Strategic Team Alignment: A Complexity Based Approach

by Mike Valentine, Partners International and Cheryl LeMaster, TruEdge Consulting

The complexity of today's business world places tremendous pressure on organizations to be innovative in addressing the challenges faced in an ever-changing market place. Increased global competition, the pace of new technology, changing demographics, and information overload contribute to a perfect storm for disruptive business dynamics to emerge. Nevertheless, to survive organizations must learn to adapt and thrive in tumultuous global environments. They must truly become learning organizations. To this end, modern-era demands have quickly taught us that it is more effective to **continually address the challenges posed by complex systems as they surface** rather than trying to predict, plan, and control the future.

Teams are uniquely equipped to develop and implement the adaptive capacity required to thrive in a complex world. In other words, teams are better able to continually assess and address emerging challenges in ways that other resources (non-teams) are not. A large body of research has shown that teams can be more innovative, better at complex problem solving, and more effective at implementing initiatives than other organizational structures (Katzenbach & Smith, 1999). However, in order for a team to effectively deliver in these areas, certain conditions are required. Most teams are neither aware of the conditions necessary for adaptive capacity nor do they or their leaders have the ability to assess, measure, and experiment to find the optimal levels for those conditions. For these reasons, we find undeveloped capability within most organizational teams. The following paper explores these conditions **and makes a case for an alignment approach that better positions teams to develop adaptive capacity.**

There has been an extensive amount of conceptual and empirical research focused on teams and team dynamics (Guzzo & Dickson, 1996). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to present an exhaustive review of that work, it is necessary to understand some of the key conditions that allow teams to thrive in complex environments. In order to do so, it is helpful to first consider a few scenarios that teams routinely face:

- A company executive has an idea and passes it on for a team to implement without input or fully understanding the organization's front-line realities;
- The information necessary to complete a project is withheld from the team and is only available through a poorly informed, uncommitted, and reticent team leader;
- A vague mandate and little team buy-in by members consistently results in missed deadlines;
- Team priorities are a source of conflict, most of which is discussed outside team meetings;
- The leader is quick to point fingers, assign blame, and micromanage;

- Intergroup tension produces dysfunctional behavior and withholding of effort by some team members;
- Constant and uncompromising differences of opinion and perspective make teamwork frustratingly slow.

It's simply not enough to bring a group of individuals together and expect good results. Whether the team has worked together for years or is newly constituted, the group requires leader support, a safe environment to try and to fail, and the room to orient themselves and *self-organize* around the new task. Here, the term 'self-organization' has a specific meaning. It is the process whereby new structures, patterns, and properties emerge in the system without them being imposed externally (Zimmerman, Lindgerg, & Plsek, 2008). With each shift in context (such as the introduction of a new leader, team member, or a new challenge), the team must have a chance to realign how it works to achieve optimal performance.

How does a team self-organize and create outcomes that result in adaptive capacity? It happens through a process called emergence. Emergence is the creation of order, the formation of new properties and structures in complex systems. "When emergence happens, something new and unexpected arises, with aspects that cannot be predicted—even from knowing everything about the parts of the system" (Lichenstein, 2014, p.1). Emergence is beyond the capacity of the lone individual; it is an outcome that requires connectivity and self-organization. It is a property that can only be achieved through the power of an interconnected group (like a team), bounded within a particular environment.

Once a team understands what is required to create the conditions necessary for emergence, they have begun the journey to develop adaptive capacity. There are many ways to describe these circumstances, but simply put they are conditions that incorporate the following elements:

➢ A high-level of psychological safety and trust within the team and between the members and the organization, in order for it to create the space for risk taking and free and open sharing of diverse perspectives and opinions;
➢ Positive leadership behaviors and support mechanisms;
➢ Team norms (traditions and beliefs) that develop in a participatory manner and embrace inclusive practices;
➢ Access to relevant information;
➢ The freedom and knowledge necessary to leverage team differences in order to generate creativity and innovation;
➢ An appreciation for and ability to manage tension;
➢ A shared sense of mission and purpose;
➢ The desire and curiosity to learn.

Complexity science incorporates and operationalizes these elements in three interconnected areas: 1) container dynamics, 2) difference, and 3) transformational exchanges (Olson & Eoyang, 2001). The areas are not discrete, they relate to one another and are interdependent. However, each element highlights a different aspect of what is required to produce emergent dynamics. *Container dynamics*, as the name suggests, is

focused on what is happening within the boundaries of the team. It examines things like information flow, container boundaries and the level of safety and trust that exists. *Difference* relates as much to how the team leverages diversity and tension in the creative process as it does to team composition. Finally, *transforming exchanges* focus on team learning. In other words, how the team deals with conflict and learns from each experience when and where it surfaces. Leaders have a significant influence on the elements of self-organization and emergence; therefore, they need to be positioned to enable the team to experiment, to discover, and to assess the levels that best fit the environment within the team's container. The presence of the above elements and their alignment is critical for adaptive capacity to develop. The figure below provides a diagram of the process.

Figure 1. Key elements necessary for emergence
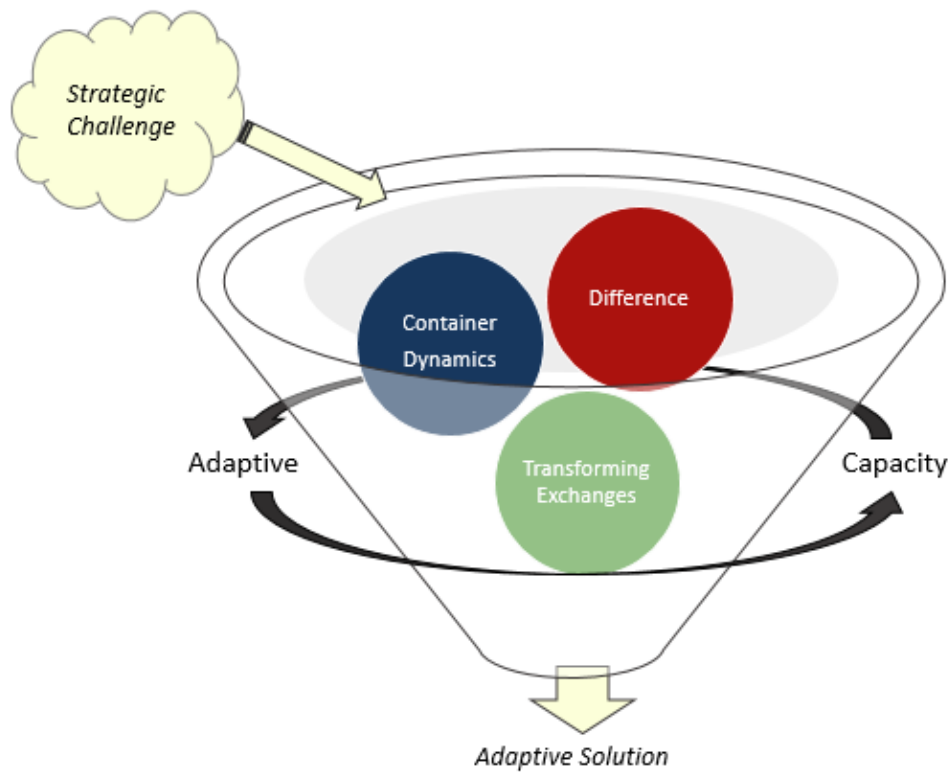
For each team and each scenario, the way these elements come together will be different. Therefore, it is essential that the team and leader have the ability to "see" where the elements are in relation to one another, and then to self-correct and realign them as they are faced with changes in the environment. The *Strategic Team Alignment* process is designed to provide a roadmap for the team to develop adaptive capacity. By raising awareness of the requirements for self-organization and emergence, and helping the group understand how to assess and measure the elements, the team begins to develop self-correcting capability. The approach works in conjunction with helping the leader understand how to support the team during this process. Here the focus is on shifting leader behaviors from directive actions to *enabling* deeds. Leaders function as enablers by fostering network conditions that encourage learning, innovation, and adaptation. They manage the flow of

information and resources, as well as the team's level of interdependency and the tension that generates creativity.

In short, the **Strategic Team Alignment** approach focuses on accurately assessing baseline team dynamics and then working to measure the conditions necessary for emergent team activity. It works with both the team and leader to facilitate alignment between the strategic aspirations of the organization, the work of the team, and the leader's role in supporting emergence. Moreover, the process positions the team for the continuous development of adaptive capacity.

References

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Mike Valentine is a Senior Consultant at Partners in HR International. Mike has over 30 years working with teams in a variety of settings and is currently conducting team-oriented research on behavior change as part of a PhD in Leadership and Change at Antioch University. Mike also has a Law degree from Temple University.

Cheryl LeMaster is a Managing Partner at TruEdge Consulting and has worked extensively with organizations going through large-scale change. Cheryl has a Masters degree in organizational development and is completing a PhD in Leadership and Change at Antioch University. She is pursuing research focused on leader behavior during complex change.