



# Developing a Team that Thrives in Tough Times

Just as the 1988 General Motors ad declared “It’s not your father’s Oldsmobile,” the same could be said about challenges today’s businesses face.

Business has changed dramatically in the last few years. Economic conditions, environmental concerns, globalization and technology have affected all aspects of how small and large companies operate.

For many organizations, these challenges can be the tipping point that ends a low functioning team.

Conversely, a challenging business environment can be the opportunity to transform a work group into a high performance team.

***“Business is moving faster than ever before and given the increasingly uncertain times, organisations need to be more adaptable, flexible and productive than ever.”***

-CXO, EU Edition,  
“A Total TelePresence-a new dawn in productivity,”  
December 2008

### CURRENT BUSINESS CHALLENGES

Economic conditions. Most recently a volatile stock market, a depressed housing market, bank and automotive crisis, corporate layoffs, retail closures and rising unemployment have led the United States into an economic recession with reverberations felt around the world.

Environmental. Concern for the long-term damage to the environment has spurred a need for corporations to examine their processes to make them more “green” and environmentally friendly. Re-engineering manufacturing processes to conserve energy, to reduce waste and decrease carbon footprints, has become a necessary aspect of corporate citizenship.

Globalization. U.S. businesses are steadily increasing their presence around the world. A recent study by IBM indicated that U.S. headquartered companies were responsible for 25% of the 1.2 million jobs created through foreign investment in 2007.

While operating multi-nationally represents increased growth, it also requires additional skills in managing across distance and cultures.<sup>1</sup>

Technology. Business moves fast, and thanks to new technology, it moves even faster. Through the Internet and mobile phones, communication is more immediate. Interaction between businesses and customers has become increased through Web 2.0, and demand for quicker response time has increased.

### TYPICAL BUSINESS RESPONSES TO THESE CHALLENGES

While many of these challenges have helped businesses move forward, they also require constant investment—constant diligence to keep up with competitors. Operating in crisis mode, companies often hunker down to weather the storm by decreasing budgets and personnel and delaying projects. Teams within these companies, if not disbanded, are often disheartened and unfocused.

History, however, suggests that this may not be the best approach to prepare businesses for post-downturn success.

### A DIFFERENT APPROACH OFFERED

Steve Prokesch, editor of Harvard Business Review, argues that businesses should take a different outlook on these challenges.



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***“In any situation requiring the real-time combination of multiple skills, experiences and judgments, a team inevitably gets better results than a collection of individuals operating within confined job roles and responsibilities.”***

The Wisdom of Teams, Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith,  
Harvard Business School Press, 1999

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Hard times can often offer opportunities to rethink and innovate. In the Harvard Business Publishing Editor's Blog, Prokesch describes Caroline Birds' 1966 book, *The Invisible Star*, in which she describes a number of innovations that came out of a previous hard time—the Great Depression.<sup>2</sup>

“I was astonished to learn how a number of enterprises outperformed competitors and actually grew during that tumultuous era by excelling in understanding and satisfying customers' changing needs,” Prokesch says in his article.

Standard Oil, Proctor and Gamble, Dupont and Sears all thrived because of a dedication to offering new products that met customer needs. Other ventures were launched, including Carvel ice cream, Clairol hair coloring products and A.C. Nielsen.<sup>3</sup>

An article in the McKinsey Quarterly<sup>4</sup> supports this theory. In his article, “Innovation Lessons from the 1930s”, author Tom Nichols looks at patents applied for during the Great Depression. Not surprisingly, the number of patents applied for from the latter part of 1931 through 1934 had negative growth, compared to the period before or after. Nichols suggests that many companies were reluctant to invest in creativity or innovation during this uncertain time.

However, the companies that did were significantly ahead of the competition at the end of the economic downturn.

So what does this mean for businesses, particularly ones who want and need to use the capabilities of a team to get the work done?

It means that now may be the best time to envision, develop and train a high performance team to help your business thrive in a changing dynamic.

#### WHAT IS A HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAM?

While many people are familiar with the team concept meaning a work group, a high performance team has several key differences. While all high performance groups function as a team, not all teams provide high performances.

Take a look at the 2004 U.S. Olympic Men's Basketball team. The United States pulled together a team of superstars from different NBA teams to create a “Dream Team” which was expected to travel to Greece, win its games, collect the gold medal and come home.



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***“Wetalkedaboutgettingbackandredeeming ourselves,” said Carmelo Anthony. “It was embarrassing. We felt we let ourselves, our team and our country down.”***

The Sporting News, “Team USA looking to atone for 2004 Olympic disappointment,” June 30, 2008

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Instead, the team, composed of highly rated athletes such as Tim Duncan, Allen Iverson, Carmelo Anthony, Dwyane Wade and LeBron James, lost to Argentina in the semi-finals and came home with the bronze medal. This defeat marked the first time the U.S. had failed to win the event since professional basketball players had been allowed to participate in 1992.<sup>5</sup>

Although the team was filled with high-powered players, it was not able to compete against international teams.

Contrast that with the team four years later. This time, led by Jerry Colangelo, National Director of USA Basketball and coached by Mike Krzyzewski of Duke University, the team became known as the “Redeem Team,” winning the Olympic gold.

#### WHAT MADE THE DIFFERENCE?

**Mission.** After being booed at the Greece Olympics because of poor performance and attitude, forward Carmelo Anthony made a pact with his teammates that things would be different once they made it back to the 2008 games.

**Teamwork.** Although many on the Olympic team were used to being leaders on their NBA teams, they had to adjust to having supporting roles for these games.

**Commitment.** In past years, basketball Olympians gathered for less than two weeks of training before the Olympics. Players of the 2008 games made a three year- commitment to the team, playing together each summer prior to the Olympics.

“The guys who are here want to be here,” said returning Olympian Carlos Boozer. “We’re concentrating. We’re focused. We’re committed to each other.”<sup>6</sup>

***“Two workers were hammering on a piece of granite with a sledgehammer. When asked what he was doing, the first worker said, “I’m trying to crack this granite.”***

***“When asked the same question, the second worker said ‘I’m part of a team building a cathedral.’”***

The One Minute Manager Builds High Performance Teams,  
Ken Blanchard, Donald Carew, Eunice Parisi-Carew,  
& Harper Collins, 2006

## HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAMS IN BUSINESS

While examples of cohesive teams exceeding expectations abound in sports, they also exist in the business environment, and have many of the same components of the 2008 Olympic team.

Chris Musselwhite, founder, president and CEO of Discovery Learning, suggests there are three characteristics of highly effective teams:<sup>7</sup>

- High performance teams get the big picture.**

An effective team understands its mission and how it affects the business overall. Just as the 2008 Olympic team knew their purpose (to re-establish dominance and bring back the gold), the same can be said for UPS drivers after Hurricane Katrina.

In the aftermath of the hurricane, a New Orleans city official needed a generator part to light City Hall. The part was found in Oklahoma, but couldn't be sent to New Orleans by air until the next day. A UPS package division manager coordinated with fellow managers from Oklahoma to Hammond, Louisiana, with drivers forming a relay to deliver the package. Fifteen drivers later, the package arrived by noon the following day. Each driver understood that he was part of a bigger mission than just his individual stint.<sup>8</sup>

- Teams have a common, measurable goal.**

Determining a measurable goal is simple in basketball. It can be based on a win/loss record, amount of turnovers, steals, assists or free throws. Teams can look at their statistics both individually and as a group and see how they are stacking up against the goal.

When pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly's product development team set specific goals for introducing an ultrasonic probe to help physicians identify deep veins in patients, the team clearly understood its purpose, was able to measure the progress and gain immediate feedback on the results.<sup>9</sup>

- Teams work collaboratively.**

Successful teams obviously have talent, but they also have a great deal of trust for each other and strong commitment to the goal. This provides an atmosphere where members work comfortably together.



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*“The future ain't what it used to be.”*

*Yogi Berra,  
Major League baseball player  
& manager.*

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When Dow Corning created an autonomous e-commerce unit (Xiameter) to sell discounted bulk silicone products, the process and result were astounding.

Conceived in the summer of 2001, the unit was launched just six months later. Further, in just three months, it had paid back the money invested in it.

The book *From Strategy to Execution: Turning Accelerated Global Change into Opportunity*,<sup>10</sup> cites keys to success including senior level commitment (the team was encouraged to break traditional rules), clear goal and mission (launch date was set early on in the process, so all decisions led toward meeting that date), and a culture of teamwork.

#### DEVELOPING YOUR HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAM

In order to put these concepts to work in individual organizations, here are several questions to answer first:

- *What specific mission does your team have? Is it long-term or short-term? What is the end goal?*
- *What level of support (commitment, time, money, staff) will the team have?*
- *What performance measures will be used for the team? How do you convey them, and how often do you measure them? How do you determine the team's ROI?*
- *How is the team selected? How do you gauge level of commitment?*
- *How do you build a cohesive unit? Does the team have the skills to work together?*
- *What training is needed to help develop the team structure, i.e. charter, norms, level of autonomy?*



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develop a team with the tools they need to exceed  
your business goals.***

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