

# 4 OBSTACLES in the Way of

BY KEVAN HALL

*After 12 years of working with over 200 of the world's leading companies in 40 countries, I have found four key areas where traditional people management practices are preventing high performance: cooperation, communication, control, and community.*

Let me share the problems with these four Cs:

## **1. COOPERATION—IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT TEAMWORK**

In the past, building a high-performance organization has been synonymous with building high-performing teams. But what if teamwork was a part of the problem, not the solution?

Even great companies are struggling with an epidemic of cooperation via teams—managers tell me that they spend 20% of their time in unnecessary meetings. Everyone feels the need to be involved in everything and teams are seen as the answer.

Teams have become thought of not just as a technique but as a corporate value—an article of faith.

I do not contend that teams are unimportant—cross-functional teams, which I call “spaghetti teams,” where everyone is involved and interdependent, are vital. However, this form of teamwork is difficult and expensive to sustain when team members are in multiple locations and can rarely meet face to face. Also, little work in complex companies actually requires teamwork; most work may be done by individuals.

The biggest problem with teams is that managers insist on managing their work groups as if they were teams. Take, for instance, what happens during activity reviews.

Did you ever sit in a meeting in which each person present updates everyone about what he or she did during the last week? This information is usually only relevant to the individual and his or her boss and is of no practical use to the other people in the room. Unnecessary activity review alone can consume an hour per week for many “teams.” This is bad enough when the group is together in a room, but imagine how many operational reviews are done via teleconference.

# Building a High-Performance Organization



If we eliminate this unnecessary “teaming,” we free invaluable face-to-face time on issues everyone needs to be involved in. This can transform our meetings from the passive consumption of irrelevant PowerPoint presentations to much less regular but more participative and involving events.

There are three simple secrets in structuring cooperation to achieve high performance.

- ▶ Prefer individual work and loosely structured groups to interdependent teams.
- ▶ Focus scarce time on team meetings where everyone needs to be involved, not in managing individual work or receiving information.
- ▶ Involve the smallest number of people necessary to do the work in team meetings, particularly if working through technology.

## **2. LACK OF COMMUNICATION, DON'T MAKE ME LAUGH**

Lack of communication is largely a problem of the past—the challenge now is how to disconnect from the mass of trivia. High performance means driving out communication waste so we can recognize and respond to the few important messages faster.

To take just one form of communication, the average manager receives 57 e-mails per day and estimates that 55% of them are unnecessary. This means that a company with 40,000 employees pays its staff to write, send, read, and delete over 240 million unnecessary e-mails every year. If it takes an average of just five seconds to scan and delete each of these, this represents over one third of a million hours of wasted effort every year

The volume of communication—unfortunately, not its quality—is set to boom with new

communication methods such as instant messaging. If you do not take control of communication now, expect the number of incoming messages you receive to triple over the next few years.

My tips on improving communication performance:

- ▶ Disconnect from distribution lists and sources of information you do not really need. Occasionally you may miss something but it will be worth the time you save.
- ▶ Think about the action you want from people before you communicate and communicate directly “to” them; avoid “reply to all” or “cc.”
- ▶ If information is just for interest, post it on an intranet site; do not “push” it out via e-mail. If no one accesses the intranet, then no one is interested, so you can stop posting altogether.
- ▶ Appoint someone in your company to work on the e-mail culture to see that e-mail is managed well.

### **3. CENTRAL CONTROL IS OFTEN AN ILLUSION**

Over the last 20 years, the total quality movement has revolutionized product quality and manufacturing performance by devolving decision making to a point as close to the action as possible and by systematically reducing waste. In people management, however, we have steadily been moving in the other direction, removing control from the point of the action and allowing wasteful working practices to grow worse.

Unfortunately, in complex companies, no one at the center has the knowledge and experience to be expert in all local markets, priorities, and cultures. Escalation to the center may sometimes lead to better decisions but it always slows things down and undermines local autonomy.

I believe that we need a systematic process of decentralizing control. Our job as managers is to build capability, not to undermine people’s ability to react quickly. Here is one deceptively simple way to do this: every time your people escalate issues to you for a decision, treat this as a management quality failure. Help them fix the problem but then identify how to give them the skills, knowledge, or confidence to solve the problem for themselves the next time.

Control is absolutely vital to making companies perform. Precisely for this reason, we cannot afford to slow it down and move it away from the people close to the action. Real control is immediate; central control takes time and is often too slow to be more than a backstop.

### **4. COMMUNITY CONSTRUCTION IS NO LONGER A “SOFT” SKILL**

The nature of community at work has changed. When the focus of the business was a single site, a sense of community came as a by-product. Being in the same place made it easy to get to know colleagues. Today, we work with colleagues we never meet and with whom we have nothing in common but a similar e-mail address.

Building community is not a “soft” skill; it is one of the hardest things to achieve. Certainly, trust is essential to enabling the right balance of cooperation, communication, and control, but trust doesn’t come easily.

Organizationally, we have matrix structures that often undermine community by creating “divided loyalties” with multiple reporting lines and different groups of colleagues competing for attention. Companies may try to build community by investing heavily in the development of “common values” but values are a personal thing, not within the purview of organizations to set.

All that companies can expect is that the people they employ follow some common practices in the way they work together.

Real high-performance organizations are able to structure themselves in the simplest, fastest way to get things done. In many cases our traditional people management practices, developed for much simpler times, are not capable of delivering this in today’s more complex organizations.

The secret is not in developing more complex techniques, working harder, or spending more on travel and communication—it lies in simplicity and speed.

If you think you are already a high-performance organization, remember that the search for performance does not end. In the words of Mario Andretti, possibly the greatest racing driver of all time, “If everything seems under control, you are just not going fast enough.” [MW](#)

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## SO YOU WANT TO SUSTAIN A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

In his book *Speed Lead*, author Kevan Hall points to four important aspects in managing the ties of community.

- 1.** Trust is first and Hall considers it essential to cooperation. “Complex organizational structures often create tensions and divided loyalties that can work against the best interests of the company.” This explains the importance of trust.
- 2.** According to Hall, community is no longer a free byproduct of location. “He writes in his book, “You have to build it consciously.”
- 3.** Before devoting time to building a sense of community, says Hall, you have to be sure it is worth the effort. “Not all community is worth having—it is expensive and time consuming to build so you need to focus your investment.”
- 4.** Faced with many answers, there is good news, according to Hall. As he writes, “When it comes to designing a corporate culture to encourage speed and cooperation, there is a right answer.” Patience and careful thought are essential, however.

*Adapted from *Speed Lead: Faster, Simpler Ways to Manage People, Projects, and Teams in Complex Companies*. Published by Nicholas Brealey Publishing, Copyright 2007, Greystones Trust.*



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