



MASTERCLASS INSIGHTS:

Seven Things Effective Teams Do Differently: Dr Mark De Rond

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Overview and Key Takeaways

On Thursday May 26th from 9.30 to 12.30 Dr. Mark de Rond, Associate Professor of Strategy and Organisation at Judge Business School, Cambridge gave a keynote presentation on **Seven Things Effective Teams Do Differently**. See below key takeaways for you and your organisation.



1) What's the difference between working groups and teams? Look for the daylight.

Mark began by differentiating between a *working group* and a *team*. In working groups individuals work together by working alone (so there is *daylight* between the individuals). These groups tend to be put in place because of their expertise. The leadership of the group is fixed. In teams, on the other hand, the boundaries are hard to see (hence harder to see daylight). Leadership is fluid and expectations of performance may be higher. Mark noted that working groups are very effective and shouldn't be considered a poor relation to teams. In fact, he says, though high performing teams have major benefits for organisations, they are often not easy places to be as they carry into them all of the complexities and challenges of the individuals that make up the team.

Effective teams face seven challenges.

Mark framed these challenges in terms of seven questions. How you as a leader respond to these challenges will determine the level of performance of your team.

2) Q1: How safe is your team psychologically?

Effective teams are psychologically safe. Psychological safety is a climate of openness where team members can take risks, share information and learn in a safe environment.

To gauge the psychological safety of your team, pay attention to the stories told about the team and the organisation as these will tell you what's penalised and what's accepted in the team. Crucial for psychological safety is the ability to give and ask for feedback **in the moment**. Mark suggested some tactics for taking 'the personal' out of decision making using role play (an exercise assigning the roles of proposer, follower, oppose and bystander to team members), and for moving conversations to a

more authentic level where members can safely express what they really think in a situation. To illustrate this he suggested a simple exercise of creating two lists; one of what we say in a tough conversation and one of what we'd like to say, and then explore how to frame and express our feedback so that we move towards a more authentic conversation.

3) Q2: What is our Stephens' Question?

Effective teams have a purpose and this purpose excites and sustains them. Research suggests that having a purpose and being able to make progress towards this purpose is meaningful and motivational.

The Stephens' Question in the title refers to the decision criterion used by Roger Stephens (Cambridge rower) when preparing for the annual boat race. This criterion was "Will me doing this today make the boat go faster?" Mark challenges us to find our own version of the Stephens' question, one that gives purpose (or *storyline* as Mark calls it) to our team's efforts and resonates throughout the organisation.

4) Q3: How much harmony do we need to perform?

Effective teams maintain a balance between the need for harmony and the need for performance. Organisations often emphasise harmony within teams believing that harmony leads to performance. In reality, there is no evidence for this apart from anecdotal, and most evidence actually points to the opposite - where there is relentless focus on performance, often harmony will follow. The challenge for teams is to create an environment where people work together, but accept that competition or rivalry is part of the dynamic of the team- *co-opetition*. Where harmony is selected over performance, competition often goes underground and causes dysfunctional behaviour.

Mark also suggested that the best way to get co-opetition is 'task-based intervention' because sometimes existential boredom is the underlying cause of a lot of tension.

5) Q4: How many is too many?

Effective teams have between five and seven members (Mark favours five). Some organisations deliberately under-resource teams to drive collaboration, innovation, and squeeze out social loafing. He suggests that if you have current teams of more than five you create a *core team* who make the decisions, and an *extended team* who are called upon as needed.

6) Q5: How much trust do we really have in each other's capabilities?

Effective teams know when to reply on competence and when to rely on character. Mark framed this question around a discussion between competence and character, and which you should rely on in a team. The answer he says depends on the context and longevity of the team. Short term projects require competence; long term projects require both. In terms of estimating competence, he noted that high performers typically miscalibrate the competence of others (regarding them as have lower competence) while low performers typically miscalibrate the competence of themselves (regarding themselves as having higher competence).

7) Q6: What if we have too much of a good thing?

Effective teams balance the value and risk associated with key team attributes. Mark showed a list of attributes from self-confidence to charisma to selflessness, and tested these individually in terms of their value and risk for the team. This exercise illustrated that each attribute in the right balance contributes value, but in the wrong balance can actually damage the team. The key question we need to be asking ourselves as leaders is 'how do you exploit the value while mitigating the risks?'

8) Q7: How do we handle difficult conversations?

Effective teams can handle conflict. Mark is of the view that normally at the heart of every frustration/conflict in a team lies 'misunderstanding'. He suggested 'mediation' (often by an external party) as a solution to handling conflict because it helps to bleed the problem of 'emotion'. There is no point in trying to solve a problem rationally, when the cause is emotional. In summary, he illustrated via a video that a high performing team has 3 distinct features:

- 9) The atmosphere/energy feels calm
- 10) It's not very noisy
- 11) The person in charge is normally very quiet. Their role is to listen, observe and then instruct. The role of the leader is to give the team space while making them feel safe.



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