

# THE PURPOSEFUL TEAM

Being part of a purposeful team, as I am fortunate to be at The OCM, is an amazing experience. We have a sense of joint enterprise, of being part of something which is meaningful to each of us, to which we are all committed, and which relies on all of us working in concert.

In this article I have tried to describe the key conversations that enable us to create and maintain purposeful teams: conversations about context, conversations to develop clarity, to maintain commitment, build capacity and co-ordination. Some of these conversations are difficult to have, many of them are neglected in most of the teams we work as coaches and consultants in. The good news is it's not 'all or nothing', teams can have conversations to create greater 'purposefulness' from any starting point, it's something we can invest in improving every day. By investing time in the right conversations, we close the gap between the potential of the team and its reality.

**PURPOSEFUL GOES BEYOND SHARED GOALS TO A GENUINE COMMITMENT TO A SHARED 'WHY'**



## WHAT IS A PURPOSEFUL TEAM?

For us purposeful and 'high performing' are related but different ideas and experiences. High performing teams (as described for example by Katzenbach and Smith) need to create clarity of shared goals, and a sense of the unique contribution that the team makes to success. But being purposeful goes beyond this to a genuine commitment to a shared 'why'. High performance is something that members of a purposeful team constantly aspire to because it moves them towards their purpose. Sometimes we will not be high performing, we may be frustrated, inefficient or even ineffective, but because we are purposeful we actively note and notice where we're falling short, learn from it together, improve and move forward.

## THE KEY CONVERSATION - WHAT'S OUR PURPOSE?

So what does it take to be a purposeful team? First of all, without wishing to state the obvious, it requires joint purpose. As Simon Sinek said, start with why. Why do we as a team exist? What would not come into existence if we didn't work together? What is the thing, the outcome, the impact or legacy that we jointly are committed to creating?

**START WITH WHY.  
WHAT'S YOUR JOINT  
PURPOSE?**

**Purpose can be hard to articulate. By really articulating purpose, we expose and have to deal with conflicts of perception and belief about what is 'right' within the team. But it's worth the investment for the trust and agility it creates. There will always remain differences in emphasis, differences in understanding of priorities and different tolerances for risk between team members, but these can be creatively resolved by the team where a joint commitment to a clearly articulated purpose is at the heart of why and how we work together.**

Where team purpose is not fully articulated the team lacks real clarity about what we are and what we are not focused on generating. This creates a danger that the unstated differences in our understanding undermine trust and our capacity to work in concert. It is common to encounter teams in which individuals feel that they are working purposefully but that others are in some way being more self-serving, simply because of these unstated differences in understanding of the team's purpose. By going through the sometimes painful but essentially creative process of fully articulating and clarifying why this team exists, we secure the foundations of a purposeful team.

**But clear articulation of purpose alone is not enough. A purposeful team also needs conversations that foster:**

- Clear and shared understanding of the context in which the team works.
- Shared expectations of each other, ways of working or culture.
- Clarity of goals and the individual contribution required from each team member.
- Genuine and resilient commitment to the purpose of the team and to working together to achieve that purpose.
- The capacity and resources to deliver on purpose.
- The ability to coordinate individual efforts to create joint outcomes.

## CONTEXT

Few if any teams exist in a vacuum, they exist in a context, an environment in which they work and on which they seek to impact. There may be elements of that environment that the team can or want to change, there will also be elements that sit outside of their control or influence. There may well be parts of that context which create barriers or boundaries to how, where and what the team works on. There will often be stakeholders that provide resources to the team or may withhold them. There will be others who are the recipients of the team's work or who judge its success. No discussion of purpose can be effective unless we also discuss and have shared understanding about the context in which that purpose will be realised.

**A TEAM CANNOT  
ACHIEVE ITS PURPOSE  
WITHOUT RECOGNISING  
AND WORKING WITH  
THE NEEDS OF EACH  
INDIVIDUAL MEMBER**



## COMMITMENT, CONTRIBUTION AND CULTURE

When we understand what our team's purpose is, and share clarity of the context in which we work, then we can explore how each of us uniquely:

- Contributes to purpose
- Is committed to purpose

We need to have conversations that allow team members both to develop clear goals, roles and processes and to understand how those contribute to realising purpose. We can also explore how the team works, its culture, values and beliefs. What culture will make us most effective in realising our purpose? What will support or undermine our commitment and satisfaction as a team?

A team's purpose will generally remain constant over time. However, the context in which it works may well change. And the constituent members of the team will change, bringing different needs, strengths and resources into play. So we must regularly revisit individually and together how we are realising our purpose in context, and how each one of us contributes to and receives fulfilment from that work.

To understand how we are fulfilled by the team's purpose and by our own individual contribution to it, we need a high degree of self-awareness. We need to understand our own purpose, beliefs and values, in order to manage our engagement with the work of the team over time. It's easy, perhaps particularly when you are committed to the purpose of the team, for individuals to neglect their own needs and fulfilment as they pursue maximum contribution to team success. However, this is not a sustainable position. Over time this imbalance will lead to demotivation or even burnout. The demotivation of any individual in a purposeful team is the concern of all members of that team. Not only does any individual's demotivation reduce our ability to succeed together, it often acts to undermine others' motivation. Most teams do not exist to meet the needs of the individuals within it but rather to achieve its purpose. Nevertheless, the team cannot achieve that purpose without also recognising and working with the needs of its individual members.

It's easy to make the assumption that what drives me and gives me satisfaction will be what drives others. But each of us is unique. The more we understand about our own purpose, beliefs and values, the more responsibility we can each take for maintaining our own engagement even in times of change and challenge.

Being part of a purposeful team gives you an environment in which your satisfaction is deliberately valued and invested in. But it also requires you to take responsibility for managing your own satisfaction and engagement. As an individual you need to manage that balance between contribution and satisfaction and at times to recognise that your own purpose is no longer compatible with the purpose of the team, or your own satisfaction is no longer compatible with the requirements and the context of the team or your role in it. This can be difficult and painful at the time, but it is less damaging to both the individual and the team than living with an unstated lack of 'fit' that gradually sucks away energy, motivation and purpose.



**THE PURPOSEFUL  
TEAM USES ITS  
COMBINED STRENGTHS  
IN CONCERT TO  
ACHIEVE ITS GOALS  
AND PURPOSE.**

## CAPACITY AND CO-ORDINATION

Conversations about contribution can never be realistically separated from consideration of capacity and co-ordination. Each of us has our own strengths both in absolute terms and in relation to the rest of the team. The purposeful team needs to have conversations about strengths and how we work in concert to use those strengths to achieve our goals and purpose. Do we have the capacity, the knowledge, experience, diversity and time that we need? If we don't what are we going to do to find the resources that will help us reach our purpose? Or do we need to find a different route forward working with resources that we have?

Purposeful teams need to invest in understanding both the unique contribution offered and required from each individual and how that contribution fits and works in coordination with others in service of the team purpose. And that understanding needs to be constantly updated, such that the team is able to respond proactively and agilely to changes in context and team membership.

# WHERE DO YOU START? START WITH THE PEOPLE.

Every team needs to have each of these conversations at some point, and a lot of our work as team coaches and consultants is in working with a team and its leader to identify and have the right conversations at the right time, in the right way.

If you are looking to build and sustain purpose where might you look to start? Most leaders instinctively want to start with a conversation to check or create clarity of purpose and this is the key foundation – but experience of working with teams shows that these conversations aren't as effective where individual team members don't have the self-awareness that allows them to join that discussion with their own purpose, beliefs and values. Investing here first is engaging and enabling to all the conversations that you need to have as a team.

**START WITH ASKING  
'WHAT AM I HERE TO  
DO, WHAT DO I BELIEVE  
IN AND VALUE'**



Few leaders habitually spend time reflecting on 'what am I here to do, what do I believe in and value'. And trying to do so without support can feel overwhelming and lead to avoidance of challenging, deep reflection – leaders often start out with statements that are bland and impersonal, adhering more to the received values of the age and organisation than to what is unique and authentic to them. Coaching conversations, whether from a specialist external or internal coach, or from a mentor, or trusted peer can provide both the support and the challenge the leaders need to develop really authentic individual values stories.

Working together in a team to develop and share an understanding of our individual purpose, beliefs and values not only creates understanding of others in the team but also develops the intimacy that underlies true trust. Taking time out in this way to develop understanding and intimacy will pay dividends when the team faces into difficult conversations around purpose, shareholder roles, goals and priorities.

At OCM Discovery we use our expertise and experience to partner with organisations looking to adapt with agility, and to deliver with purpose. We work with leaders to authentically engage in collaboration to build productive, purposeful and satisfying teams. Contact Diane Newell [diane.newell@theoem.co.uk](mailto:diane.newell@theoem.co.uk) to start a conversation and find out more.