TQ The Elusive Factor Behind Successful Teams

Here's a conundrum that organizations face day in and day out: A group of high-functioning individuals come together around a stated goal, forming a team. Yet with the best will in the world, they don't fully coalesce and realize their objectives.

The reasons for the fail can be a head-scratcher. Individually, each team member has the necessary smarts and skills, or IQ. Each person possesses sufficient interpersonal savvy, or EQ, to make collaborative work possible. That's why they were hired in the first place. But when they form a team, something is missing or goes chronically awry. The team never becomes more than the sum of its parts.

The issue can't be dismissed as some missing alchemy of time, place, opportunity, and interpersonal relations. Nor can the team's problems be resolved through feel-good retreats and activities like potlucks and happy hours.

Instead, the team must deliberately raise its TQ — or capacity for becoming a high-functioning team.

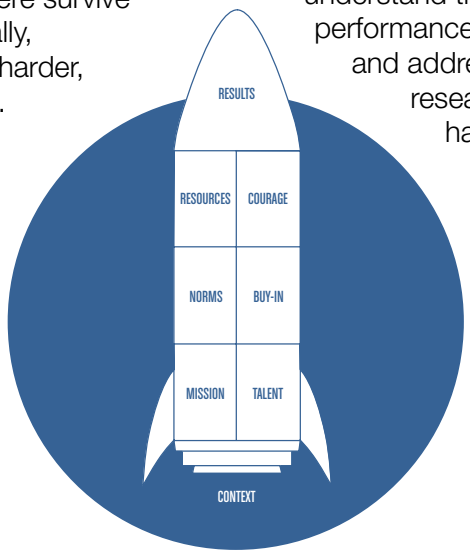
The TQ Overview: Boosting the Team's Core Skill-Set

When you think about it, humanity's greatest accomplishments have resulted from team efforts. No one is an island; people everywhere survive and thrive by pulling together. Ironically, however, organizations are finding it harder, not easier, to build successful teams. Numerous studies show that only 20% of teams are considered high performing. That percentage drops to 10% when the organization's leaders are surveyed.



So why the poor results? Teams face bigger challenges than in the past, as organizations grow more diverse, virtual, matrixed, and dynamic, with team members coming and going. Also, teams tend to turn inward when problems arise, trying to figure out solutions on their own, even though support from outside may be critical. Progress really starts with the top team, which must model and teach teambuilding to the entire organization. Unless the top team is functioning well, it's hard for teamwork to succeed on a divisional or departmental level.

In our experience, teams build TQ when they understand the factors contributing to team performance, get feedback on those factors, and address the gaps. Based on our research on thousands of teams, we have developed a robust, practical, teambuilding framework. We call the eight-factor framework we've designed the **Rocket Model**, because it propels success.



Strengthen TQ: Know the Eight Factors Underlying Team Performance

1. Shared assumptions about the context.

Team formation gets off to a good start when team members share a common view of the context in which they're operating. In fact, we find that putting shared language around context is more essential as a first step than defining the team's mission. All too often, it turns out that team members are operating from different assumptions. That fundamental disconnect leads to well-intended but misaligned actions that hurt team morale and reduce effectiveness.

Team members need to be on the same page about who their key stakeholders are, as well as their expectations and concerns. Depending on the team, stakeholders might include customers, suppliers, competitors, other teams, regulatory agencies, and top leadership. Team members should also agree on external factors affecting the team, such as macroeconomic conditions, the political environment, and demographic trends.



Tip: Taking the time to make sure team members are aligned on context is especially important when some team members are virtual. Because they sit in different places, virtual team members almost always have different perspectives about the team's context.

2. Mission clarity.

When team members agree on what success looks like, they set the stage for effectiveness. What will it mean to win? What are the goals, when do they need to be accomplished, what strategies will the team use, and how will progress be measured? Answering these questions leads to goal clarity, which strengthens mission clarity and is essential to boosting TQ.

Once goals are set, the team can translate them into plans with executable strategies and steps, role assignments, and decisions about how results will be measured. Planning helps the team ensure that day-to-day activities are connected to key priorities, real productivity, and tangible achievements. We recommend regular progress reviews, so the team can make necessary adjustments, improving the odds of success.

Tip: Getting mission right is important, since it's foundational to the next six stages of building TQ, but wordsmithing the mission statement is a common time-waster. Assign subgroups to translate the broad mission into measurable and meaningful goals, share them with the rest of the team, then refine from there.

3. Aligned talent.

It seems like it should be easy to get the right number of people with the right talents on a team. In fact, we find it can be one of the toughest aspects of building TQ. That's because most organizations assign staff members to a team based more on availability or politics than talent. The team leader may believe that the skills, experience, and abilities of individual team members are all that matters, but there are other talent considerations.

High-performing teams are the right size. Having too few or too many team members can be equally problematic, and the number of people needed may change over time. They have well-defined roles and responsibilities, assigned to optimize performance and avoid duplicate efforts. They know how to get along and work effectively together, with little tolerance for "team killers." The organization recognizes and rewards great teamwork, as well as individual accomplishments.

Tip: Getting people with the right skills on the team is only part of the picture. Team leaders also need to ensure that everyone does their fair share, plays nice, and is an effective contributor to the team's success. Leaders should address any dysfunctionality as fast as possible, to protect team cohesiveness and morale.

4. Effective norms.

It's human nature for any group to develop norms for greeting, meeting, seating, communicating, deciding, and executing. These unwritten rules usually solidify fast, without any formal discussion. However, teams that take the time to talk through and consciously establish norms leverage a powerful tool for achieving team cohesiveness and performance.

High-performing teams make efficient use of their meeting time and have clear rules and processes in place — some formal, some informal — for managing communications, making decisions, delegating tasks, and ensuring accountability. When a team has issues with efficiency, we find it's helpful to identify the norms that are currently in place and work with team members to set new norms that help, not hinder, performance.

Tip: Norms relating to team meetings usually represent one of the biggest opportunities for improvement. As Patrick Lencioni pointed out, meetings are like movies. Both are boring if the actors simply take turns talking about the events of the past week.



5. Buy-in.

Buy-in happens when team members have a team-first, not a me-first, attitude. High-performance teams are committed to team goals, roles, and rules, and they're motivated to get necessary, day-to-day tasks done. They understand how their work contributes to the greater good, and they're optimistic about their chances of success.

Lower-TQ teams often have mixed levels of engagement, with some people working hard, while others are checked out for reasons that vary. We recommend that leaders counteract low engagement in three ways. First, paint a compelling team mission, aligned with each team member's personal values, desires, and needs. Second, get all team members involved with creating goals, roles, and norms. Third, make sure each person is treated fairly, contributes equally and abides by team norms — playing favorites is a morale killer.

Tip: Determine team commitment by examining whether individual team members execute team decisions. If everyone in a team meeting agrees to a decision, but only some of the members change their behavior afterwards, then team commitment is not particularly strong, calling for further evaluation of the first four **factors of the Rocket Model**.

6. Resources to power up.

Early on, teams need to figure out what resources are necessary for meeting their goals, and leaders may have to lobby key stakeholders to get those needs met. Tangible resources may include a realistic budget, office space, hardware and software systems, specialized equipment, and tech support. Intangibles may include political support and authority to make decisions.

High-TQ teams have the necessary political clout, and they make an efficient, effective use of their resources. Even when there's a shortfall, team members maximize the resources they have and find ways to win.

Tip: Watch out for situations where the team is chartered to make decisions, yet one or two senior stakeholders with veto power must first vet their decisions. These teams run the risk of becoming nothing more than vehicles for legitimizing the opinions or agenda of the stakeholders, making the odds of team engagement very low.

7. Courage for conflict management.

The best teams understand that managing conflict is not the same as minimizing conflict. The team members cultivate the necessary courage to raise difficult issues, while developing effective ways to work through disagreements and find solutions. They know that too little conflict, with problems swept under the rug, leads to artificial harmony and groupthink. Too much conflict leads to chaos and backstabbing.

Typically, we find that the root causes of most team conflict can be tied back to misunderstandings or disagreements about the previous six steps in the Rocket Model: context, mission, talent, norms, buy-in, or resources. When the team addresses underlying issues in a courageous, skillful fashion, within a trusting, psychologically safe environment, morale improves along with team functionality.

Tip: Dysfunctional teams may try to deal with conflict by having team members participate in some team-building activity, such as a golf outing or ropes course. Unfortunately, these events only boost morale temporarily, as they fail to address the root causes of conflict. By walking back through the previous six steps, the team may be able to pinpoint and address the issues.



8. Focus on results.

High-TQ teams keep their eye on the prize. They measure results against mission, regularly track progress, learn from successes and failures, and devise ways to continue improving delivery. They understand it's critical to align goals with important organizational outcomes and benchmark progress in a way that leads to superior performance.

Achieving results depends on how well the team handles the previous seven steps in the framework. In other words, members must share assumptions about context, agree on mission and work towards goals, have clearly defined roles and skills, ensure buy-in, adhere to norms, access necessary resources, and manage conflict effectively. When the team falters at one of these steps, outcomes are affected. By practicing what works, the team continues to strengthen morale and succeed.

Tip: It's critical for leaders to teach teams how to win, and it can be instructive to study techniques used by coaches in sports, where there's continual strategizing around how to win. While the outcomes for corporations may not be as clear-cut as a winning or losing season in sports, there are always ways to benchmark success.

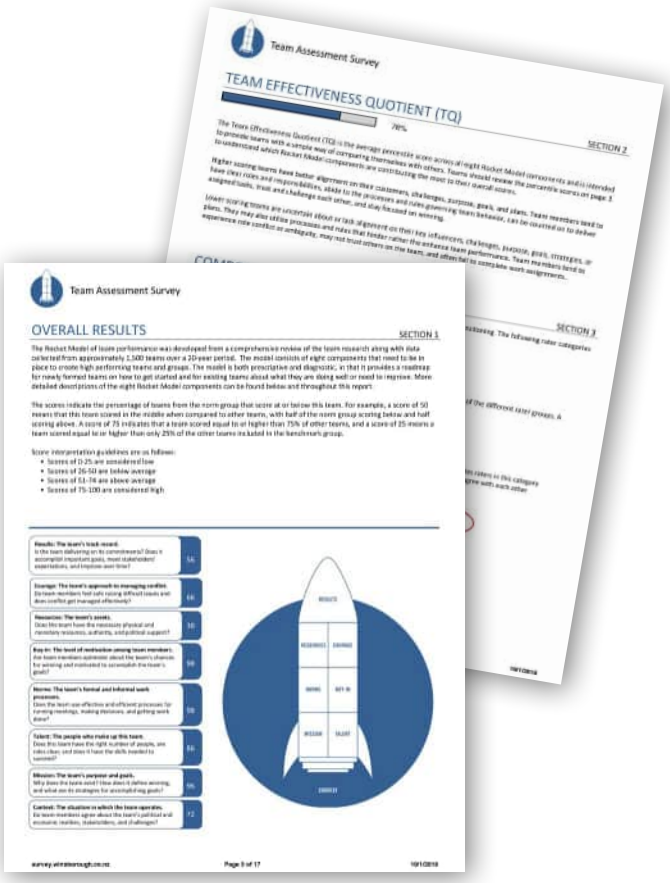
Measure TQ: Benchmark Team Performance

Every team has strengths and weaknesses, and even high-functioning teams have the potential for heightened performance.

To get an accurate read on a team's effectiveness, we recommend team members complete our proprietary Team Assessment Survey (TAS), a powerful, in-depth feedback tool that measures team effectiveness in each of the eight components of the framework. The TAS is an online survey based on research with 1,500 teams from around the globe. It's designed to help teams identify and leverage strengths, define areas of improvement, build and execute action plans, and set the stage for changes to team dynamics and performance.

Teams find TAS is an unparalleled starting point for realizing goals and achieving results at a level that may currently seem unreachable.

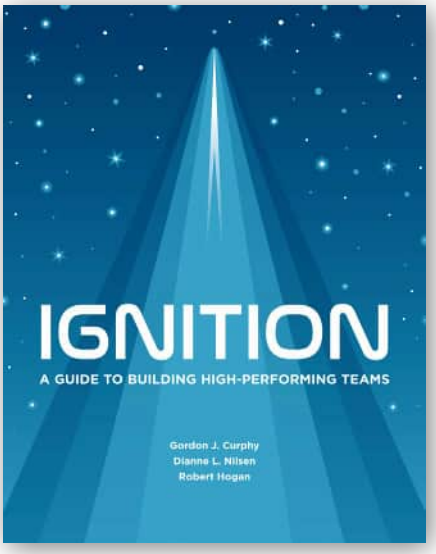
http://www.therocketmodel.com/team-assessment-survey/



Manage TQ: Address Gaps in Team Performance

Once a team has a baseline measure of its performance, it needs to develop actionable steps and focus on follow-through.

Ignition: A Guide to Building High-Performing Teams will help you build strong teams in challenging situations, such as leading virtual or matrixed teams, combining teams as a result of a re-organization, and helping new team leaders and members get off to a strong start. The book also provides guidance for teams wanting to take their performance from good to great and for those wanting to tackle dysfunctional team dynamics. Ignition includes 12 case studies, facilitator's guides with intervention designs, and step-by step instructions for 40 team improvement activities.



DISCOVER WHAT WE CAN DO TO BOOST YOUR TQ

Gordy Curphy and **Dianne Nilsen** are partners at Curphy Leadership Solutions and the thought leaders behind the Rocket Model and Team Assessment Survey. Over the past 20 years, they have consulted with teams and leaders in a variety of settings. They have conducted more than 10,000 team surveys and trained thousands of team leaders and consultants on the Rocket Model. In addition, they have developed several commercially published assessments and sold more than 100,000 copies of their books on leadership and teams.


Gordon Curphy


Dianne Nilsen

Visit **http://www.TheRocketModel.com** to learn more about boosting your team's TQ. You'll find helpful resources, including white papers that describe how organizations foster teamwork, how to improve top leadership team performance, and how to foster TQ on virtual teams.

Gordy and Dianne work with a global network of TQ experts. To find a consultant near you, please go to the Contact page of our web site.