



Common Characteristics of Advanced Teams

Is Your Team More or Less Advanced?

Through our work with clients, we have studied many teams in diverse organizations. Advanced teams have several common characteristics. If your team has gone beyond the initial startup functions like setting ground rules, getting organized, learning to manage team meetings, and learning how to use basic problem solving tools, then it may be on its way to becoming advanced.

After getting started, many teams are ready for higher levels of development and performance. A fully functional and advanced team embodies the following characteristics, first identified by Dennis Kinlaw and adapted by me for this article:

- Autonomy
- Interdependence
- Flexibility
- Strategic thinking
- Problem solving competencies
- Performance improvement competencies
- Performance that is integrated with the total organization

Autonomy literally means self ruling; not independence. The goal for strengthening the autonomy of teams is to:

1. Make maximum use of their potential
2. Minimize their unproductive dependency on external authorities and resources
3. Stay clearly aligned with organizational goals and operations of the organization

Organizations need teams with sufficient autonomy to manage their performance by making their own decisions, solving their own problems, and generating and testing new ideas. Organizations need teams that can respond to their own emergencies and take advantage of new opportunities. They cannot possibly advance to greater levels of maturity and value to the organization unless they strengthen their autonomy.

Interdependence means that teams have higher capacity to:

1. Understand and appreciate how much what they do depends upon what other people and teams do.
2. Understand how other people and teams depend on them and in turn, on what they do.
3. Take the initiative to strengthen their capacity to work with all those people and teams with which they must cooperate and collaborate.

For interdependence to work, the team must appreciate that every other person or team that provides input or to whom they provide some input, is an opportunity for building greater interdependence. Advanced teams recognize that what they do must be complementary to what every other unit in the organization is doing. Interdependence is improved by communication and mutual influence, by using mutual feedback, by sharing resources, and by finding new opportunities for better cooperation and

collaboration.

Advanced teams are **flexible** and refuse to be stymied. If you have ever had to do business with a rigid person – one who refused to cooperate or to find alternatives to help you solve a problem – then you know what the opposite of **flexible** is.

Advanced teams demonstrate more and more adaptability. When one avenue is closed, they will look for others in order to get the job done. They respond to unplanned changes in the work environments, changes in assigned priorities, losses of key personnel, and the myriad of unanticipated events which happen in organizations. They find ways to overcome adversity and maintain a level of superior performance.

One way advanced teams learn to be **flexible** is by developing high levels of shared competencies within their teams. Advanced teams practice shared leadership and, regardless of what happens, they are never leaderless.

Advanced teams are on the lookout for every opportunity to improve. They welcome the chance to learn new technologies, use new tools and methods, and find new resources to strengthen their capacity to perform and increase **problem solving competencies**.

Advanced teams are able to be flexible because they place such a value on being competent.

Strategic thinking at any organization level requires mental pictures or vision of what the organization intends to create and then supporting plans and actions that are implemented. Visions can only become operational when they are followed by the actions that make them realities.

Strategic thinking includes all that an organization might do to define a desired future than aggressively set out to move the organization in that direction. It means not only defining a future, but gaining commitment to that future and undertaking the strategies to achieve that future. Among the payoffs for **strategic thinking** are: clear sense of purpose, awareness of what is important, alignment of decisions, and concentration of resources.

Competencies to improve performance are a fundamental characteristic of advanced teams. The more advanced a team is, the more knowledge and skill it has to manage to improve performance. Through my research and experience, I do know that advanced teams perform critical tasks at a higher level of efficiency and effectiveness than teams at the early stages of development.

Advanced teams are very systematic in the way they go about **solving problems** and they employ a wide variety of tools and methods. They are able to think creatively and are willing to experiment, test and discover.

Advanced teams are willing and are committed to **measuring their own performance** and finding new methods, models and tools to monitor processes. They know at all times how they are perceived by their customers because they monitor and measure these perceptions.

Teams in the earliest stages of development are naturally preoccupied with themselves. During the early stages of a team's formation, these teams are usually preoccupied with their own problems such as setting ground rules, learning basic problems solving skills, learning how to facilitate and manage their own meetings, and resolving problems in leadership.

Advanced teams are more able to become focused on the large organization and **integrating team**

performance with the total organization. They know how to work to fully support the goals of the larger organization and become fully integrated into the larger organization's performance plans.

To accomplish this, advanced teams know their organizations business. They know the strategic plan. They know the business plan. They know just how their work contributes to the company's "bottom line." Companies do not always do a very good job of ensuring that all people understand the basics of their profit and loss. They do not translate the meaning that their long range and business plans have for every unit. Advanced teams don't wait to be told. They find out the goals, priorities and problems of the organization. They define themselves in terms of these goals, priorities, and contribute to the solution of the company's problems.

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