutz, Hettie Richardson, Abbie Shipp, Aaron Taylor, and, of course, my coauthor, Brad Kirkman. I also owe a ton of gratitude to my colleagues, students, and friends at the Mays Business School at Texas A&M University, the School of Labor and Employment Relations at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the Neeley School of Business at Texas Christian University.

The ideas for *3D Team Leadership* are a culmination of over thirty years of combined research, consulting, and teaching. We have been fortunate to work with thousands of extraordinary team leaders and members in dozens of companies on five different continents. We include our own joint research, research with our many wonderful colleagues, as well as research that we thought important to share but in which we were not direct participants. We feel lucky to be able to build on this work. The team leaders and teams we studied come from a wide variety of industries, including software development and other high-tech firms, manufacturing, insurance, governmental agencies, energy, telecommunications, fire and rescue departments, home improvement, biotechnology, and aluminum production.

We are especially indebted to the following companies that provided access to team leaders and members on numerous occasions and without which this book would not have been possible: Alcoa, Allstate, Biogen, Burt's Bees, Cisco Systems, ConocoPhillips, Genencor, Halliburton, IBM, MEMC, MetLife, Motorola, National Spinning, NetApp, Prudential, Sabre, Sara Lee, The Home Depot, and U.S. court system.

Even more important are the individuals who took way more valuable time out of their busy schedules than we deserved to work with us and share their experiences for this book. We are especially grateful to Don Allen, Greg Berg, Steve Conaton, John Deering, Alex Hall, Daniel Holmes, Bernhard

Kretschmer, John McCue, Simon McPherson, Kevin Miller, Sander Pool, Beth Ritter, Nathan Snoke, Marty Turner, Maria Wadlow, and Thomas Winter. Special thanks are owed to Louise Dandridge, Justin James, Kelly Miller, Ed Prime, Joe Provenzano, and Kelly Turner for their work in coordinating our firefighter study. We also thank Tanya Menon for her invaluable feedback on the book and Margo Beth Fleming for her excellent editorial guidance throughout the writing process. We owe special thanks to Lauren Hawkins Miller and Olivia Bartz for their editing assistance on the book.

1 The Dramatically Changing Landscape of Leading Teams

ITS 6:26 A.M. ON A MID-AUGUST MORNING IN SAN JOSE, California. Outside, the near perfect 60-degree temperature is accented by a gentle breeze from the south. The sun is making its daily debut, and, heeding its lead, commuters all across the western United States reluctantly surrender to their snooze buttons and fire up their coffee brewers in preparation for another workday.

But, unfortunately, not Anna. Anna has been holed up in her modest second-level office at a prominent technology firm since the very early morning hours and is looking desperately at her empty coffee cup for answers that might help her meet her increasingly complex and ever-expanding obligations. Today is an example. After a brief sleep and a paltry granola bar, Anna arrived at her office around 4:00 a.m. to lead a team meeting with new product engineers in Bengaluru (formerly known as Bangalore), India; Sydney, Australia; Dublin, Ireland; and Raleigh, North Carolina. Although Anna technically has the authority to conduct these meetings during local business hours (Pacific Standard Time in California), she rotates the meeting times so that each office is given at least one convenient local time slot per business quarter. This strategy doesn't solve all cultural and geographic issues, of course, but at least it seems to boost overall engagement and fairness perceptions among her team members. Unfortunately, it also ensures that at least two members are worn down and temporally inconvenienced during the conversations—and today was Anna's turn to sacrifice.

After her new product development team meeting, Anna spends 45 minutes responding to e-mails relating to her “actual” job (an increasingly ambiguous term encompassing things like employee evaluations, sending monthly P&L numbers, and corresponding with high-level customers), then begins preparing for an 8:30 a.m. meeting with one of the company’s ongoing communities of practice (the purpose of Anna’s community was to generate best practices in code writing that can be disseminated throughout her company worldwide). Anna serves as an ad hoc leader of the community and is tasked with coordinating and managing ten core members (those who are relatively permanent) and somewhere between forty and fifty more peripheral members (those who move in and out of the community depending on interest level). Similar to the new product team, these members are located in many different countries and are not easily rounded up for even simple conversations. Furthermore, because it is such a large team, just making sense of the roster feels like an overwhelming task--and don’t even get her started on trying to manage the actual personalities within it! Anna’s most recent “go-to” play for getting things done in the community was to form and use subteams (smaller sets of teams within the overall community) to address specific initiatives, then focus on helping those subteams coordinate with one another to contribute to overall community goals.

Following her community of practice meeting, Anna grabs another cup of coffee and joins a meeting of the company’s senior management team (a “privilege” afforded all divisional vice presidents). Anna is not the leader of this team, but she is expected to actively contribute to discussions and action plans concerning her company’s current operational issues and strategic vision. Not only are these discussions vital for company well-being; they are also important to Anna’s career. They are, in essence, her chance to make a mark and impress key decision makers. As a result, Anna preps exhaustively. The meetings typically last between 60 and 90 minutes, which, on days like today, means that Anna has conducted three intensive team meetings before most restaurants even retire their breakfast menus.

Adding to all of these team responsibilities, Anna is also a member of a multicompany consortium and two to four company-specific project teams at any given time. In contrast to the ongoing teams, these project teams have limited life cycles ranging from a few weeks to several months. The special project teams, in particular, often move through various phases whereby members shift from working mostly individually and independently, then in

smaller subteams, and then all together as one intact team. Although Anna is not typically the formally designated leader of these project teams, she and her colleagues often share certain leadership roles throughout each team's life span. Anna is grateful that she has only one additional team meeting on this particular afternoon, but that doesn't mean she won't be responding to other team-related e-mails, phone calls, and short video chats throughout the day (and evening).

Anna's work life is consumed by teamwork. On many days, she feels overwhelmed, even suffocated, by the prospect of managing (okay, juggling) her roles on each of her teams. They consume her time and energy, they divert her focus from her individual day-to-day responsibilities, and they even spill over into her personal life. Furthermore, she feels that her career is being decided in large part by the complex black box--like inner workings of teams—an unnerving proposition for someone used to controlling her own destiny. However, Anna knows that team-based arrangements can outperform classic individual-based ones; it was drilled relentlessly into her head during her MBA program years ago. She has also personally witnessed instances of incredible collective performance at work. In fact, her solid results on a highly visible team are also a big reason that she was promoted to her current VP rank. Of course, and unfortunately, she has also recently observed just as many examples of team dysfunction--wasted time, free-riding, groupthink, nasty infighting--than the supposed synergy (that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts) her company told her teams would produce. Yet these instances have not tempered her company's desire to form new teams to address every type of challenge and opportunity. In short, teams are everywhere, and if Anna wants to continue her career ascent, she must learn to thrive in all of them.

Does Anna's story sound familiar? It should, but if not, it will soon enough. Anna's experience reflects a common tale of the thousands of leaders we interviewed and consulted with during our careers as researchers, executive educators, and practitioners. If you are someone who, like Anna, is currently leading multiple teams, while also being a member of another set of teams, and you sometimes feel stressed, burned out, confused, overwhelmed, or all of these, *this book is for you*. Our approach—what we call *3-Dimensional Team Leadership* (or “3D” Team Leadership, for short)—is designed to help you navigate what often feels like chaos in leading and working in today's teams.

3D Team Leadership, boiled down, is about focus—knowing where to devote your time and attention at any given point to maximize your and your

teams' effectiveness. It's about working smarter, not necessarily harder. There are thousands of leadership books and philosophies out there, and many of them have some great, time-tested tips and strategies for effectively leading teams, but making sense of all of them or just choosing the right ones can seem flat-out impossible. In this book, we distill the most powerful leadership tools into a clear, practically useful framework you can begin using in your team leader (and member) roles right away.

Importantly, this book puts forth the two primary leadership levers that you can use to maximize your teams' effectiveness. First, there are elements of *team design* to consider, such as how work is structured, what kind of goals are set, and how rewards can be used to stimulate individual and team performance. Second, there are important behaviors associated with *team coaching* designed to maximize member and team motivation and performance. Although there is at least some evidence that team design can be more important than coaching for team effectiveness¹ (or, as we like to say, a well-designed team can survive a bad coach, but you cannot coach a team out of its poor design), we will show you in this book that leaders should strive to use both to create the highest-performing teams possible.

The tools contained in this book will help you become a premier team leader and, in doing so, unleash your potential to create more value for your company, generate more professional gains for yourself and others, and reduce your overall stress. We outline three basic dimensions inherent in all teams that require different degrees of focus according to a team's current circumstances: individual team members, a team as a whole, and the subteams within an overall team. We then provide guidance to help you (1) recognize what situation your team is in, (2) know what behaviors are appropriate for that situation, and, if necessary, (3) shift your focus to different dimensions as teams move through different life cycle stages.²

The 3D Team Leadership model was inspired by our academic, consulting, and teaching experiences working with team leaders and members. In a nutshell, we have seen leaders make the same mistakes over and over: they are unable, or unwilling, to see the nuances of teams and, as a result, treat them as only one "thing" (usually a single, collective entity while overlooking individuals or the subteams in teams). As you might expect, they spend most of their time focusing on setting team goals, holding team retreats, coaching and motivating their teams, providing team feedback and after-action reviews, figuring out ways to help their teams be resilient when they face adversity and celebrating team success

when their team achieves its goals. Unfortunately, sometimes these efforts result in frustration and inaction that actually hurt team performance.

To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with focusing on overall team functioning and performance. In fact, focusing on a team as a whole can be especially critical in many instances.³ Our point, however, is that sometimes leaders can get a bit too team focused (a tunnel vision, of sorts), especially in today's business environments where we are constantly told teams can, and should, do everything. We've even heard some team leaders talk about feeling guilty if they take time to focus on their one-on-one team member relationships instead of exclusively focusing on their whole team; it's almost as if they consider it cheating on their team! But the premise of 3D Team Leadership is that there are times when you should focus on individuals within your teams, other times when you should focus on your team as whole, and still others when it might be wise for you to focus on smaller subsets of team members (we refer to these as subteams throughout the book). The keys are knowing when to shift your focus from one dimension to another and being able to answer two questions: (1) What skills and behaviors does it take for me to lead individuals versus teams versus subteams? and (2) How do I know when it is most important to focus one of the three dimensions more than the others? In today's complex business environments, the ability to *focus* has never been more important, and that is what this book will help you learn how to do.

Although many leaders are certainly intellectually capable of understanding the technical components of 3D Team Leadership, without guidance they often find it quite difficult to exhibit the actual behaviors the model requires. Using concrete, practical examples, we'll teach you how to diagnose key aspects of situations, team life cycles, and your relationships with others that will push you forward in your leadership journey. As former managers and now academics (and when we serve as department heads, managers again) who have worked in and alongside dozens of organizations over a combined thirty years, we take an evidence-based approach to discussing these tools. So, if you are serious about improving your team leadership potential, join us on a journey toward learning how to see teams as they really are—in 3D!

Teams: Looking Back and Moving Forward

Teams are inherently messy and complex. Individual members have unique skill sets, distinct worldviews, and varying levels of motivation; team

composition is fluid as critical members move on to other assignments and green newcomers join in their wake; and team dynamics and goals shift over time in response to various factors. Yet everything that makes teams complicated also has the potential to make them beautiful. Research and case evidence time and time again suggest that teams have the potential to outperform, outinnovate, and even outlast comparable groups of individuals working alone.⁴ As you undoubtedly know, however, this potential synergy does not occur by happenstance. Teams can also waste time, frustrate members, limit creativity, and produce subpar deliverables. One of the biggest factors that separates dysfunctional from high-performing teams is leadership.⁵

Team leadership, simply defined, is the *process of motivating and directing the actions and energy of an interdependent collection of individuals toward a common goal*. Several outstanding books have addressed the topics of teamwork and leadership over the past twenty-five years. We have benefited immensely from them and are careful here to integrate the key tried-and-true lessons of team leadership that are still relevant today. Yet without a doubt, this book is not old wine in a new bottle. Leading teams in today's business environment is dramatically different and wildly more complex than twenty years ago (or even a decade ago), and our book, importantly, is written specifically for today's teams.

To see the difference, let's take a quick look back. In the early 1990s, companies typically assigned employees to a single team, at that time often referred to as "self-managing" or "high-performing" teams, with responsibility to deliver products, services, or ideas in a relatively stable and enduring fashion. When we began working with many of these organizations, including companies like Allstate and Prudential Insurance, IBM, Sara Lee, and municipal and federal government offices, it was relatively easy to analyze and understand team functioning and performance. Typically we would ask human resource managers for a roster of teams with member names attached, solicit information from each member using surveys or interviews, analyze the data, and report the results.

These types of teams are rapidly approaching extinction.⁶ Today's teams are unstable—members are constantly coming, going, and coming back to teams,⁷ meaning that a team roster today is often obsolete by tomorrow. Moreover, the business world is increasingly *volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous* (expressed by the acronym VUCA,⁸ which we use throughout this book), meaning that critical team tasks cannot always be easily identified (and