

Six Building Blocks to High Performing Teams

by Dr. Stuart Atkins

In the 1960s, when trainers and consultants first became involved in team building, T-groups and simulations were enthusiastically endorsed as a way of teaching teamwork to teams.

T-groups soon fell by the wayside because they frequently became overly personal and participants felt threatened by negative feedback. Simulations on the other hand remained popular because they were fun and entertaining. They were great ice-breakers, and they always generated lively discussions. After working with simulated problems, it was assumed that the participants would naturally transfer their learning to their real problems and relationships.

But Chris Argyris, chair of the Administrative Sciences department at Yale University, held a different view. When I met with Argyris, he contended that using simulations only deferred the inevitable. For team members to learn how to work as a team, Argyris argued that they needed to use real-life problems and typical team agendas as the focal point for their learning. In his book *Interpersonal Competency* he maintained that this was the only reliable way for team members to develop the interpersonal skills required to work effectively with one another and with the team leader.

Creating a Low-Risk Climate

I was ambivalent about Argyris' position because I valued simulations as low-risk activities. They helped to overcome defensiveness in teams when trust was

low. It occurred to me that if I could create a high-trust climate, I could eliminate the need for simulations.

As a result, I developed an approach to team building called LIFO® Team Building which quickly creates the trust and openness necessary for teamwork without risking relationships. "LIFO" stands for "Life Orientations." LIFO® Team Building is founded on the recognition that different people approach life and work from different orientations or points of view, using different styles and strengths.

The high-trust climate created by LIFO® Team Building promoted the open flow of information about team tasks and team dynamics. Teams improved their interpersonal competency as they worked on producing results. Since those early years, LIFO® Team Building has evolved into a fail-safe procedure for quickly building high performing teams. It utilizes the six building blocks, or competencies, described in this article.

1. Confirming Strengths

Acknowledge team members' styles and strengths

The first building block in LIFO® Team Building is to acknowledge the strengths that each team member



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contributes to the team. To do this, the team members take the LIFO[®] Styles and Strengths Survey, which identifies their preferences for four basic ways of doing things, or styles.

Each style represents a different way of looking at problems and responding to people. Each style has its own special set of values, goals, and strengths. Survey results reveal that everyone uses all four styles to varying degrees.

In a typical LIFO[®] Team Building session, team members use the survey to identify the unique strengths that they contribute to the team. They discuss specific examples of how they have used these strengths. Then other team members express appreciation for their contributions.

Team members also disclose their least preferred styles—those that they use least frequently—and some of the strengths of these styles that they use at least occasionally.

These activities create a positive, non-defensive climate that sets the stage for more in-depth team building activities.

2. Treating Negatives Positively

Give feedback that promotes positive behavioral change

Once team members have identified and appreciated each other's strengths, the next building block is for them to deal with "negative" or unproductive behaviors in a way that promotes positive behavioral change.

There are two skills involved in this competency. The first is describing behavior positively in terms of the underlying strengths that the person is using. The second is framing requests for behavioral change quantitatively, not qualitatively. Instead of using value-laden concepts such as right vs. wrong, good vs. bad, or strong vs. weak, participants learn how to use the simple technique of asking others to use "more of" and "less of" specific strengths.

For example, one team member might say to another, "I think we'll be able to finish negotiating the details of the McPhaerson contract in our next meeting, Bill, if you are more receptive to what Alex and Jodi have to say and present your own ideas a little less forcefully."

In this approach, no references are made to "weaknesses" that must be overcome. Instead, requests are made for more of and less of positively worded strengths. And people are only asked to change what they do, not who they are.

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After considering the feedback, each member then decides which strengths to use more of and which to use less of. Practical, supportive guidelines are provided so each member can develop a plan for modifying his or her behavior. Because these activities are framed in terms of using more of or less of one's strengths rather than working on one's weaknesses, participants accept the feedback without defensiveness.

3. Utilizing Differences

Incorporate the unique strengths of each team member

Most people feel that their own way of doing things is the "right" way. Other ways are "wrong." In teams, this frequently leads to unresolved conflicts, suppression of alternative perspectives, reduced communication of important information, and limited creativity when planning and making decisions.

LIFO[®] Team Building overcomes these problems by helping teams understand why different members value different styles and strengths. They come to understand the benefits of each different approach

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—for both the individual and the team. For example, why does one member value being methodical and going one step at a time, while another prefers to seize opportunities and move on? Why does one member work for the good of the group while another is more interested in pleasing the team leader?

Developing an appreciation of stylistic differences can radically alter the dynamics of a team. Acknowledging the unique perspective and contributions of each member helps the team stop arguing over whose way is the best. Instead, the team can organize its tasks so that team members can work on those parts of the job that are complimentary to their styles and strengths.

Individual team members can also develop greater flexibility by deciding to use some of the perspectives and strengths they observe in other team members more frequently.

4. Visioning the Whole

Develop 360° vision for better plans and decisions

No team's plans and decisions are any better than the completeness and accuracy of the information they possess. It is often said that there are two sides to every issue, but it is more accurate to say that there are **four** sides. These "sides" represent the different perspectives or points of view of the four basic styles.

From one "side" or perspective, harmony is all-important. From this point of view, it is essential to maintain good relationships, get along, make sure other people are pleased, and avoid disruptions to the flow of things. From another perspective, excellence is paramount. From this point of view, it is vital to do the very best for the greatest number of people, meet the highest possible standards, and do the right thing. Another perspective focuses on action-moving forward, getting results, winning the game, and doing things with urgency. The fourth perspective values reason-gathering data, comparing alternatives, making rational decisions, working out the details, and taking things one sure step at a time.

Most teams do not naturally have a 360° perspective. Often the biases of the person responsible for selecting the team members influence the composition of the group. Sometimes the appropriate personnel for the team simply do not value all four styles equally.

If teams are unable to envision all sides of a situation, they tend to make lopsided decisions and unrealistic plans. Teams usually have to make a deliberate effort to cultivate all four perspectives in order not to overlook important information. The simplest way to do this is to appoint one or more team members to champion the underrepresented points of view, and then to honor their counterbalancing role on the team.

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5. Getting Agreement

Get through and get action without creating resistance

Although the Golden Rule is an important moral precept, it is not a reliable guideline for effective communication between team members or between teams and people outside the group. That's because **not everyone wants to be treated the same way**. I therefore incorporated into LIFO® Team Building what I call the New Golden Rule: "Do Unto Others As They Want To Be Done Unto."

Different people want to know different things, depending on the styles that they prefer. For example, people who prefer the action-oriented style want to know: "What are the opportunities? What's the bottom line? Who's in control? What's next?" In contrast, the key questions of the harmony-oriented style are: "Will it gain acceptance? What are people's opinions? Is it disruptive? Can it be changed?"

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To get through, get agreement, and get action without resistance, it is necessary to answer the key questions that are uppermost in other people's minds, **not our own**. Learning how to recognize other people's style preferences and knowing the key questions that must be answered to appeal to each style makes it possible to prepare highly persuasive requests or proposals to individual team members, the team as a whole, and key individuals or groups outside the team.

6. Controlling Excesses

Increase performance by reducing effort

It is easy for teams to undermine their performance by falling in love with one perspective over the others. Some teams overemphasize team harmony to such an extent that conflicting points of view are avoided and never resolved. Others are so eager to take action that they jump into projects with inadequate planning. Others become so involved in analyzing options that analysis paralysis kills performance. Still others set quality standards so far above the requirements of the job that they waste time and money pursuing perfection.

**Through LIFO® Team Building,
complicated techniques for dealing
with defensive team dynamics are no
longer required.**

Teams can fail to reach their performance potential when members push the team into excess by reinforcing each others' strengths. Unchecked, the team ends up wasting time and alienating people, both inside and outside the team. Ironically, the team is simply doing "too much of a good thing."

LIFO® Team Building teaches teams how to control the unproductive, excessive use of their strengths in two ways. First, individual team members develop

action plans for moderating the excesses of their own most preferred styles. Second, team members who prefer different strengths can work together so that their strengths counterbalance each other and keep their excesses in check.

Putting It All Together

When the six building blocks are in place—confirming strengths, treating negatives positively, utilizing differences, visioning the whole, getting agreement, and controlling excesses—teams naturally stay focused on high-performance action. As a result:

- Trust is high, because each member feels that his or her values, goals, and strengths are appreciated and respected.
- Commitment is high because the perspectives of all members have been considered.
- Confidence is high because decisions have been thought through from all points of view.
- Morale is high because each member feels that his or her own strengths and contributions have been incorporated into the team's action plans.
- Collaboration is high, because team members know how to get through and get agreement without creating resistance.
- Course correction is rapid, because team members know how to give and receive open and honest feedback that promotes positive behavioral change.

Through LIFO® Team Building, complicated and defensive team dynamics simply disappear. The equally complicated techniques for dealing with these defensive dynamics are no longer required. Teams can focus on taking care of business. High performance is the inevitable consequence. 🌈