The psychology of teams

Fiona Beddoes-Jones, with Julia Miller, gives a historical perspective of groups in the workplace, then looks at some concepts, models and dynamics.

TEAMS AND TEAMWORK ARE NOT NEW. People are inherently social by nature and have always collaborated together in teams, tribes or families to achieve what individuals alone cannot. After all, you couldn't kill a woolly mammoth on your own, could you? What is relatively new, however, is the formal recognition of the value of teams and the focus that psychologists and organisations have put on attempting to understand teams and harness their power.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Before the 1920s, when the Western Electric Company began a series of studies into work groups at its Hawthorn plant in Chicago, no systematic investigations had been undertaken on the performance of groups. The Hawthorn studies, as they became known, prompted decades of subsequent research by psychologists into groups and group work.[1] Up until and throughout the Second World War, few large organisations used recognised groups or teams at work, preferring to focus on narrowly defined specialist tasks as encouraged by the 'scientific management' approach of Frederick Taylor, which became known as 'Taylorism'.[2]

From the 1950s, psychologists such as Abraham Maslow, Douglas McGregor, David McCelland and Frederick Herzberg, whose theories on people's individual motivation coincided with their interest in 'humanistic' psychology, began to criticise the command and control, authoritarian approach of organisations and called instead for greater 'job enrichment'. One of the first significant organisations to introduce formal work groups into some of their manufacturing plants was Proctor & Gamble in the 1960s. General Motors first used assembly teams in some of its US plants in the early 1970s. Notice that the terms 'teams' and 'teamwork', although common in sports, did not commonly become used within organisations until the 1970s.

In addition, as early as the 1950s social psychologists carried out studies which revealed that within construction crews, those crews that selected members from among their circle of friends performed better than those construction crews that lacked such a social network.[3] In other words, when friends work together they are more productive than teams of people who are not friends.

THE CONCEPT OF GROUP DYNAMICS

We know that people are complex, made up of diverse personality traits, desires, motivations, beliefs, values, and varying degrees of inter-personal and intra-personal awareness. This individual complexity, multiplied by the number of people in a team, is one of the reasons why psychologists are still struggling to really understand how teams work and how to 'fix them' when they don't work or have become dysfunctional.

In one of the earliest theories of group dynamics, Sigmund Freud suggested that the fundamental basis of group formation and cohesion was an individual's sense of identification with the leader of the group.[4] Taylor went on to explore the effect that personal attachments ▶▶

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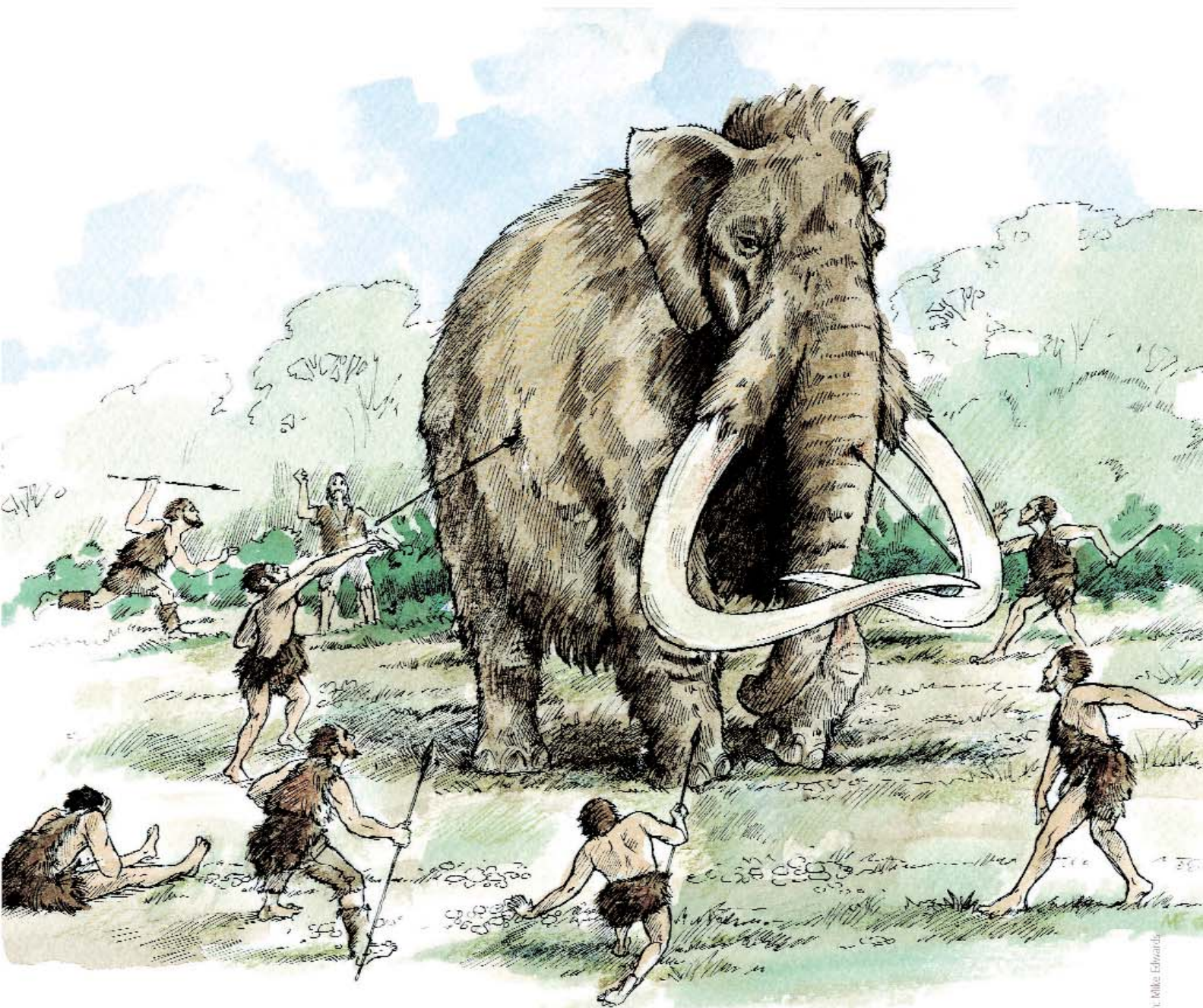
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TABLE 1:
THE TEN CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE TEAMS

The most effective and successful teams the authors of this article have encountered have the following characteristics.

1. They share certain beliefs and values and a common objective.
2. They have a clearly defined goal, which is often time critical.
3. They encourage everyone to work to their cognitive and behavioural strengths.
4. They make some decisions by consensus, while others are made by the functional or nominal leader.
5. They enjoy themselves when they are working and are energised by being part of the team.
6. They are visually aware; team members see that something needs to be done and just do it without needing to be asked.
7. They are mutually supportive and rely on each other for success. They listen to each other, help each other out and coach each other whenever necessary.
8. They like each other, trust each other and spend time together as friends.
9. They share a sense of pride in the work they do and the organisation they are a part of.
10. They celebrate achievement.

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▶▶ within groups had on individual performance, finding that performance was positively correlated with attachment. In other words, people work harder within a team for leaders they like.

One of the most well-known and widely used theories of group dynamics is Bruce W Tuckman's 1965 four stage model of forming, storming, norming and performing.[1] According to Tuckman's

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model, when people come together they first *form* some kind of a group. Then they explore the boundaries of the group, which often involves a degree of conflict to establish roles and hierarchies and to identify people's personality characteristics, strengths and possibly weaknesses. This is the *storming* stage. Once group members have established the boundaries, they begin to feel comfortable with each other and their behaviours become *normalised*. Only then can the group really begin to *perform* and become a team that achieves its objectives. When the dynamics change the group will revert to the beginning of the model and will experience forming and storming again.

Some trainers, myself included, add a fifth stage to Tuckman's model that of mourning. This involves the changing dynamics within teams. When team composition alters for whatever reason, including members joining or leaving the team, the existing group mourns the loss of its previous group dynamics or group members. Mourning also relates to the shift in dynamics that occur within a team when it either achieves its objectives, or the tasks or roles within the team change. This means that group dynamics are rarely stable for very long even if the people within a team do not change.

Group dynamics and the movement between stages are largely unconscious in all but the most self-aware individuals and teams. And even self-aware teams will still experience storming and mourning for example, as knowledge does not preclude behaviour. In other words, the process of group dynamics seems to be inevitable even if the group is consciously aware of it. A group can progress through the stages very quickly, or it may become stuck at a particular stage.

Although Tuckman's model doesn't specify how long each stage takes, you will know from your own experience of being part of a team and observing other teams that some teams never get past the storming stage to reach performing. Conversely, some teams seem to move very quickly from forming through to performing. Why is that? If the psychologists don't know, what other information or evidence do we have that may shed some light on team performance?

THE CONCEPT OF GROUPTHINK

Groupthink was a condition of teams first suggested by Irving Janis in 1972.[?] He identified that where groups are very goal and task orientated, sometimes individuals' need for consensus and cohesion is so high that storming does not occur and poor decision making goes unchallenged.

To go some way towards explaining this, in a series of experiments designed to explore group conformity and the effects of social pressure on individual decision making Solomon Asch[?] identified that in the face of clearly incorrect evidence 33 per cent of participants displaced their estimates to match the majority consensus. In contrast, 75 per cent of participants remained independent and never matched the (clearly incorrect) group decision. This suggests that individual personality characteristics or thinking style preferences may influence whether someone is likely to conform or challenge and links very neatly to the team role theory explored below.

Both Meredith Belbin's team role of the shaper and Beddoes-Jones' challenger role will tend to be fulfilled by people who are most likely to storm and challenge, and who are least likely to conform or acquiesce. Both models recognise the danger of groupthink and the necessity of having a defined role within a team that may prevent it. The psychometric Thinking Styles identifies two statistically correlated 'types' of decision maker:

- the 'internally referenced mismatcher' who believes s/he is right and will stand his/her ground and argue about it, and
- the 'externally referenced matcher' who tends to believe that others are correct and will conform with the majority opinion.[x]

TEAM ROLE MODELS
The purpose and objectives of using any team roles model are to:

- generate beneficial understanding
- encourage dialogue between team members, and
- create new working practices if appropriate.

There are four primary team role models used within organisations today:

- Belbin's Team Roles[?]
- Margerison McCann's Team Management Wheel
- Myers' MTR-i[10], and
- Beddoes Jones' Cognitive Team Roles.[?]

Although all four models have a different basis in psychological theory (the comparisons of which are outside the scope of this article), they also have a number of similarities. All have identified between eight and ten roles that exist within a team structure. All four models also suggest that people will have different degrees of preference for fulfilling each role and may avoid some roles if they can. The need for behavioural and situational flexibility is stressed particularly by the MTR-i and Cognitive Team Roles. Belbin suggests that the ideal team size is five or six people, which means that some people will need to take on complementary or dual roles within a team. Beddoes-Jones deliberately doesn't specify an optimal team size, as Cognitive Team Roles principles suggest that a high performing team can number as few as two people just so long as, between them, they fulfil all of the ten cognitive roles (see Table 1, page 17). Research carried out using Cognitive Team Roles suggests that if a team numbers eight or more people, it will tend to divide into smaller sub-teams.

SOCIO-COGNITIVE DYNAMICS OF TEAMS

As previously explored, the group dynamics of teams are rarely stable for very long owing to changes in team membership and changing objectives. The social dynamics of teams encompass:

■ friendships
■ alliances and allegiances, and
■ the ways in which team members get on with each other as people.

The cognitive dynamics of a team are generated from the thinking preferences of its members and the cognitive roles they fulfil within the team. Therefore, the socio-cognitive dynamics of a team are the ways in which people's thinking style preferences influence their social interactions and behaviours with others. Only the Cognitive Team Roles model specifically identifies and explores the socio-cognitive dynamics of teams.

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE TEAMS

So if the dynamics and performance of teams are so hard to understand and predict, what do we actually know about effective team performance? Even if it is not scientifically researched, there is plenty of anecdotal and experiential evidence in the workplace about teams that really do achieve exceptional results, often in the face of considerable difficulties. Table 1 (page 17) details the ten characteristics of effective teams. Some of these elements come from psychological research studies; others are based on our research and experience of studying teams using Cognitive Team Roles.

CONCLUSION

Successful teams do exist and have always existed. As trainers it is our responsibility to share what we know with the other people in our organisations to make their working lives more comfortable, enjoyable and effective. It amazes me that, when the research evidence regarding friendships and attachments in teams has existed since the 1950s, half a century later there are still supervisers, managers and leaders within organisations who bully and belittle their staff in the mistaken belief that they don't need to be liked to get the job done.

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Not only are they abusive in their style, infringing other people's human rights and likely to end up before a tribunal, but also if they were liked by their staff they could achieve so much more. So in this sense, vast resources are being unnecessarily lost and wasted in the UK simply because we are not harnessing the power and productivity of teams. You can help to change that and you can make a difference. Take a few minutes to re-read this article, highlighting or underlining any relevant information that is not included in your organisation's training for teams or team leaders. Make sure that you include it in the future. ■

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Key learning points
■ Group dynamics are in a constant state of flux even if team membership remains stable and the process of group dynamics seems to be inevitable.
■ Teams of friends are more productive than teams of people who are not friends and, within a team, people will work harder for a leader they like.
■ People's individual complexity, multiplied by the number of people in a team and aggregated together, is one reason why psychologists are still struggling to really understand how teams work and how to 'fix them' when they don't work or have become dysfunctional.
■ The purpose and objectives of using any team roles model are to generate beneficial understanding, encourage dialogue and create new working practices if appropriate.
■ The socio-cognitive dynamics of a team are the ways in which people's thinking preferences influence their social interactions and behaviours with others.