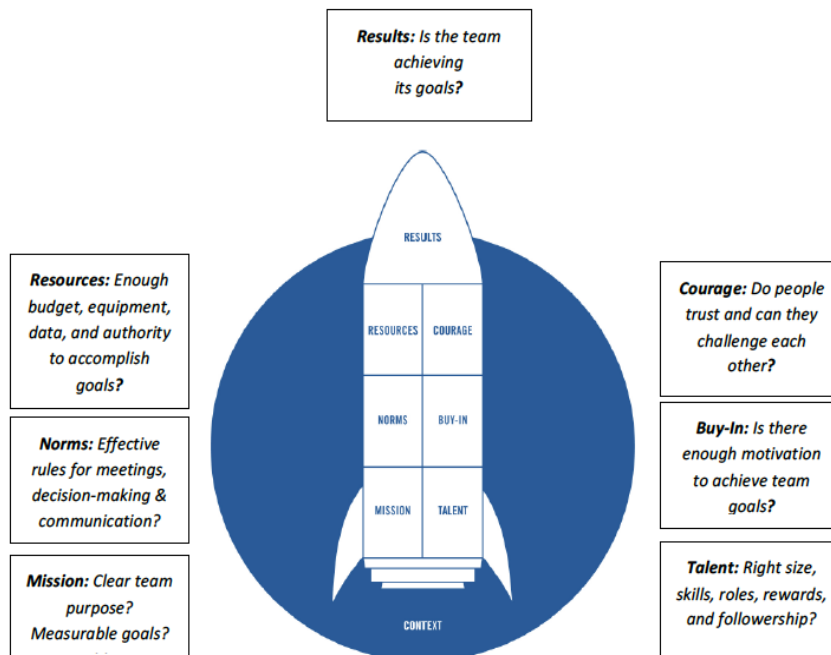


Overview and Supporting Research

The Rocket Model

A Roadmap for Building High Performing Teams



Introduction. Different frameworks can be used to describe team dynamics and performance, some of which include Tuckman's Forming-Storming-Norming-Performance model, Kazenbach and Smith's Team Basics Model, Hackman's Team Effectiveness Model, and Lencioni's Five Dysfunctions of a Team. These models have a number of similarities, and the Rocket Model capitalizes on many of the insights gained about teams from their use. The Rocket Model also has some key differences, in that it encompasses a broader array of factors, is applicable to groups as well as teams, and as described below, is well aligned with the current team research.

This document provides an overview of the eight components of the Rocket Model as well as some of the peer-reviewed research underlying the model. Data were also collected from over 2,500 global teams over the past 20 years, and as a result the Rocket Model has been refined several times. The current version of the model consists of eight interrelated components: Context, Mission, Talent, Norms, Buy-In, Resources, Courage, and Results. The Rocket Model is prescriptive in that when launching new teams, combining teams, or turning around broken teams, the model recommends starting with Context and then working through the other components in the order in which they are listed below. The model is also diagnostic, in that it can be used to evaluate team strengths and areas of improvement. Using the Rocket Model in this manner helps team leaders and facilitators choose team improvement activities that better align with underlying team issues.

This description of the eight Rocket Model components and associated references come directly from the *Team Assessment Survey 4.0 Technical Manual* (Curphy, Nilsen, Raulston, Breen, and Lee, 2021). The Team Assessment Survey 4.0 is used to provide teams with quantitative, qualitative, and benchmarking feedback on the eight Rocket Model components, and the Technical Manual includes the extensive psychometric analyses used to create the latest version of the survey. Readers wanting more information about the *Team Assessment Survey 4.0 Technical Manual* or Team Assessment Survey 4.0 should contact Gordy Curphy, Dianne Nilsen, or their local distributors.

Context: The situation in which the team operates usually has a profound effect on team dynamics and performance. Customer demands, competitive threats, supplier shortfalls, regulatory environments, disruptive technologies, macro-economic and political conditions, government programs, donors and funders, labor pools, headquarters, other internal teams, Boards of Directors, activist investors, and other entities can differentially affect what teams do and how they operate. Although the types and strength of situational factors vary by team, it is critically important that team leaders and members develop a shared mindset about the team's most important stakeholders and influencers, what these entities are likely to do that could affect team performance, and the team's top challenges.^{12,14,16}

Team context may seem like an obvious factor to consider when building teams, but most of other team building models do not explicitly take into account the influence customers, competitors, regulators, and market conditions have on team goals, composition, or dynamics. Moreover, team members often have not developed a shared mindset about the

situation facing a team. New teams, recently restructured teams, combined teams, virtual teams, teams experiencing considerable turnover, and teams with high levels of diversity may not agree on the situational factors affecting or the challenges facing a team. Leaders often erroneously believe there are high levels of alignment about the situation when in reality team members are telling different stories about who or what outside forces are influencing how the team operates.

There is an abundance of research showing that shared mental models improve team adaptability and performance.^{16, 39-42} Leaders can ensure team members share the same level of situational awareness by fostering periodic discussions about the external factors affecting the team.

Mission: This factor defines why teams exist, what they need to get done, and what success looks like. As such, it may well be the most important factor in the Rocket Model, as a team's purpose and goals will drive the number of people, types of skills, and budget needed; how often teams meet and make decisions; the roles team members need to fill; as well as the level of trust and motivation required. A team's Mission is often affected by the situation in which it operates (e.g., Context), as customers and economic conditions are likely to impact a team's goals. Because Mission affects all the other components in the Rocket Model, it is important that teams get this factor right before working on Talent, Norms, or Buy-In.

There are four major sub-components to Mission, and these include having a clearly defined team purpose (why does this team exist?), a set of measurable team goals (what does the team need to accomplish?), agreed upon action plans to accomplish team goals (how will the team succeed?), and periodically monitoring team performance (through regular progress review meetings). High performing teams spend time building, implementing, and communicating all four sub-components; lower performing teams often have shortcomings in one or more of these factors.

Like Context, there is a solid body of research supporting the importance of defining the why, what, how, and monitoring sub-components of Mission.^{16, 43, 44}

Talent: When people talk about Talent their conversations often center around the skills and experience of those on the team. These are critically important considerations, as teams with the best talent usually win and those that don't usually struggle. But Talent is more than just team member capabilities; the number of people on the team, their reporting structure, the roles they fill, the degree to which they have a collective orientation and behave as good team players, and whether rewards are structured to promote teamwork are also affected by team performance. Some teams are too large to be effective, matrix structures and role ambiguity can hinder effective teamwork, and some teams have capable individuals who do not play nice with fellow team members.

Because it involves people, Talent may well be the most difficult factor in the Rocket Model. A key leader responsibility is getting the right people on the team and continuing to develop their skills. Unfortunately, many leaders are not particularly good judges of talent and some teams are populated with those who enjoy good relationships with their bosses but lack the skills needed for team success. Those who do not set clear expectations or actively develop the talent on their teams often see degraded team performance over time. Leaders who are overly inclusive and create larger teams than necessary or cannot successfully navigate matrix structures are also likely to lead lower performing teams.

Two important aspects of Talent are collective orientation and professional familiarity. Collective orientation refers to team members who prefer working on teams rather than doing things themselves. Those with higher scores on the personality traits of Extraversion or Sociability and the work value of Affiliation have stronger collective orientations, whereas those with lower scores find working in teams to be taxing. Professional familiarity involves having a deep understanding of the skills and experience of fellow team members. Professional familiarity improves the odds that the right tasks get assigned to the right team members and those filling in when others are on vacation or temporarily assigned to other duties will be successful. Most team consultants make the mistake of confusing personal familiarity (e.g., identifying the personality types, traits, or colors of the team members) with professional familiarity. The latter is far more important than the former when it comes to building high performing teams.

It should be no surprise that there has been considerable research done on the six sub-components of Talent. This body of research provides overwhelming support for the Talent component of the Rocket Model. ^{16,45-50}

Norms: Like Mission and Talent, Norms are another common component found in many team models and includes the formal and informal processes teams use for getting work done. A formal process might be the Customer Resource Management platform sales teams use to identify leads, track sales activities, monitor proposal status, and build sales pipelines. Informal processes would include how the sales team hands off leads or proposals between team members; when and how long it meets, makes decisions, or information gets communicated; or if there are any consequences for misbehavior. These formal and informal rules and procedures have a profound effect on team dynamics and performance, so it should be no surprise that there is strong evidence demonstrating the importance of team norms in team effectiveness. ^{16, 44, 51-53}

Teams adopt a wide variety of norms, and could include the use of acronyms, seating arrangements at meetings, break times, desk or dress codes, response times, escalation procedures, Power Point templates for presentations, and what can be talked about or goes unsaid. Most team norms are implicit, in that they are not formally documented and take time for new members for learn. Many also inadvertently hinder rather than enhance team performance. Time wasting team meetings, a lack of follow through, non-responsiveness to requests by team members, and finger pointing are common symptoms of teams with bad

norms. Five norms seem to be particularly important for team performance, and these include the rules for team meetings, communication, decision-making, accountability, and self-adjustment. The latter concerns taking regular breaks to reflect on and improve how teams get work done. Just as sporting teams watch video tapes of games, work teams should periodically reflect on how things are working and make adjustments as needed.

Norms are often an underutilized lever to improve team performance, and leaders are well served by: (a) ensuring team norms help rather than hinder team performance; and (b) making implicit team norms more explicit. Leaders can avoid complaints about badly run meetings, communication gaps, or uncertainty about who owns what decisions by getting team members to create new team norms, as they will set explicit expectations for team member behavior and improve adherence to the new rules.

Buy-In: Team members are usually assigned tasks to complete to help the team succeed. Team members' competence (e.g., professional familiarity) usually comes into play when tasks are allocated, but skills and experience alone will not guarantee task accomplishment. Motivation is also a key ingredient in task performance, and Buy-In is concerned with the direction, intensity, and persistence of effort team members dedicate towards task completion. Buy-In also concerns a team's level of collective efficacy—to what extent does a team feel it can win or succeed? Teams with high levels of Buy-In have team members who are highly motivated to complete assigned tasks, are optimistic about the future, and do whatever is necessary to help their teams succeed. Those at the lower end of the Buy-In continuum feel less optimistic about the team's chances of success and spend their time and energy on non-task activities.

Several factors affect Buy-In, and these include a compelling team purpose, realistic team goals, clear task expectations, first team loyalty, and leader encouragement. Team members readily identify with teams when they believe what they do is important and will put forth the necessary level of effort when they know what they are expected to do and feel confident they can be successful. They will also dedicate more time and energy if this team, rather than some other team, is their primary responsibility. Leaders who provide encouragement and support also tend to have team members who are willing to go the extra mile.⁵⁴⁻⁵⁷

Resources: All teams need data, information, budgets, hardware, software, telecommunications gear, office space, specialized equipment, and the like to succeed. A team's specific resource needs should be driven by its goals, and if team goals change, so do its resource requirements. Research indicates that most teams squander resources. They do not make particularly good use of the resources they have and often ask for more when they already have all they need to be successful.^{18, 33} Savvy team leaders figure out how to achieve the team's goals with whatever resources are at hand. They also know that removing obstacles can be just as important as adding more resources when it comes to improving team performance.

A critical team resource is authority. Teams that are empowered to do what is needed in order to accomplish team goals are usually more successful than those that are micromanaged. Team empowerment also seems to be related to team learning, as those with enough authority better adapt to changing conditions than those tightly controlled. Like the other components of the Rocket Model, Resources is found in other team models and is well supported in team research.^{16, 58}

Courage: This component is concerned with team trust and psychological safety, and there has been a considerable amount of interest on these topics over the past few years. Team trust is made up of three components: (a) Ability-the extent to which team members feel everyone has the skills and experience needed to complete assigned tasks; (b) Benevolence-the extent to which team members do what is right for the team rather than pursue their own self-interests; and (c) Integrity-the extent to which team members believe everyone abides by the rules and follows through on commitments. It is important to note that team trust takes time to develop, as team members need some exposure to their peers before they gain professional familiarity, determine if their peers are out for themselves or the team, or can be counted on to deliver. Trust is something one confers onto fellow team members. When someone says they trust a member of their team, they are saying that this individual meets the Ability, Benevolence, and Integrity criteria.

Although trust takes time to develop, it does not take much for teams to lose trust. A few bad work hand-offs, missed deliveries, or selfish behaviors is all it takes for team trust to erode. Many consultants make the mistake of confusing personal familiarity with team trust. They insist that teams sharing personality traits, types, colors, or styles help teams become more trusting, when in reality these kimono-opening exercises say little about the Ability, Benevolence, and Integrity factors of team trust.

Psychological safety is concerned with creating environments where team members can speak truth to power, challenge each other, and manage conflict while maintaining effective team member relationships. Polite teams get polite results, and high performing teams usually have considerable conflict. On these teams the conflict centers around team goals, strategies, priorities, plans, or approaches for solving problems, it is less about the people on the team. Whereas team trust is something conferred to fellow team members, psychological safety is something fellow team members confer to their peers, as psychologically safe teams allow team members to challenge team leaders and each other when it comes to solving problems.

Team leaders need to pay attention to both team trust and psychological safety if they want to build high performing teams. Teams can have a high level of trust but low levels of psychological safety if leaders do not encourage appropriate challenges regarding task or goal accomplishment. Teams low in trust but high in psychological safety often end up having the equivalent of food fights, where conflict is high, but little gets resolved or accomplished. Given the importance of team trust and psychological safety, it should be no surprise that they have repeatedly been shown to be related to team performance.^{16, 44, 59-65}

Results: This is the dependent variable of the Rocket Model and is concerned with the degree to which teams meet customers' needs, achieve targeted goals, learn from experience, and enhance their capacity to do even more. There are several aspects of results worth noting. First, teams not having clearly defined goals (Mission) often confuse activity with productivity. Team members may be working hard, but it is difficult to determine whether these efforts are moving the needle or having any impact. This is a common problem with government, NGO, HR, Legal, and Public Affairs teams.

Second, it is important that teams routinely monitor their performance against team goals, but they should also monitor their performance against other teams. Some teams do an excellent job achieving their internally set goals only to find out the competition is eating their lunch when it comes to capturing market share or generating revenues. Sometimes this benchmarking can be in the form of friendly competition, such as comparing a fast-food restaurant's performance against the company's other restaurants in a city. At other times this might involve benchmarking against competitors' fast-food restaurants. Internal and external benchmarking keeps teams grounded in reality, so leaders should look for ways to compare team performance against others whenever possible.

Third, in order to achieve intended results, team leaders need to teach their teams how to win. Military leaders and athletic coaches obsess over winning, whereas team leaders may not pay much attention to whether their teams are succeeding or having an impact. Team leaders can teach their teams how to win by setting clearly defined and measurable team goals, developing well-thought out action plans to achieve these goals, regularly monitoring goal and plan progress, and working with team members to devise solutions when the team is achieving intended results. Like the other seven components in the Rocket Model, Results is well supported by the team research.^{16, 33, 44, 66}

Summary

The Rocket Model was developed to be a practical, researched-based framework for building high performing teams. From a practical perspective, the vast majority of issues negatively affecting team performance can be easily categorized into one or more of the eight Rocket Model components. It is difficult to imagine a scenario where one of the eight components would have no impact on team dynamics and performance. From a research perspective, there are meta-analyses involving hundreds to thousands of teams supporting each of the eight Rocket Model components. The model is not only well supported by peer reviewed research, psychometric analyses on data from 2,500 global teams provide further support for the Rocket Model. The model meets the practical and research standards needed by those wishing to scale effective teamwork across organizations.

The Rocket Model is one of four components in a comprehensive and fully-integrated team solution; others include the Team Assessment Survey 4.0, *Ignition: A Guide to Building High Performing Teams* (Curphy, Nilsen and Hogan, 2019), and facilitator Support Materials (Curphy

and Nilsen, 2019). The model provides a common language for building teams, the survey provides feedback against the model, and the book and facilitator materials provide the guidance and tools needed to improve team dynamics and performance.

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