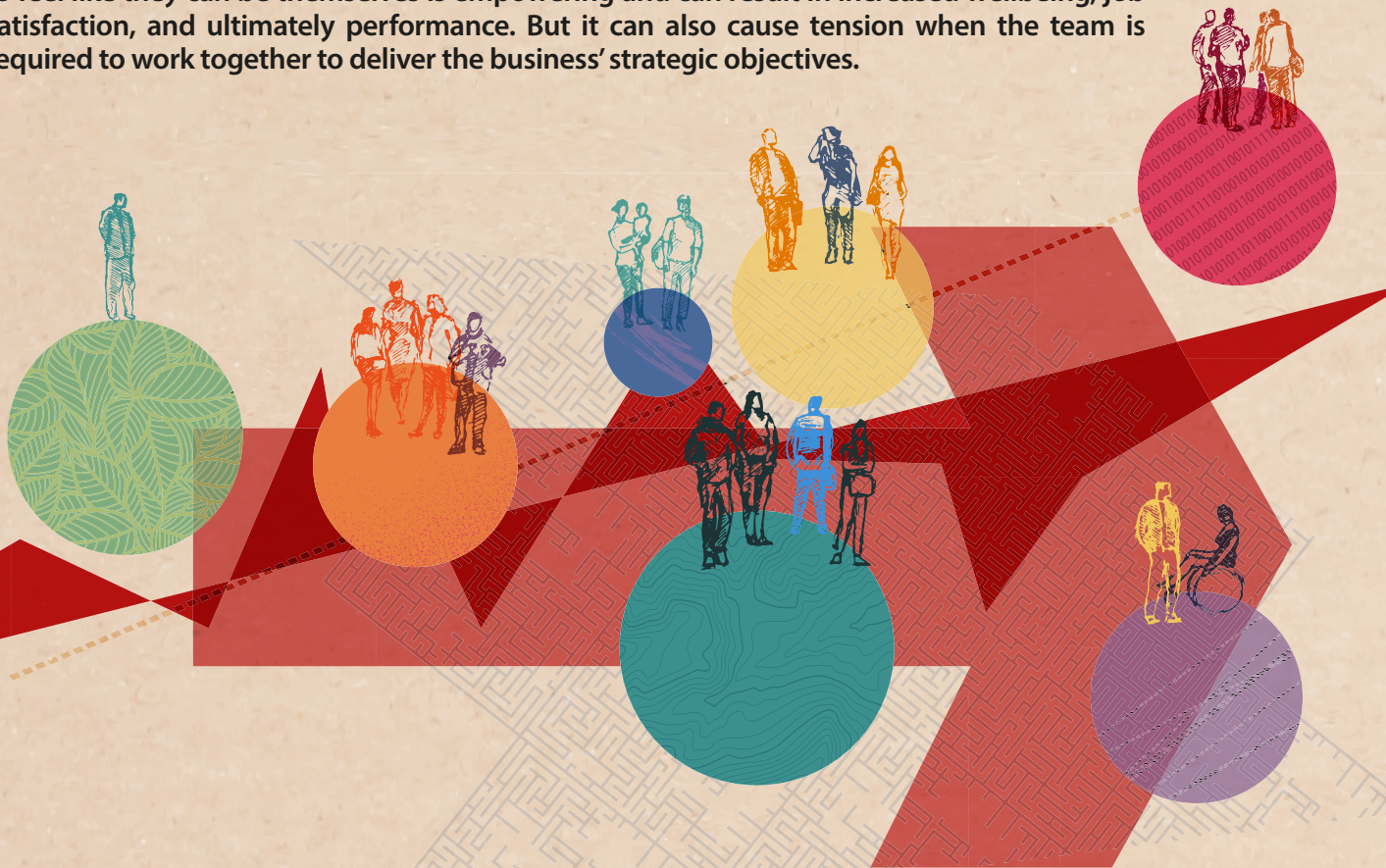


by Jodie Hughes

Giving Up to Fit In:

The Tension Between Individual and Team Needs

The last few years have seen a shift from an organisation-driven environment towards championing the needs of individual employees; not only because of recent discourse around the war for talent, but also due to the rise of flexible working and a push towards authenticity in the workplace. This greater focus on 'Self' certainly has many benefits: allowing employees to feel like they can be themselves is empowering and can result in increased wellbeing, job satisfaction, and ultimately performance. But it can also cause tension when the team is required to work together to deliver the business' strategic objectives.



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For many teams, remote (and then hybrid) working disrupted the team dynamic, with people reporting their interactions have become more transactional as the social cohesion has eroded over the last two years. As new hybrid ways of working bed down, how will team members balance their individual needs with those of the team? And should leaders be thinking about teams in a different way?

The team is traditionally the unit in which most work takes place; typically co-located, with a shared understanding, and close working relationships. But the notion of a team has perhaps changed, and in some ways, got lost in recent times. It is increasingly 'normal' for teams to be formed of people who have never met one another in person – indeed there are many articles about team working in a hybrid world and the degree to which physically meeting one another is important. However, this article focuses on the tension between 'individual' and 'team' work, and the concessions that must be made on the part of the individual in order to fit in with the team. What do we give up? What do we gain? And how do we manage this tension?

Playing to Individual Strengths

Let's start with a look at what individuals bring to the team setting. It's long been understood that a team benefits from a variety of strengths and preferences in order to be truly balanced and effective, and one way to identify where an individual's preferences will fit within a team is to use a psychometric tool.

Psychometrics are designed to help individuals develop awareness of their own strengths and learn how to utilise them in the workplace. Insights from these tools help individuals understand that other members of their team have different preferences, and with this knowledge, find more effective ways to interact with colleagues.

There are many psychometrics available, but our go-to tool of choice when it comes to understanding teams is the Team Management Profile (TMP): see diagram 1 below.

The TMP proposes that there are eight types of work necessary to create a high-performing team. From a 'Creator-Innovator' who comes up with ideas to a 'Thruster-Organiser' who prefers to plan and organise and a 'Concluder-Producer' who enjoys seeing tasks through to completion. Each of the roles bring their own strengths to a team, helping it to be balanced and more effective, and increasing teamwork by knowing where your and others' roles lie.

Understanding and utilising these strengths is likely to lead to better results – for instance, you would probably see a better outcome if you delegated a proof-reading task to a detail-orientated person, rather than someone who sees the big picture. It also has numerous benefits to the individual. Capitalising on the 'parts' of a team, i.e. focusing on individual strengths and what people do well, can help team members to feel more empowered and energised.

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Diagram 1: Margerison-McCann Team Management Wheel
© Team Management Systems

Preferences are not Excuses!

However, in undertaking this team analysis, we need to be mindful of a trap that is heavily linked to the debate about authenticity at work. And that is that preferences are just that: preferences. This does not mean that an individual lacks the ability to do a task outside of their strength, and equally, or perhaps more importantly, neither does it mean that our preferences are ready-made 'excuses' for not doing so.

To illustrate this point (with a slightly over the top example), it would clearly be wrong for an Air Traffic Controller to attempt to argue away role incompetence along the lines of "of course I didn't see that plane, I don't do detail". Neither does having a preference for flexibility excuse reports being handed in late, nor does having a preference for structure excuse resistance to change. These preferences help explain behaviour, but it is not meant to excuse it.

In fact, weaknesses can be a great opportunity to step out of one's comfort zone and expand knowledge and skills. For example, if an individual prefers to brainstorm ideas in a Creator-Innovator role, this doesn't mean they're free from organising schedules and plans when the team &/or situation requires. Viewing a shortfall in one area as needing to be filled by another individual is actually a dangerous mindset, and plays to the notion of placing all the emphasis on individual responsibility rather than the team. If your team lacks a creative spark, it is vital to make this part of the collective responsibility, rather than simply look to the 'Creator-Innovator' to shoulder the burden alone.

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This is an important, and often overlooked, pitfall of focusing on individual roles within a team. Whilst we want to aim for a great person-role fit, there will be times when we need to undertake work in a way that is not perfectly aligned with our preferences. The question then becomes “do I have *enough* fit between my preferences and what is expected of me?”

Is Team Work Always Better?

“An effective team is always worth more than the sum of its parts” (1).

Undertaking a team analysis like this can have huge benefits, but there remains another pitfall so often overlooked, and one that helps explain why a team made up of diverse skills, backgrounds and preferences does not always result in improved performance. Along with a diverse team and the understanding of individual preferences, it is also essential for the group to have a solid understanding of the mechanics of how a team operates, and the skills to link people and unleash the full potential of this diversity.





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Simply putting a wide range of people of very different personalities, backgrounds and skills in a room and setting them on the task is actually unlikely to improve performance, if not accompanied by a good understanding of the ways in which the group can utilise that variety (2).

One of the ways in which we often see this play out, is through dilution of an individual's expertise. We occasionally run an exercise based on a NASA scenario, where we ask people to give their individual answers to a problem of which most people have limited experience. They are then asked to form groups and discuss the issues in order to arrive at a group answer. Teams usually do better than individuals for all sorts of reasons: greater access to knowledge, wide range of experience, effective challenge and questioning.

But sometimes an individual outperforms the group, and this is almost always down to a failure of the team to utilise that diversity effectively.

The best example of this issue involved a more junior female employee with strong introverted preferences and an over-deference to seniority being placed in a group with more experienced and confident managers. Her individual responses outperformed the group by some distance, and it was only after the group discussion that she admitted she had studied Aerospace Engineering at University, and 'knew a little bit about the subject'. Peer pressure, lack of confidence and turn-taking, failure to state credentials and over-confidence (bordering on arrogance) on the part of the senior managers were all culprits here, but make our point well: diversity is not enough.

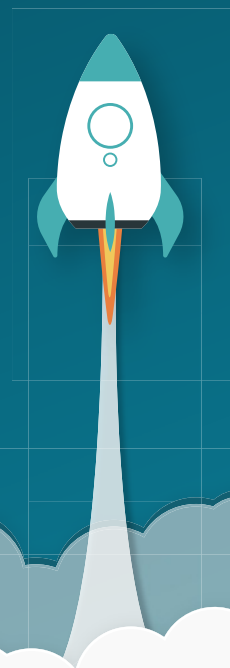
In fact, in such instances where this interference with knowledge and expertise is easy to predict, it can actually be more beneficial for true experts to work alone, albeit with a level of challenge and checks built into the process somewhere along the line.

Linking and the Process of Teamwork

So, while it is beneficial to have diversity within teams, integrating mechanisms must be in place for the benefits to be realised (3); whether through process, or effective softer skills, teams need development in ways in which this diversity can be allowed to flourish. Put another way – our authenticity needs some nurturing. One way of doing this is to improve communication between the individuals.

Part of the Team Management Profile is focused on 'linking' – helping employees understand the most effective ways to interact with each other. For example, a more flexible manager understanding that a structured team member could benefit from having an agenda for the meeting to get the best out of them. This is an essential but often missed step in setting up effective teams with varied skills and preferences.

Another good example of where linking skills play an important role might be in considering the importance of active listening. This is a key component of linking the preferences, and something clearly missing in the NASA example above – not because the leaders didn't listen, but because people felt unable to speak out. Active listening is much more than just paying attention when someone speaks, it's about creating the conditions in which they are likely to offer their thoughts without fear of reprisal, or judgement.



What Leaders Can Do

While the rise in sense of self and personal autonomy should be celebrated, there may be a knock-on effect to the sense of shared team identity and performance, which has likely been exacerbated by hybrid working. Therefore, it is important for leaders to understand what they can do to help individuals forge this shared identity, keeping in mind the individuals' autonomous preferences.

- 1 Use a preference development tool to understand the strengths and opportunities of their team.** One of our clients, a financial planning organisation, has been using the Team Management Profile to onboard their various investment subsidiaries and help their teams become more familiar with each other and work effectively together more quickly.
- 2 Manage team expectations around strengths and preferences.** Create the expectation that whilst working outside preferences will be minimised, there will be occasions where work will be outside someone's immediate comfort zone. Remember that preference explains, but doesn't excuse, actions when those actions are a key part of someone's role.
- 3 Address team weakness through process.** If there is a weakness in the team, first and foremost seek to compensate for it through process rather than actively seek a new individual to fulfil the role. We should always look to the best overall person to recruit, rather than prioritise preference simply to fill a gap.
- 4 Unleash the full potential of diversity.** Focus on developing the tools and skills to really make use of the diversity present within your team.

Authenticity in a Team Needs Nurturing

For organisations to deliver their strategy, they need individuals and teams to be working effectively, and helping people to understand their likely preferences within that team can have a huge impact.

Creating the conditions where people can express their preference and authenticity in a way that works for the team, is a worthy goal, and being mindful of the potential pitfalls and solutions can go a long way towards balancing the needs of the individual *and* the team.



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Jodie is a Business Psychologist in OE Cam's Talent Management practice. She has a keen interest in understanding the role individual differences play in the workplace; specifically how strengths, weaknesses and preferences impact the way people work individually and as part of a team. She applies a broad variety of psychometrics with her clients and is experienced in designing and facilitating leadership development to enable individuals to work more effectively.

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