

# Turning Innovative People into High Performing Teams

Steven A. Jacobs

*Leaders working in R&D, in any organization, have many challenges. Frequent meetings, updates, budgets, internal politics, evaluations, counseling, hirings and even lay-offs distract from the focus on creating new products and technology, and bringing the results down to the Company's bottom line.*

So it was with much trepidation that Joe walked into his boss Larry's office to find out what Larry, VP of R&D, meant when he had told him, in the hallway, that he had volunteered him for a wonderful opportunity.

"Joe, I need you to lead a new idea I have to make R&D successful. For too long now, we have taken our product leads from Marketing; and as much as that has worked to a degree in the past, it is not the future of this company."

"Sounds good, Larry," Joe responded with a smile. He, too, thought that Marketing was too involved in new product idea generation, and that wasn't always a good thing. "One quick question - why me?"

"You're prior military. I suspect you're a proven leader or you wouldn't have made it to the rank of Captain," Larry said matter-of-factly. "You'll be in charge of one of the I-teams we're about to create."

The look of uncertainty must have been clear on Joe's face as his boss went on. "The Innovation, or I-teams, must fill this company's new idea pipeline and help the bottom line. Our new approach needs to remain hush-hush, as it may not be received well by other departments. We'll be killed if this gets to the head of Marketing before I have the chance to prep her."

"You can count on me," Joe said, with a bearing that hid his concerns.

"By the way Joe, you'll be doing this on top of your regular job, as we can't afford to lose any time on any of the current projects. Good luck." Larry was already busy responding to e-mail as Joe looked back and quietly left the office.

As Joe headed back to his office, he knew the team had to be successful - not just because

he liked Larry, but also because he liked his job and the company. And right now, the company's pipeline contained more line extensions than you could shake a stick at.

He began to focus on what needed to be done to assemble a top-notch innovation team from a list of very diverse R&D folks. The first thing was looking in the mirror, to make sure he was up for the job. He reflected: "Can I do this? Doesn't matter, I have to. What makes me right for this job? Well, I'm secure in what I know and what I don't know (which is quite a bit). I'm a servant leader. I devote myself to the needs of the people on my teams." He knew he always took care of those he led, as he was inherently aware that their success meant his success. This he knew for sure, as he had experienced it many times. He always looked for talent and sought to surround himself with the best.

## Servant Leaders

- Devote themselves to serving the needs of organization members
- Focus on meeting the needs of those they lead
- Develop employees to bring out the best in them
- Coach others and encourage their self-expression
- Facilitate personal growth in all who work with them
- Listen and build a sense of community

With this attitude and its attendant successes, Joe had become the "go-to guy" in his area, and many with whom he had collaborated wanted to work with him again. Joe brought out the best in people. He coached them, challenged them, encouraged their self-expression, talked to them as often as

possible and, more importantly, listened to them and their concerns. He gave them what they needed to do their jobs, praised them in public, and told them what they were doing wrong in private. All this was done while setting a challenging pace and expecting them to hit their timelines and milestones.

What people really liked was Joe's calmness in nightmare situations, his ability to flex his leadership style, and how secure he was in what he knew and what he didn't know. Joe had often noted that the root of many arguments and conflicts was an underlying sense of insecurity. He felt that fear of looking stupid kept people from learning, growing and getting better. Accordingly, he was never afraid to ask questions about things he didn't know, and never seemed worried about looking "stupid."

But Joe also knew that he had made many mistakes. Chief among them was sometimes hiring the wrong people. He had learned from the book *Good to Great* that you must take the time to get the right people in the right positions, roles that matched their talents, and to get the wrong people out the door as fast as possible. The company didn't always allow the time it took to recruit and hire the right people for the right seat; but he had found that, if individuals were hired on probation and it became clear they were wrong for the company, he should get rid of them fast. He did this transparently and constructively. In effect, he verbally held up a mirror to them: "This is you and your talents and strengths, and this is your job. Notice the two don't match. We have to fix this." This led to 50% of the folks Joe fired hating him, and 50% coming back to thank him for his honesty and forthrightness. It had also allowed him to build very good teams.

Part of his selection criteria was encapsulated in an acronym his colleagues made fun of. "Look folks, I like to lead, and be on, teams that have a very high 'PWF.'" This, he explained, stood for "Personal Weirdness Factor." He had discovered two very important things in his years leading teams. Normalcy sometimes equated with a certain level of risk aversion or "groupthink". Little innovation came from teams of "yes men." Also, "straight A students," upon entering the corporate world, often had difficulty handling the failures they had never experienced in school and were thrown off balance when they did not feel valued or listened to as much as they were used to.

### **Characteristics of High PWF Folks**

(PWF – Personal Weirdness Factor)

- Individuality
- Challenge each other's thoughts and ideas
- No "Yes" folks (one of you is redundant)
- Little similarity of thoughts/high diversity (cultures)
- Embrace Imperfection – Fast!

"Beware of perfect people. They will never propel your enterprise to greatness. They're too cautious. You've got to be fast to be good."  
(Dick Brown, CEO of EDS)

So it was with these concerns in mind that he studied the personnel records of prospective team members; talked to some of their colleagues; and went on to choose a team made up of R&D professionals with a very high PWF and a record of being good teammates and inventors. The team was composed of six people: Tom, a young engineer and a rock and roll drummer in his off time; Christine, an Irish-born Ph.D., who was very smart, quick to laugh and had six patents under her belt; Elaine, who, as an information specialist and Internet addict from the corporate research library, "lived to surf and surfed to live" and also had three patents; Zhou Li, a first generation Chinese scientist, who often came up with interesting ideas and, with 18 patents, seemed to have an excellent track record for creativity; Bill, an introvert engineer with a quick mind, dry sense of humor, and keen eye for group dynamics, and who typically only spoke when he had something of value to add. Joe, as team leader, rounded out the group. He considered his PWF also rather high due to his "twisted" background in medicine, experience as a military pilot and maintenance test pilot, an MBA in global management, and over a dozen business trips around the world working with global

teams. This team was imperfect; and partly because of that, Joe felt that it had great potential for creativity and innovation.

Joe knew too that, for these individuals to meld into a high-performing team, they would have to establish a constructive culture early, build trust, and ensure their collaborative and creative values were aligned. He knew from experience that trust was an absolutely essential part of any team. Without trust, you didn't have a team; you had a bunch of individuals who would do anything to survive, including throw each other under the bus. Further, this group would have to follow Tuckman's team development path of "Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing."

Joe, for this project, would be assisted by a facilitator, Anthony, who would give Joe more time to watch, assess and drive the team dynamics and culture. He could also compare his perceptions with Anthony's.

The first team meeting was an interesting one. Everyone gathered together looking to Anthony and Joe to tell them what was going on, as this was still "hush-hush."

"I've brought you here today," Joe started out with a smile and then quickly changed to a tone of all business, "because we have a very important task at hand. The survival of the company is in our hands. We all know that R&D has not been the driving force in coming up with new products, and we have been tasked to fix that. We have to come up with highly innovative products to add to our company's pipeline."

"That's not the worst news," Joe said looking at all of them for a reaction. "As your team leader, I am not even in the same ballpark as you with regard to your subject knowledge. What I do have, that will be of value to this band of brothers and sisters, is the ability to lead, drive, ride herd over and protect this team so that we will be successful. Mark my words: when we are done, we will have come up with some amazing ideas." The expression of confidence on Joe's face hid his concerns well.

From there, Anthony took over and started the discussion with introductions, going over the agenda, timeline and expectations of the group. He also led them in establishing the team norms. "OK, gang, the challenges for us will be myriad, but the team will ultimately be successful," Anthony stated with utter confidence as well.

For the next five weeks they met to brainstorm and then narrow down their options, then brainstorm again, and then narrow down the options once again. Anthony told

them the best ideas came after the easy ideas were out of the way. Complying with Anthony's requests and visiting different facilities, the team met before, during and after work for discussion; and it was at week seven of a 15-week timeline that the team finally exploded. In a private meeting away from Anthony, they turned to Joe and said, almost in unison, "This is going nowhere! We're sick and tired of thinking up ideas and not developing them. We're tired of Anthony's constant iterations with no movement forward!" So after more listening and discussion, Joe said, "I'll talk to Anthony before our next group meeting to prep him and at the team meeting we'll put our cards on the table and figure out what we need to do to get everything back on track."

When Joe met with Anthony and told him the situation, much to Joe's surprise, Anthony smiled and said, "Good – this is just what I was hoping for!"

"Anthony, the group and I are rather frustrated, and you've been hoping for this? Bring me in out of the fog, my friend."

"Joe, I'll explain it to the group at the meeting."

The body language at the next meeting was quite interesting. Although the team came with folded arms and legs and rigid bodies and frowns, Anthony moved the meeting along beautifully.

"OK gang, I hear you're not too happy with me. Tell me what your concerns are." The comments came in rapid fire...

"We're not going anywhere."

"We're not doing our jobs."

"We're spinning our wheels."

And then finally, "I'm getting heat from my manager that I'm spending too much time on this, and I quote, 'worthless innovation project du jour,' and it's taking time away from my real job."

The chorus of "me too's" went around the room, and that's when Joe realized what the situation was. The anger at Anthony had been a result of the unbearable pressure their bosses had been putting on them regarding their job focus and dedication.

Anthony, who had been listening carefully said, "I was expecting this, folks. You're going through storming, and now we know why. If you make it through this – and some teams never do – you may wind up being a high performing team." The light over Joe's head could brighten the room. He knew what team development was required, but being so close to the action, had missed it.

"Ok folks, that brings new light to this prob-

lem," Joe said. "Here's what I'll do. I'll go to each of your managers and tell them what the situation is. I'll tell them to lay off you, as this is an extremely important project and team. Then I'll go to our VP and ask him to have a word with each of them. That will "align" their thinking and help them to understand the importance of what we're doing here. And if they don't back down, I will smite them as, in the immortal words of Elwood Blues, 'We're on a mission from God' here!" That got a hesitant laugh and the tension in the room started to ease. Joe leveraged their common enemy, as he had seen that was exactly what many teams needed to polarize and come together in a common goal. He also realized that he had gotten too focused on the deliverable and had to allow the group, and himself, when the pressure became too much, to relax, break away from the task at hand, talk openly and have some fun.

At the next meeting, smiles were evident around the room. Their bosses had been talked to, their lives had gotten better. Trust and their respect for Joe began to grow. The following meetings became better and better, and the team ultimately generated six patentable products. Team members began to laugh more with each other. They relied on each other to create an environment in which innovation occurred regularly. They finished each other's sentences and began to meet after work to socialize over drinks.

Joe realized the secret to building the trust in a team was that they all needed to exhibit and embody the "4 C's": Consistency, Competence, Commitment, and Character. Live those and trust followed. Anyone that didn't exhibit those needed to be replaced. This team lived them and breathed them. Trust and teamwork had evolved to a level

Joe had seen only one other time in his life, in the military. This truly had become a high performing team.

When it came time to present the ideas to Larry, the team couldn't have been more prepared and proud. The presentation went well. Joe asked each member to present a product idea so that all could be seen and praised. The team then was asked to present to the head of Marketing and eventually the president of the company, who were both duly impressed with the ideas and the outcomes.

After the provisional patents were filed, the team asked Joe to beg Larry to keep the team together, as they had never before enjoyed being on a team this much and wanted to continue their highly successful work for the company.

The look on Larry's face, when Joe asked him not to disband the team, was utter astonishment.

"Joe, that wasn't the idea. We can't keep the team together. They have other jobs," Larry said.

"I know Larry, but these folks want to keep going and make a difference for this company. Do me a favor and think about it. This could be a big opportunity."

Two days later Larry came back to Joe with bad news. There was just no way, with a hiring freeze on, to do it, and the team was to be disbanded. Joe knew that was going to be devastating to the people and the company – as competencies traveled, but high performing team members did not.

Two weeks later, Tom, the engineer rock and roll drummer, told Joe that he was leaving the company.

"Joe," Tom said, "if I didn't know teams could

be that good, I may not have looked for another job. Now that I have to go back to my dysfunctional team, I can't wait to leave. I have to thank you for opening my eyes to truly amazing teamwork." Joe thanked him and wished him well.

The trend continued. Two years later, somewhat like the great Ford Taurus team after Ford management had disbanded it, only one person of that I-team was still at the company. All the rest, including Joe, had left for other opportunities.

Joe counted himself lucky for having been on his second high-performing team. The mark for identifying a great team, he knew, was that, after the team was disbanded, members felt as if they had lost a loved one and went into temporary depression. He also knew he would never forget how well the team worked together and how creative they were; and he couldn't believe his luck at having been a part of something great.

#### **Key guidelines for creating and leading high-performing innovation teams:**

- Build great teams with a high PWF and then build trust within them.
- Let flexibility and servant leadership be your most prevalent style.
- Find folks that can laugh at themselves.
- Clearly identify the team objective and goals and then create a common enemy.
- Remember that even great teams must develop, including going through a stage of "storming."
- Be ready for change – hold onto the tiger's tail as hard and as long as you can! ■

## About the Author:



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Steve Jacobs is a successful business leader, consultant, and communicator. He has been heavily involved in innovation, global cultural dynamics, high performing teams, and clinical supply chain operations for the pharmaceuticals, biotech products and medical device industries. He has been president and Global Chief Operating Officer of a multinational contract organization that served companies like Novartis, Eisai, Lilly and others in the pharmaceutical and biotech sector. He also served as head of US clinical supply operations for Johnson & Johnson.

Mr. Jacobs was a logistics and aviation officer in the U.S. Army, where he rose to the rank of Major and was a maintenance test pilot. His undergraduate degree is in pharmacy from the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia and his MBA is from the University of Phoenix with a specialization in global management.