To allow the Hawthorne Effect to work for you, you have to make nonstandard approaches the rule. Whatever standard there is should be brief and gentle. The total of all standards imposed upon your people should be described in no more than ten pages. (This is no pipe dream; many organizations that have given up on the Methodology-as-Law approach end up with ten-page standards manuals.) You ought to be prepared to grant exceptions to even this loose guide. This gives you a development environment consistent with the views of that famous business sage Mao Tse-tung:

Let a hundred flowers blossom
and let a hundred schools of thought contend.

Of course Mao didn’t really mean it, but we do.

PART IV

GROWING PRODUCTIVE TEAMS

Think back over a particularly enjoyable work experience from your career. What was it that made the experience such a pleasure? The simplistic answer is, “Challenge.” Good work experiences have always got a fair measure of challenge about them.

Now think of a specific enjoyable memory from that period. Play it over in your mind like a videotape. Maybe it was a meeting or a bull session or an all-nighter or the breakfast that followed one. If you’re like most of us, such memories are vivid and surprisingly complete. You can hear the sounds and individual voices, you can see expressions on faces, you’re aware of the setting. Freeze your mental videotape now and examine a single frame in detail. Where is the challenge? We’re willing to bet that it doesn’t figure into your memory at all, or if it does, it’s a remote part of the background.

What’s in the foreground of most of our prized work memories is team interaction. When a group of people fuse into a meaningful whole, the entire character of the work changes. The challenge of the work is important, but not in and of itself; it is important because it gives us something to focus on together. The challenge is the instrument for our coming together. In the best work groups, the ones in which people have the most fun and perform at their upper limits, team interactions are everything. They are the reason that people stick it out, put their all into the work, overcome enormous obstacles.

People work better and have more fun when the team comes together. Part IV looks into the concept of the successfully bonded team and things you can do to help such teams form.
Chapter 18

THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF THE PARTS

We tend to use the word *team* fairly loosely in the business world, calling any group of people assigned to work together a “team.” But many of these groups just don’t seem like teams. They don’t have a common definition of success or any identifiable team spirit. Something is missing. What is missing is a phenomenon we call *jell*.

Concept of the Jelled Team

A jelled team is a group of people so strongly knit that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The production of such a team is greater than that of the same people working in unjelled form. Just as important, the enjoyment that people derive from their work is greater than what you’d expect given the nature of the work itself. In some cases, jelled teams working on assignments that others would declare downright dull have a simply marvelous time.

Once a team begins to jell, the probability of success goes up dramatically. The team can become almost unstoppable, a juggernaut for success. Managing these juggernaut teams is a real pleasure. You spend most of your time just getting obstacles out of their way, clearing the path so that bystanders don’t get trampled underfoot: “Here they come, folks. Stand back and hold onto your hats.” They don’t need to be managed in the traditional sense, and they certainly don’t need to be motivated. They’ve got *momentum*.

The reasons for this effect are not so complex: Teams by their very nature are formed around goals. (Think of the sports team
Could it even exist without a goal?) Prior to a team's jelling, the individuals on the team might have had a diversity of goals. But as part of the jelling process, they have all bought on to the common goal. This corporate goal takes on an enhanced importance because of its significance to the group. Even though the goal itself may seem arbitrary to team members, they pursue it with enormous energy.

Management by Hysterical Optimism

Some managers are disturbed by the sentiments of the preceding paragraph. They find it distasteful to consider any artifice for getting workers to accept corporate goals. Why should we need to form elaborate social units to do that? After all, professional developers are supposed to accept their employer's goals as a condition of employment. That's what it means to be a professional.

Believing that workers will automatically accept organizational goals is the sign of naive managerial optimism. The mechanism by which individuals involve themselves in the organization's objectives is more complex than that. You wouldn't be surprised to learn, for example, that the fellow you know as a database specialist is more inclined to describe himself as a father, a boy scout leader, and a member of the local school board. In these roles, he makes thoughtful value judgments all the time. What would be a surprise is if he stopped making value judgments when he arrived at work. He doesn't. He is continually at work examining each claim for his individual energies and loyalty. Organizational goals come in for constant scrutiny by the people who work for the organization, and most of those goals are judged to be awfully arbitrary.

The dilemma here is that as boss, you have probably accepted the corporate goal (bring the project home by next April for less than $750,000), and accepted it wholeheartedly. If your staff isn't just as enthusiastic, you're disappointed. Their lack of interest might seem almost treasonous to you. But hold on here, is it possible that your own strong identification with a corporate goal stems from something beyond mere professionalism? Isn't it true that some artful engineering on the part of your boss and the powers above has made that corporate goal line up exactly with one of your own? Meeting the corporate aims is certain to lead directly to more authority and responsibility for you: "Today the Sysoomah Project, tomorrow the world!" Throughout the upper ranks of the organization, there is marvelous ingenuity at work to be sure that each manager has a strong personal incentive to accept the corporate goals. Only at the bottom, where the real work is performed, does this ingenuity fail. There we count on "professionalism" and nothing else to assure that people are all pulling in the same direction. Lots of luck.

If you work for the Save the Snaildarters Foundation or the First Fiboroni Church of Holy Purity or any other organization in which all employees are bound together by common belief, then you may be able to count on their natural affinity for the organization's goals. Otherwise forget it. While the executive committee may get itself all heated up over a big increase in profits, this same objective is pretty small potatoes to people at the bottom of the heap. PROFIT UP ONE BILLION DOLLARS AT MEGALITHIC INC. Ho-hum. COMPANY LOGS RECORD QUARTER. Zzzzzzz.

I once ran a telecommunications project for a large consumer finance company. This organization was in the business of lending money to poor people at outlandishly high rates of interest, a business that is illegal in twenty-three states. Increasing the company's already huge profit was not something the average worker could easily identify with but management seemed to think it was. A delegation came to talk to me late one Friday afternoon. The company's chances for the best second quarter in history were in our hands, they said. They asked me to share this fact with the rest of the team, "to focus their efforts." I had never worked on a more focused team in my life. But I dutifully passed the word on the next morning. (They were so fired up that the whole team was in, even though it was a Saturday). The energy went out of the team like wind out of a sail. The chief programmer summed it all up, "Who gives a rat's ass for their second quarter?"

Half an hour later, they'd all gone home.

—TDM

Getting the system built was an arbitrary goal, but the team had accepted it. It was what they had formed around. From the time of jelling, the team itself had been the real focus for their energies. They were in it for joint success, the pleasure of achieving the goal, any goal, together. Refocusing their attention on the company's...
Interest in the project didn’t help. It just made success seem trivial and meaningless.

The Guns of Navarone

Goals of corporations are always going to seem arbitrary to people—corporations seem arbitrary to people—but the arbitrariness of goals doesn’t mean no one is ever going to accept them. If it did, we wouldn’t have sports. The goals in sports are always utterly arbitrary. The Universe doesn’t care whether the little white ball goes between the posts at Argentina’s end of the field or those at Italy’s. But a lot of people get themselves very involved in the outcome. Their involvement is a function of the social units they belong to.

Those at the periphery of a team may be mildly interested in the team’s success or failure, but their interest is tiny compared to that of the team members. People who work on jelled teams often get so involved that they’re psyched up enough to storm the guns of Navarone, all just to pass the version 3 acceptance test for the pension trust system. You have to remind them that what they’re striving to accomplish is not the Moral Equivalent of War.

In spite of the useful energy and enthusiasm that characterize jelled teams, managers don’t take particular pains to foster them. Part of the reason is an imperfect understanding of why teams matter. The manager who is strongly motivated toward goal attainment is likely to observe that teams don’t attain goals; people on the teams attain goals. Virtually all of the component tasks required to meet the objective are performed by the individuals who make up the team. Most of this work is done by individuals working alone.

There is very little true teamwork required in most of our work. But teams are still important, for they serve as a device to get everyone pulling in the same direction.

The purpose of a team is not goal attainment but goal alignment.

When the team is fulfilling its purpose, team members are more effective because they’re more directed.

Signs of a Jelled Team

A few very characteristic signs indicate that a jelled team has occurred. The most important of these is low turnover during projects and in the middle of well-defined tasks. The team members aren’t going anywhere till the work is done. Things that matter enormously prior to jell (money, status, position for advancement) matter less or not at all after jell. People certainly aren’t about to leave their team for a rinky-dink consideration like a little more salary. Sadly, managers often miss this strong indication of their own success. They are disinclined to pay attention to turnover even when it’s killing them; when turnover is low, they don’t think about it at all.

Jelled teams are usually marked by a strong sense of identity. The teams you hear discussed in the industry have colorful names: the “Okie Coders” at General Electric, or the “Gang of Four” at DuPont, or the “Chaos Group” at Cincinnati Gas & Electric. Teammates may all use the same catch phrases and share many in-jokes. There may be obvious team space. The teams may congregate at lunch or hang out at the same watering hole after work.

There is a sense of eliteness on a good team. Team members feel they’re part of something unique. They feel they’re better than the run of the mill. They have a cocky, SWAT Team attitude that may be faintly annoying to people who aren’t part of the group.

There is invariably a feeling of joint ownership of the product built by the jelled team. Participants are pleased to have their names grouped together on a product or a part of one. The individual is eager for peer review. The team space is decorated with views of the product as it approaches completion.

The final sign of a jelled team is the obvious enjoyment that people take in their work. Jelled teams just feel healthy. The interactions are easy and confident and warm.

Teams and Cliques

If it made you at all uneasy to read about jelled teams sticking to themselves and feeling slightly superior to the rest of the world,
you're not the only one. We can almost hear you thinking, “Wait a minute, what these guys are calling a ‘team’ may be what we would call a ‘clique.’ Teams may be good, but aren't cliques something to be avoided at all cost?”

The difference between a team and a clique is like the difference between a breeze and a draft. Breeze and draft have identical meanings: They both mean “cool current of air.” If you find that cool current of air delightful, you call it a breeze; if you find it annoying, you call it a draft. The connotations are different, but the denotation is the same. Similarly, there is no difference in denotation between a team and a clique, but the connotations are opposite. People use team when the tight bonding of the jelled working group is pleasing to them. And they use clique when it represents a threat.

Fear of cliques is a sign of managerial insecurity. The greater the insecurity, the more frightening the idea of a clique can be. There are reasons for this: Managers are often not true members of their teams (more about this in Chapter 23), so the loyalties that exclude them are stronger than the ones that bind them into the group. The loyalties within the group are stronger than those tying the group to the company. Then there is the awful thought that a tightly knit team may leave en masse and take all of its energy and enthusiasm over to the competition. For all these reasons, the insecure manager is threatened by cliques. He or she would feel better working with a staff of uniform plastic people, identical, interchangeable, and unbonded.

The jelled work group may be cocky and self-sufficient, irritating and exclusive, but it does more to serve the manager’s real goals than any assemblage of interchangeable parts could ever do.

Chapter 19

THE BLACK TEAM

The value of jelled teams will be obvious to you if you have already had the enjoyable experience of working on one. But just in case you haven’t, this chapter is intended to give you some sense of what they’re like. Presented below is the story of a well-known team that began to make its mark in the early 1960s. Some of the lore of this team must surely be exaggerated, but it makes a good yarn, and at least most of it is true.

The Stuff of Which Legends Are Made

Back in the dawn of time (relatively speaking), there was a company in upper New York State that made large blue computers. The company also made software to run on these computers. Customers of this company were nice enough folks, but just between us, they could be awfully poor sports about software delivered with bugs. For a while, the company put its efforts into training the customers to make them more tolerant of bugs. But this approach didn’t work out, so they bit the bullet and decided to get rid of the bugs instead.

The easy and obvious approach was to have the programmers remove all bugs prior to delivery. For some reason this didn’t work too well either. It seems that the programmers (at least the ones back in those days) were rather too inclined to believe the best of their programs. Try as they might, they couldn’t find the last remaining bugs, so they often declared the software to be done when there were still lots of bugs.
Finding the last bug was hard, but some testers were better than others. The company formed a group of these particularly talented testers and gave them the charter to do final testing on critical software before it was sent to the customers. Thus was born the legendary Black Team.

The Black Team was initially made up of people who had proved themselves to be slightly better at testing than their peers. They were slightly more motivated. They also were testing code that had been written by someone else, so they were free of the cognitive dissonance that hampers developers when testing their own programs. All in all, those who formed the team might have expected it to achieve at least a modest improvement in product quality, but they didn’t expect more than that. What they got was much more than that.

The most surprising thing about the Black Team was not how good it was at the beginning, but how much it improved during the next year. Some magic was happening: The team was forming a personality of its own. This personality was being shaped by an adversary philosophy of testing that evolved among group members, a philosophy that they had to want and expect to find defects. They weren’t rooting for the developers at all, quite the opposite. They were delighting in submitting the program (and the programmer) to a sequence that was not just a test, but an ordeal. Bringing your program in for Black Team testing was like appearing before Ming the Merciless.


t

They’d get together and work out ever more awful testing ploys. Programmers began to mutter about the diseased minds on the Black Team.

Needless to say, the company was delighted. Every defect the team found was one that the customers wouldn’t find. The team was a success. It succeeded as a test group, but more important for our purposes here, it succeeded as a social unit. People on the team got such a kick out of what they were doing that colleagues outside the team were positively jealous. The black outfits and the silly exaggerated behavior were part of the fun, but there was something much more fundamental going on. The chemistry within the group had become an end in itself.

Footnote

Over time, members of the team moved on one at a time to other things. Since the team function was important to the company, departing members were replaced immediately. This continued until finally there wasn’t a single member left of the original group. But there was still a Black Team. The team survived the loss of all its original staff, and it emerged with its energy and its personality intact.
Chapter 20
TEAMICIDE

What's called for here is a concise chapter entitled "Making Teams Jell at Your Company." It should have half a dozen simple prescriptions for good team formation. These prescriptions should be enough to guarantee jelled teams. In the planning stage of this work, that is exactly the chapter we expected to write. We were confident. How difficult could it be to cut to the heart of the matter and give the reader practical tools to aid the process of making teams jell? We would apply all our skills, all our experience; we would overwhelm the problem with logic and pure brilliance. That's how it looked in the planning stage.

Between plan and execution, there were a few distressing encounters with reality. The first of these was that we just couldn't come up with the six prescriptions needed for the chapter. We got stuck at zero. We'd been prepared to scale our expectations down a bit, but not this much. ("Six Things You Can Do to Make Team Formation Possible." It was still hard. At last, in desperation, we tried a trick called inversion, described in Edward deBono's Lateral Thinking. When you're stuck trying to solve a problem, deBono suggests that rather than looking for ways to achieve your goal, look for ways to achieve the exact opposite of your goal. This can have the effect of clearing away the brain's cobwebs that keep you from being creative. So instead of looking for ways to make team formation possible, we began to think of ways to make it impossible. That was easy. In no time at all, we came up with lots of sure-fire ways to inhibit the formation of teams and disrupt project sociology. These measures, taken together, constitute a strategy we dubbed teamicide. Our short list of teamicide techniques is presented below:

- defensive management
- bureaucracy
- physical separation
- fragmentation of people's time
- quality reduction of the product
- phony deadlines
- clique control

Some of these techniques will look awfully familiar. They are things that companies do all the time.

Defensive Management

It makes good sense for you the manager to take a defensive posture in most areas of risk. If you must work with a piece of failure-prone gear, you get a backup; if the client is inclined to vacillate, you take pains to nail down the product specifications; if a contract vendor tends to "forget" promises, you publish minutes after each meeting.

There's one area, though, where defensiveness will always backfire: You can't protect yourself against your own people's incompetence. If your staff isn't up to the job at hand, you will fail. Of course, if the people are badly suited to the job, you should get new people. But once you've decided to go with a given group,
basic premise that their people may operate completely autonomously, as long as they operate correctly. This amounts to no autonomy at all. The only freedom that has any meaning is the freedom to proceed differently from the way your manager would have proceeded. This is true in a broader sense, too: The right to be right (in your manager’s eyes or in your government’s eyes) is irrelevant; it’s only the right to be wrong that makes you free.

The most obvious defensive management ploys are prescriptive Methodologies (“My people are too dumb to build systems without them”) and technical interference by the manager. Both are doomed to fail in the long run. In addition, they make for efficient teamicide. People who feel untrusted have little inclination to bond together into a cooperative team.

**Bureaucracy**

Studies conducted by Capers Jones in the 1970s and 1980s reported on systems development costs by work category. One of the categories was “Paperwork.” What Jones calls *paperwork* is more or less mindless paper pushing, since the thinking time necessary to decide what to put on the paper is categorized as some other activity, such as analysis, design, or test planning. In other words, his “paperwork” category is pure bureaucracy. Jones concluded that paperwork is the second largest category of systems development work. It accounts for more than thirty percent of the cost of producing a given product.

There is a depressing modern trend to make development workers more and more into bureaucrats. Perhaps this is a sign of epidemic defensive management. But while the trend is global, it is not at all uniform. We know of companies in which the development groups look and feel like a bureaucratic nightmare by Kafka, and other companies in which the paperwork burden is minuscule.

Mindless paper pushing is a waste. It ought to be attacked because it keeps people from working. But our point here is a slightly different one. It is that bureaucracy hurts team formation. The team needs to believe in whatever goal it forms around. That goal can be arbitrary, but at least it has to exist. There has to be some evidence that management believes in it. Just telling your people that the goal matters won’t be enough if you also have to tell them they should spend a third of their time pushing paper. Paper pushers just can’t get themselves into SWAT Team mode. They can’t see themselves hellbent for success.
Physical Separation

When the Furniture Police makes its case for the Zippo-Flippo Modular Office System, all the talk is of “flexibility.” But when it comes time to flex a bit to put a work group together, the long faces come out. “We can’t disrupt everything and move stuff around over our lovely carpet just to get these four people into adjacent space. Can’t they use telephones?” The result is that what could be a tightly bound team is scattered over multiple floors or even in different buildings. The specific work interactions may not suffer terribly, but there is no casual interaction. Group members may grow stronger bonds to nongroup neighbors, just because they see more of them. There is no group space, no immediate and constant reinforcement, no chance of a group culture forming. (You couldn’t imagine Black Team members all dressing in black if their workspaces were not together; they’d be constantly interacting with people who weren’t in on the joke, who just thought they were bizarre, and the whole funny bit would die with a whimper.)

Physical separation of people who are expected to interact closely doesn’t make much sense anyway. Neighboring workers are a source of noise and disruption. When they’re all on the same team, they tend to go into quiet mode at the same time, so there is less interruption of flow. Putting them together also gives them opportunity for the casual interaction that is so necessary for team formation.

Fragmentation of Time

One of my clients is an agency of the Australian government. During one consulting call, I collected data indicating that the average worker there was involved in four or more different projects. I complained about this to the Commissioner. He said it was regrettable, but just a fact of life. People’s duties were fragmented because their skills and knowledge made them indispensable to efforts other than the principal ones they were assigned to. He said it was inevitable. I said it was nonsense. I proposed that he make it a specific policy that people be assigned to one and only one project at a time and that the policy be written down and widely distributed. He was game. A year later, when I returned, the average worker was assigned to fewer than two projects.

—TDM

Fragmentation is bad for team formation, but it’s also bad for efficiency. (Perhaps you’ve began to pick up a trend here.) People can keep track of only so many human interactions. When they try to be part of four working groups, they have four times as many interactions to track. They spend all their time changing gears.

No one can be part of multiple jelled teams. The tight interactions of the jelled team are exclusive. Enough fragmentation and teams just won’t jell. The saddest thing is we allow far more fragmentation than is really necessary. We tend to concede this battle without even a fight. Simply saying that a goal is to assign people only one piece of work at a time can result in significant reductions of fragmentation, and thus give teams a real chance to form.

The Quality-Reduced Product

The heading used here is a facetious one; nobody really talks about quality-reduced products. What they talk about is cost-reduced products. But it usually boils down to the same thing. The typical steps we take to deliver a product in less time result in lower quality. Often the product’s end user gives willing consent to this trade-off (less quality for earlier, cheaper delivery). But such concessions can be very painful for the developers. Their self-esteem and enjoyment are undermined by the necessity of building a product of clearly lower quality than what they are capable of.

An early casualty of quality reduction is whatever sense of team identification the group has been able to build. Co-workers who are developing a shoddy product don’t even want to look each other in the eye. There is no joint sense of accomplishment in store for them. They know that there will be a general sense of relief when they can stop doing what they’re doing. At the end of the project, they’ll make every effort to separate themselves from other members of the group, and get on to better things.

Phony Deadlines

In Chapter 3, we made the point that tight deadlines can sometimes be demotivating. But there are certainly cases where a tight but not
impossible deadline can constitute an enjoyable challenge to the team. What's never going to help, however, is a phony deadline. When the manager intones, "We absolutely must be done by _____," group members can barely keep their eyes from rolling. They've been there before. They know the whole routine.

Maybe phony deadlines used to work. Maybe there were once workers so naive that they actually believed what they heard. When the boss said the job "reely reely has to be done by January," maybe they just accepted it and buckled down. Maybe. But it certainly doesn't work that way anymore. The people on your staff will know if they're being bamboozled. If you say the product absolutely has to be out the door by some arbitrary date, they will ask, "Why? Will the universe grind to a halt if we're late? Will the company fold? Will the nation slide into the sea? Will Western Civilization break down?"

In the typical phony deadline spiel, the manager announces that the work must be done on such and such a date. The date mentioned is impossible to meet, and everyone knows it. The effort will certainly slip (so much for the idea that the deadline is absolute). The work has been defined in such a way that success is impossible. The message to the workers is clear: The boss is a Parkinsonian robot with no respect or concern for them. The boss believes they won't do a stroke of work except under duress. Don't expect a jelled team on that project.

Clique Control

A participant at one of our seminars made this observation: "The only time our management shows any awareness of teams is when it takes specific steps to break them up." There may be an explicit policy that teams can't be allowed to stay together from one job to another. Or, there may be a policy that projects winding down have to be de-staffed smoothly over time so that the personnel organization can steer people efficiently into new projects. This assures that teams will be broken up. Still other organizations take no specific steps to disband teams, but miss every opportunity to keep them together.

The pleasures of team activity and the energy that is produced by team interaction are articles of faith in our society. How did business organizations ever come to be so apathetic or even anti-pathetic toward teams? Part of the reason is insecurity, as indicated in Chapter 19. Another part is a conspicuously low consciousness of teams in upper management. The team phenomenon, as we've described it, is something that happens only at the bottom of the hierarchy. For all the talk about "management teams," there really is no such thing—certainly never jelled teams at the managerial level. When managers are bonded into teams, it's only because they serve dual roles: manager on the one hand and group member on the other. They become accepted as part-time peers by the people they manage. As you go higher and higher in the organization chart, the concept of jelled teams recedes further and further into oblivion.

**Once More Over the Same Depressing Ground**

Most organizations don't set out consciously to kill teams. They just act that way.
Chapter 21

A SPAGHETTI DINNER

Picture yourself a technical worker who's just been assigned to a new project. You know the manager and most of the other project personnel by name, but that's about it. Your first day on the new project is next Monday. On Wednesday before that Monday, you get a call from your boss-to-be. She's having a get-together, she says, for people on the new project. Is there any chance you could come by her place on Thursday evening for dinner with the rest of the team? You're free and want to meet the new group, so you accept.

When you arrive, the whole group is sitting around the living room drinking beer and telling war stories. You join in and tell a few of your own. The client liaison, who has also been invited, does a bit about his department head. Everybody has another beer. You begin to wonder about food. There is no smell of anything cooking and no signs of anyone working in the kitchen. Finally your boss-to-be admits that she hasn't had time to make dinner, and suggests that the whole crew walk over to a nearby supermarket and assemble the makings of a meal. "I guess we must be capable of putting a spaghetti dinner together."

Team Effects Beginning to Happen

Off you go. In the supermarket, you amble as a group through the aisles. Nobody takes charge. Your boss seems to have anything on her mind but dinner. She chats and laughs and offers up a story about the IRS. In spite of a general lack of direction, some things do get thrown into the cart. One fellow has already gotten the salad pretty well taken care of. There is some talk of making a clam sauce, and when nobody's opposed, two of your new mates begin to talk out the details. You decide to make your patented garlic bread. Someone else picks out a bottle of Chianti. Finally there is a consensus that enough stuff is in the cart for dinner.

Back at the ranch, you all set down your bags of groceries and the boss grabs another beer and tells about a new software tool. Little by little the party gravitates toward the kitchen where some preparations are beginning. Your boss gives no direction, but she pitches in to chop onions when someone suggests that's what's needed. You start the garlic and olive oil simmering in a pan. There is a sauce bubbling and some spaghetti boiling. Gradually a dinner comes together. You all eat till you're full and then share in the cleanup chores.

What's Been Going on Here?

So far, nobody has billed a single day of effort to the project, but you've just had your first success as a group. Success breeds success, and productive harmony breeds more productive harmony. Your chances of jelling into a meaningful team are enhanced by your very first experience together.

Presented this way, the spaghetti dinner may seem like a contrivance on the manager's part. But it probably wasn't and wouldn't have seemed like it had you been there. If you had asked the manager in question what she had in mind for the evening, she would have probably replied in total sincerity, "Dinner." A natural manager has got a subconscious feel for what's good for the team. This feel may govern decisions throughout the project. The entire experience is organized for small, easy joint successes. You have to look twice to see the manager's hand in any of this, it just seems to be happening.

Variations on the story of the spaghetti dinner have been told to us in different forms and about different managers for years. The common thread is that good managers provide frequent easy opportunities for the team to succeed together. The opportunities may be tiny pilot sub-projects, or demonstrations, or simulations, anything that gets the team quickly into the habit of succeeding together. The best success is the one in which there is no evident management, in which the team works as a genial aggregation of peers. The best boss is the one who can manage this over and over again without the
team members knowing they’ve been “managed.” These bosses are viewed by their peers as just lucky. Everything seems to break right for them. They get a fired-up team of people, the project comes together quickly, and everyone stays enthusiastic through the end. These managers never break into a sweat. It looks so easy that no one can believe they are managing at all.

Chapter 22
OPEN KIMONO

Growing jelled teams is a fairly chancy matter. Nobody does it consistently. Nobody can make it happen, particularly when it would be most useful. Sometimes the mix is wrong. And sometimes the group is staffed with folks who aren’t disposed to become part of a team; they’re loners and always will be.

In his book People and Project Management, Rob Thomsett analyzes certain of the pathologies that interfere with team formation. It makes fascinating reading. However, few of these pathologies are treatable. About the only remedy is to remove certain members from the project because they hurt the chances of a team to jell. That may sound okay in the abstract, but in any specific case you’re likely to find such a remedy plain silly. The very person you’d be inclined to do without for this reason will probably be a star in many other respects. Lots of efforts have to proceed (and succeed) without jelled teams.

Having said all that, we know this indisputable fact: Some managers are pretty good at helping teams to jell. They succeed more often than not. In this chapter, we examine one characteristic of these team-oriented managers.

Calling in Well

Chances are you’ve heard of people calling in sick. You may have called in sick a few times yourself. But have you ever thought of calling in well?
It’d go like this: You’d get the boss on the line and say, “Listen, I’ve been sick ever since I started working here, but today I’m well and I won’t be in anymore.”

—Even Cowgirls Get the Blues

When people talk about an organization that you have to be “sick” to work for, they’re not referring to physiological sickness. They mean that working in such a place would require them to disregard certain mental survival rules, rules that protect the well-being of the psychological self. The most important of these rules has to do with self-regard. A job situation that hurts your self-regard is itself “sick.”

The person who calls in well is ready for work that enhances self-regard. Assignment to such work is an acknowledgment of certain areas of competence, and it provides autonomy and responsibility in these areas. Managers of well workers are careful to respect that autonomy, once granted. They know that a worker’s failure will reflect badly on the boss, but that’s just the breaks of the game. They’re prepared to suffer the occasional setback, a direct result of failure by one of their people. When it happens, they suspect it will be a failure that they themselves would never have caused, had they been doing the work rather than managing it. But so what? You give your best shot to putting the right person in the position, but once he or she is there, you don’t second-guess.

This Open Kimono attitude is the exact opposite of defensive management. You take no steps to defend yourself from the people you’ve put into positions of trust. And all the people under you are in positions of trust. A person you can’t trust with any autonomy is of no use to you.

One of my first bosses was Jerry Wiener, who had run a development team for General Electric on the Dartmouth time-sharing project. He later formed a small high-technology company. At the time I came along, the company was about to enter into a contract that was larger than anything it had ever done before. The entire staff was assembled as our corporate lawyer handed Jerry the contract and told him to read it and sign on the last page. “I don’t read contracts,” Jerry said, and started to sign. “Oh, wait a minute,” said the lawyer, “let me go over it one more time.”

—TDM

The lesson here is not that you should sign contracts without reading them (though that may not be a terrible rule in cases where you pay counsel to look out for your interests). If you’ve got the wrong counsel, you’re in deep bananas anyway. Managers who are most proficient at getting the work done are likely to be way out of their depth in evaluating contracts for the work. Reading contracts may be little more than a conceit. Jerry had taken great pains to hire the best counsel he could find. He’d certainly looked over other instances of the man’s work. This was not the time to be defensive; it was the time to make it clear to everyone that the boss was assuming and depending on competence around him.

It’s heady and a little frightening to know that the boss has put part of his or her reputation into the subordinates’ hands. It brings out the best in everyone. The team has something meaningful to form around. They’re not just getting a job done. They’re making sure that the trust that’s been placed in them is rewarded. It is this kind of Open Kimono management that gives teams their best chance to form.

The Getaway Ploy

The most common means by which bosses defend themselves from their own people is direct physical oversight. They wander through the work areas, looking for people goofing off or for incompetence about to happen. They are the Parkinsonian Patrol, alert for people to kick. Of course, nobody (neither manager nor worker) thinks about it that way, since it’s so much a part of the corporate culture. But the thought of doing without it is inconceivable to many managers.

A recent consulting assignment involved taking part in a project to build a customer information system for a California company. The spec was written and we were ready to start blueprinting internal design. The boss called us all together and handed each person a map showing the way to an office in faraway Long Beach. He
explained that there was a free conference room there where we could work uninterrupted. He would stay behind and fend off all but the most essential phone calls. We were told to "come back when you're done." More than two weeks later, we came back with a hot-shot design. He never called or dropped in once during the whole period.

—TRL

If you've got decent people under you, there is probably nothing you can do to improve their chances of success more dramatically than to get yourself out of their hair occasionally. Any easily separable task is a perfect opportunity. There is no real management required for such work. Send them away. Find a remote office, hire a conference room, borrow somebody's summer house, or put them up at a hotel. Take advantage of off-season rates at ski areas or at beaches. Have them go to a conference, and then stay over for a few days to work together in peace. (We've heard of at least one instance of each of these ploys.)

Such a plan will cost you some points with your own management and peers, because it's so audacious. How can you know, they'll ask you, that your people aren't loafing this very minute? How can you be sure they won't knock off for lunch at eleven and drink away their afternoons? The simple answer is you'll know by the product they come back with. By their fruits, ye shall know them. If they bring back a carefully thought-out and complete result, they worked. If they don't, they didn't. Visual supervision is a joke for development workers. Visual supervision is for prisoners.

Getting away from the office helps in many ways. First of all, it removes your highest-priced resource from the distractions and interruptions that fritter away so much of their time. You may succeed someday in building a productive office environment, a workplace where it's at least possible to get something useful done between 9 and 5. But you can only do this in the long run. In the short run, use any excuse to get your people out. In addition to making them more efficient, the getaway and the periods of total autonomy give them an improved chance to jell into a high-momentum team.

There Are Rules and We Do Break Them

The engineering profession is famous for a kind of development mode that doesn't exist elsewhere: the skunkworks project. Skunkworks implies that the project is hidden away someplace where it can be done without upper management's knowing what's going on. This happens when people at the lowest levels believe so strongly in the rightness of a product that they refuse to accept management's decision to kill it. Digital Equipment Corporation's PDP-11, one of DEC's most successful products, came to the market in this manner. There is a lore about such projects. The amusing thing is that skunkworks is really just another word for insubordination. Management says no, and the project goes on anyway.

One of our clients tried to cancel a product that was judged to have no market. Cooler heads prevailed and the product was built. It became a huge success. The manager who had unsuccessfully tried to kill the project (he now had become president of the whole company) ordered a medal for the team, with the citation "First Annual Prize for Insubordination." He presented it with a speech, stating that others seeking the award had better be just as successful. Being an insubordinate failure wouldn't get anybody a prize.

People at all levels know whether some sensible insubordination is acceptable or not. People look out for their Open Kimono managers. They're determined to make them look good, even though the managers may notch an occasional decision. Defensive managers are on their own.

Chickens with Lips

In the middle 1970s, Larry Constantine was counseling certain client companies to help them build a healthy corporate sociology. One of the things he advised was for the companies to allow people at the lowest level some voice in team selection. As implemented, the idea was that the company would post new projects on a central kiosk. People would form themselves into candidate teams and then "bid" on jobs. If you had a hankering to work with some of your mates, you would put your resumes together and make a joint pitch for the job. The points in your favor were how well-suited you were to the job, how well you complemented each other's capacities, and how little it would disrupt other work in the company to assign you as a
group to this project. The company picked the best-suited team for each job.

This scheme gave people two unusual degrees of freedom: They got to choose the projects they worked on and the people they worked with. The surprising finding was that the first of these factors didn’t matter very much. Management initially feared that only the glamorous projects would be bid for, but it didn’t happen that way. Even the most mundane projects were bid for. What seemed to matter was the chance for people to work with those they wanted to work with.

The idea of an employment audition, presented in Chapter 15, has a similar effect. The project members who listen to the audition are not just an audience; they have a say in whether the person gets the offer. In addition to technical judgment, they’re supplying a team perspective on how well the candidate will fit in: “I think we could work with this guy,” or “He seems well-qualified, but he’d stick out like a sore thumb in this group.”

Some years ago, we were part of a pretty well-knit working group, a group whose members shared a common, in particular, a similar sense of humor. We even developed a shared theory about humor. This theory held that some things are intrinsically funny. Chickens, for instance, are funny, but horses aren’t. Lips are hilarious, elbows and knees are funny, but shoulders are just shoulders. One day we had an audition for a new group member. After he’d spoken and left, one of our colleagues critiqued, “I guess you can’t fault his knowledge. But do you think he’d ever come to understand that chickens with lips are funny?” The candidate didn’t get the job.

**Who’s in Charge Here?**

The best bosses take some chances. They take chances on their people. None of this says that good managers don’t manage, that they don’t give direction and make judgments of their own. They have to do this all the time. The suggestion here is that they do this only by exercising their natural authority. Between master craftsman and apprentice there is a bond of natural authority—the master knows how to do the work and the apprentice does not. Submitting to this kind of authority demeans no one, it doesn’t remove incentive, it doesn’t make it impossible to knit with fellow workers. An insecure need for obedience is the opposite of natural authority. It says, “Recognize me as a different caste of creature, a manager. I

belong to the thinking class. Those beneath me are employed to carry out my decisions.”

In the best organizations, there is natural authority working in all directions. The manager is known to be better at some things, perhaps setting general directions, negotiating, and hiring, and is trusted to do those things. Each of the workers is known to have some special area of expertise, and is trusted by all as a natural authority in that area. In this atmosphere of Open Kimono, the team has its optimal chance to jell.
Chapter 23

CHEMISTRY FOR TEAM FORMATION

Some organizations are famous for their consistent good luck in getting well-knit teams to happen. It isn’t luck, of course; it’s chemistry. There is something about those organizations, some optimal mix of competence and trust and mutual esteem and well-person sociology that provides perfect soil for the growth of jelled teams. And it’s not only team formation that benefits from these factors. Everything works better. These organizations are just plain healthy.

Rather than illustrate this with an example from our experience, we encourage you to think of one from your own. Have you ever been in an organization that simply glowed with health? People were at ease, having a good time and enjoying interactions with their peers. There was no defensiveness, no sense that single individuals were trying to succeed in spite of the efforts of those around them. The work was a joint product. Everybody was proud of its quality. (At least a glimmer of this healthy glow should be apparent in your present situation. If not, perhaps it’s time to call in well, and get your résumé out.)

What are managers up to in these healthiest companies? A quick surface appraisal might convince you they aren’t up to much at all. They don’t seem busy. They’re not giving a lot of directions. Whatever their relationship is to the work going on around them, they’re certainly not doing any of it.

In organizations with the best chemistry, managers devote their energy to building and maintaining healthy chemistry. Depart-
ments and divisions that glow with health do so because their managers make it happen. There is a holistic integrity to their method, and so it’s hard to break down and analyze the component parts (how the parts fit together into a whole is more important than what the parts are). But it’s still worth a try.

Presented below is an admittedly simplistic list of the elements of a chemistry-building strategy for a healthy organization:

- Make a cult of quality.
- Provide lots of satisfying closure.
- Build a sense of cliteness.
- Allow and encourage heterogeneity.
- Preserve and protect successful teams.
- Provide strategic but not tactical direction.

There are more. We’ve cited only those elements that have a particular effect on team formation. The following subsections provide our comments on each of these points.

The Cult of Quality

The judgment that a still imperfect product is “close enough” is the death knell for a jelling team. There can be no impetus to bind together with your cohorts for the joint satisfaction gained from delivering mediocre work. The opposite attitude, of “only perfect is close enough for us,” gives the team a real chance. This cult of quality is the strongest catalyst for team formation.

It binds the team together because it sets them apart from the rest of the world. The rest of the world, remember, doesn’t give a hoot for quality. Oh, it talks a good game, but if quality costs a nickel extra, you quickly see the true colors of those who would have to shell out the nickel.

Our friend Lou Mazzucchelli, chairman of Cadre Technologies, Inc., was in the market for a paper shredder. He had a salesman come in to demonstrate a unit. It was a disaster. It was enormous and noisy (it made a racket even when it wasn’t shredding). Our friend asked about a German-made shredder he’d heard about. The salesman was contemptuous. It cost nearly half again as much and didn’t have a single extra feature, he responded. “All you get for that extra money,” he said, “is better quality.”
Your marketplace, your product consumers, your clients, and your upper management are never going to make the case for high quality. Extraordinary quality doesn’t make good short-term economic sense. When team members develop a cult of quality, they always turn out something that’s better than what their market is asking for. They can do this, but only when protected from short-term economics. In the long run, this always pays off. People get high on quality and out-do themselves to protect it.

The cult of quality is what Ken Orr calls “the dirt in the oyster.” It is a focal point for the team to hang around.

I Told Her I Loved Her When I Married Her

It may be news to some, but the human creature needs reassurance from time to time that he or she is headed in the right direction. Teams of human creatures need it, too. Such reassurance comes from what psychologists call closure. Closure is the satisfying “thunk” of pieces of the whole falling into place.

Organizations also have some need for closure. Closure for the organization is the successful finish of the work as assigned, plus perhaps an occasional confirmation along the way that everything is on target (maybe a milestone achieved or a significant partial delivery completed). How much confirmation corporations require is a function of how much money is at risk. Frequent, closure only at the end of a four-year effort is adequate for the needs of the organization.

The problem here is that organizations have far less need for closure than do the people who work for them. The prospect of four years of work without any satisfying “thunk” leaves everyone in the group thinking, “I could be dead before this thing is ever done.” Particularly when the team is coming together, frequent closure is important. Team members need to get into the habit of succeeding together and liking it. This is part of the mechanism by which the team builds momentum.

The chemistry-building manager takes pains to divide the work into pieces and makes sure that each piece has some substantive demonstration of its own completion. Such a manager may contrive to deliver a product in twenty versions, even though two are sufficient for upper management and the user. It may even be necessary to conceal some of these interim versions from the client, and build them only for internal confirmation and satisfaction. Each new version is an opportunity for closure. Team members get warmed up as the moment approaches, they sprint near the very end. They get a high from success. It suffuses them with renewed energy for the next step. It makes them feel closer together.

The Elite Team

In the early 1970s, a vice president of one of our client companies sent around a memo on the subject of travel expenses to everyone in his division. You may have received similar memos on the topic yourself, but this one was different. It said more or less this: “It has come to my attention that some of you, when traveling on expenses, have been traveling economy class. This is not an economy-class organization. This is a first-class organization. When you fly on business from now on, you will fly first class.” Of course that memo cost money. The expense was very real and the only thing you could balance against it was an enhanced sense of eliteness. At least one organization thought that was a valid trade-off. Couldn’t happen in a real-world corporation, you say? It happened at Xerox.

Those who think popcorn is “unprofessional” think team eliteness is downright subversive. There is a widespread feeling that managers are just not doing their jobs if the team sticks out in any way. The group’s adherence to a corporate standard of uniformity is almost a symbol of the manager’s degree of control. Yet from the viewpoint of the people being managed, this symbol is deadly. The more comforting it is to the manager, the more it saps the lifeblood of the team.

People require a sense of uniqueness to be at peace with themselves, and they need to be at peace with themselves to let the jelling process begin. When management acts to stifle uniqueness, uniqueness happens anyway. People simply express their uniqueness in uncontrolled dimensions. For example, employees who take a perverse pride in being difficult to manage or hard to motivate or unable to work with others may be reacting to too much control. They would almost certainly rather express themselves in some less difficult way, something that would not work to the detriment of the group’s effectiveness.

What could be wrong with a team that is uniquely quality-conscious or uniquely productive or uniquely competent to meet a tough deadline? Nothing, you might think, yet even these nominally
acceptable forms of uniqueness are upsetting to lots of managers. They grumble that the teams are unmanageable and uppity. What's really threatened by the team's eliteness is not manageability, but the trappings of managerial strength. The team might be hellbent on success, but the manager is worried about being considered a wimp.

If you could effect some change in the people you manage and make them much more productive and goal-directed but also less controllable, would you do it? The answer to this question distinguishes the great managers from the merely mediocre. The mediocre manager is too insecure to give up the trappings. The great manager knows that people can't be controlled in any meaningful sense anyway; the essence of successful management is to get everyone pulling in the same direction and then somehow get them fired up to the point that nothing, not even their manager, could stop their progress.

A jelled team does have the effect of making people more productive and goal-directed. And you do give up some control, or at least the illusion of control, when it jells. The team begins to feel elite in some way or other, with all members of the team sharing in the sense of eliteness. The unique thing about the team doesn't have to be anything very fundamental. For example, there was one championship football defensive unit whose only unique characteristic was that all members of the team were "no-names." It was enough. They took pride in that fact and knit around it. Whatever the elite characteristic is, it forms the basis of the team's identity, and identity is an essential ingredient of a jelled team.

An important qualifier here is that teams need to be unique in some sense, but not in all senses. There are lots of examples of teams that complied with institutional standards of appearance. Military specialty teams and most sports teams dress alike. But as long as they are allowed to feel unique in some sense, they can conform in others.

Managers who feel threatened by elite teams often talk of the deleterious effect their eliteness can have on people outside the team. If members of one small working group begin to characterize themselves as Winners, isn't everyone else automatically put into the category Losers? It is true that extremely successful teams can be daunting to those outside the team. But this is not so much the effect of the team as of the success. If this is your only problem, you should be writing your own book.

On Not Breaking Up the Yankees

If a team does knit, don't break it up. At least give people the option to undertake another project together. They may choose to go their separate ways, but they ought to have the choice. When teams stay together from one project to the next, they start out each new endeavor with enormous momentum.

A Network Model of Team Behavior

This may offend your sensibilities as a manager, but managers are usually not part of the teams that they manage. Teams are made up of peers, equals that function as equals. The manager is most often outside the team, giving occasional direction from above and clearing away administrative and procedural obstacles. By definition, the manager is not a peer and so can't be part of the peer group.

This idea is upsetting to managers who pride themselves on their leadership. Isn't the manager supposed to supply leadership, to function as quarterback, spiriting the team on to victory through judicious play selection and split-second timing? That may sound good, but the team that needs that much leadership isn't functioning very well as a team. On the best teams, different individuals provide occasional leadership, taking charge in areas where they have particular strengths. No one is the permanent leader, because that person would then cease to be a peer and the team interaction would begin to break down.

The structure of a team is a network, not a hierarchy. For all the deference paid to the concept of leadership (a cult word in our industry), it just doesn't have much place here.

Selections from a Chinese Menu

In writing about teams, we have traded somewhat on the easy analogy between teams in industry and teams in sports. The very word team conjures up an image of healthy young folks sweatily pursuing footballs or hockey pucks or each other. It's hard to think about teams without reference to sports, but the sports analogy carries some unfortunate baggage.

The typical team you see thrashing away on weekend television is made up of individuals with a lot in common: Members of a basketball team, for instance, may all be tall, young, strong, and
of the same sex. They’re alike because the nature of their endeavor requires that they be alike. There is less of a requirement for sameness on development project teams. But since our whole notion of teams is affected by the sports example, we often expect sameness on the team and perhaps unwittingly bring it about.

A little bit of heterogeneity can be an enormous aid to create a jelled team. Add one handicapped developer to a newly formed work group, and the odds go up that the team will knit. The same effect can result from adding a co-op student or an ex-secretary on the first project after being retrained. Whatever the heterogeneous element is, it takes on symbolic importance to team members. It is a clear signal that it’s okay not to be a clone, okay not to fit into the corporate mold of Uniform Plastic Person.

The saddest example of the overly homogeneous work group is the all-male team. Women are obvious victims of the sports analogy: The same male establishment that excluded them systematically from team sports for so long now compounds the felony by insinuating that they’re probably bad team players. Of course women function as well on teams as men. Any man who has worked on mixed teams would find it hard to imagine ever again working in the all-male environment. That was our fathers’ sad lot.

Putting It All Together

You can’t always make it happen, but when a team does come together, it’s worth the cost. The work is fun, the people are energized. They roll over deadlines and milestones and look for more. They like themselves. They feel loyal to the team and to the environment that allows the team to exist.

Somewhere deep in our ancestral memory is buried the notion that work is supposed to be onerous. If you enjoy something, it isn’t really work. If you enjoy it enough, it’s probably sinful. You ought not to do it too much or even at all. You certainly shouldn’t be paid for it. What you really ought to do is find something else to work at, something that feels like work. Then you can be bored, tired, and generally miserable like everybody else.

If you’re a manager, this vestigial memory requires you to make sure that your people never have any fun on the job. Any evidence of pleasure or joy in the workplace is a sure sign that some manager is not doing the job properly. Work is not being extracted with maximum efficiency from the workers, otherwise they wouldn’t be having such a good time.

Of course nobody ever says outright that work ought not to be fun, but the idea is there, burned into our cultural subconsciousness. It turns up in the guilty sheepishness we feel if we’re ever caught giggling in delight at the task at hand. It surfaces in our reluctant acceptance of the dress code, the anti-popcorn code, and the general furrowed-brow attitude that distinguishes so-called professionals from people who are enjoying themselves.

In this part we’ll address the opposite premise, that work should be fun.