HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAMS: LESSONS FROM THE PYGMIES

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe best practices for effective work teams. Taking the behavior of the pygmies of the African rain forest as a primary model of human behavior, the article will offer a number of suggestions for creating successful teams. Attention will also be given to some of the factors that can destroy teamwork. Finally, some of the themes relevant to high-performance organizations will be explored.

Key words: work teams, high-performance organizations, trust, autonomy, egalitarianism, distributed leadership, groupthink, sex role, dual career family, pygmies.

Tell me the company you keep, and I'll tell you who you are.

— Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

You don't lead people by hitting them over the head; that's assault, that's not leadership.

— Dwight Eisenhower

Most readers are probably familiar with the label *pygmy,* an anthropological term referring to various populations of a Negroid type inhabiting central Africa, whose adult males average less than 1.5 meters. The word *pygme,* in Greek, means the length between a person's elbow and knuckles, a measurement applied descriptively to this group of unusually small people. The pygmies are thought to be among the earliest inhabitants on the African continent and are probably the oldest human dwellers of the rain forest. The pygmy culture has existed since prehistoric times, and there is a great deal we can learn from it. It is a window on our past—a primary model of human behavior—giving us an idea of the way people behaved before the rise of agriculture some 10,000 years ago. Already in ancient Egyptian history, some twenty-three hundred years before Christ, the existence of the pygmies was noted in the record of an expedition looking for the source of the Nile. A message sent to Pharaoh Phiops II of the 6th Dynasty by Prince Herkhuf of Elephantine, the commander of this expedition, described the discovery of "dancing dwarfs from the land of the spirits" (Siy, 1993, p.16). Reference to the existence of the pygmies can also be found in Homer's description of a battle between Greek and Trojan forces in the *Iliad.* According to a description in his *Historia Animalium,* Aristotle was also aware of the existence of pygmies living in the land whence flows the Nile.

Unfortunately, humankind's knowledge of the pygmies advanced slowly from these early reports. Over the centuries, the pygmies were turned into a mythical tribe through increasingly fictitious depictions. Early Arab traders, for example, told stories about dwarfs who jumped at them from beneath the ground, killing the unfortunate with

poisoned arrows. Tall tales about this group of people continued well into the nineteenth century. Most of these stories, however—recent as well as ancient—were clearly figments of the imagination, fanciful, extravagant descriptions far removed from reality. (Consider, for example, stories in which pygmies were depicted as subhuman monsters who, like monkeys, flew about in treetops using their tails.) In short, the pygmies remained a people of mystery.

Starting with the explorers of the Congo at the turn of this century, a more realistic picture of the pygmies emerged. In 1870 the German explorer George Schweinfurth rediscovered the pygmies about four thousand years after Prince Herkhuf's first encounter. Shortly afterwards, the American journalist, Stanley, reporting about his adventures in Central Africa, mentioned the existence of the forest pygmies. Gradually, through the writings of various explorers, more was learned about the pygmies' semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer existence; those who observed the pygmies reported accurately about their ability to survive in a harsh forest environment by hunting game and gathering honey, fruits, nuts, roots, plants, and certain insects, and trading with nearby villagers for vegetables, tobacco, metal, tools, and cloth (Hallet, 1973; Bailey, 1989; Bahuchet, 1991).

Pygmies are now defined as a number of tribes scattered among the rain forests of central Africa in small, temporary settlements. Although the basic unit is the nuclear family (that is, mother, father, and their children), several extended families generally make up a camp numbering from ten to thirty-five people. Each nuclear family builds its own dome-shaped hut; these are then placed in a circle around a common area (Duffy, 1984; Siy, 1993).

Life in a pygmy camp is lived mostly outside. There is very little privacy in the camp; pygmies are rarely alone. Eating, drinking, bathing, and even sexual intercourse take place in close proximity, necessitating considerable sharing and tolerance. Empathy and cooperation are therefore important qualities of pygmy society.

Pygmies have no written language. Their history and knowledge are preserved in an oral tradition. Their detailed knowledge of the rain forest ecosystem is kept alive in the minds of the people and passed on verbally from generation to generation. Pygmies also possess a rather enlightened moral code—one that was in place long before missionaries tried to impose their worldview on them. Included in that code are injunctions against killing, adultery, lying, theft, blasphemy, devil worship and sorcery, lack of love for children, disrespect for elders, and other forms of misbehavior. It is not surprising, then, that the pygmies, in contrast to many other tribes in their region, have never indulged in cannibalism, human sacrifice, mutilation, sorcery, ritual murder, intertribal war, debilitating initiation ordeals, and other cruel customs (Hallet, 1973).

The twentieth century has not been good to the pygmies. Encroaching civilization has taken its toll as other population groups have pushed them out of an ever-shrinking habitat. A low birth rate, high infant mortality rate, and extensive inbreeding with invading non-pygmy tribes have added to their decline. Furthermore, missionaries and government officials have been settling the pygmies in permanent villages, forcing them to abandon the life that their people have lived for thousands of years. Because the pygmies' entire upbringing and culture are geared toward a nomadic forest existence, becoming sedentary has often led to moral and physical disintegration. There are very few pygmies left who still live in their original state; and at the pace things are going, their world will soon be gone forever.

Recently, I spent some time among the pygmies in the rain forest of Cameroon. As my guides in the jungle, they taught me some of the basics of jungle lore. It was with considerable awe that I observed their knowledge of the forest, their ability to read the signs made by different animals, their expertise with respect to edible mushrooms, fruits, tobacco, and vegetables. What for the untrained eye would have no significance was full of meaning for the pygmies.

From the first day of my visit, it was clear that to the pygmies the forest is the main source of well-being; it is the center of their existence. For an outsider, however, the

forest can be frightening—particularly when thunder and lightning conspire with rain to turn small streams into raging torrents and topple heavy branches or even whole trees. Drama of that sort makes a person feel small and insignificant; it is a very intimidating experience. But for the pygmies, the forest remains a source of beauty and goodness despite its potential for harm; the forest is the great provider.

I was intrigued by the relationships I observed among the pygmies in a variety of contexts. I saw them operating as a hunting team; I watched their dances; I listened to their songs. I was struck by the degree of mutual respect and trust they showed toward each other. I also noted that they seemed to be a generally happy group of people. Their outlook toward the world appeared to be of a very positive nature, perhaps because trust is such a core characteristic.

As we attempt to understand this positive outlook toward the world, we should remember that the anchor point for basic trust is the primal relationship with one's initial caregivers (Erikson, 1963). Because of the influence child development has on later behavior, adult attitudes are a giveaway of the kind of early relationships people experienced. As child development studies have shown, primary interaction patterns color all later experiences; one's original ways of dealing with caregivers remain the model for all future relationships. Thus the earliest social experimentation of children toward the people close to them leads to a lasting ratio of trust versus mistrust and creates a sense of mutuality (a reciprocity that, as they depend on each other in the development of their respective strengths, determines their later *Weltanschauung).* In consequence, if a child is brought up in a caring environment, it is to be expected that the adult he or she becomes will feel safe and secure.

Trustworthy parental figures who respond to the needs of children with warm and calming envelopment make for a positive world image. Pygmy society seems to be full of this kind of adults. As an example of their caring environment, everyone in the same age group as one's parents is called "mother" or "father," while the older ones are called "grandparents." As far as pygmy children are concerned, all adults are their parents and grandparents. Given the nature of pygmy society, there is always someone

around to take care of children's needs; they are rarely without physical contact. Fathers are actively involved in the amount of direct care to their infants. They engage in more infant caregiving than fathers in any other known society. Pygmy fathers spend almost 50 percent of their day holding or within arm's reach of their infants (Hewlett, 1991). Child neglect and abuse are almost unknown in pygmy society; cruelty to children is the most serious violation covered by pygmy laws and commandments. No wonder pygmies have such a positive, trusting way of relating to each other. Further to looking for an explanation of the origin of their very trusting attitude, it can also be hypothesized that the pygmies' deeply anchored sense of independence and autonomy may be a consequence of their early exposure to their parents' egalitarian role in the family model.

This positive attitude toward the world, their feelings of independence, and this sense of basic trust are reflected in the attitude toward the forest mentioned earlier. The pygmies' strong faith in the goodness of the forest is probably best expressed through their great *molimo* songs. When pygmies celebrate or are upset about something, they sing. They simply cannot do without dancing, singing, and making music. They believe that such expressions awaken the forest, and this makes everything right again—in due time.

Molimo is the name given by the pygmies to a ritual embodied primarily in songs sung nightly by the men. In the *molimo,* often referred to as "the animal of the forest," participants make believe that the sounds they produce are made by an animal dancing around the camp. The same name—*molimo*—is given to the long, trumpet-like instrument that plays an important part in this ritual. The *molimo* is called out whenever things seem to be going wrong, especially in times of crisis: the hunting is bad, somebody is ill, or someone has died. By calling out the *molimo,* the pygmies initiate the process of making things good again.

Although the pygmies are not necessarily better than more "civilized" folks, there is something about the relationships among these relatively simple people, and the relationship they enjoy with the forest, that is fascinating. The intensity with which

they live and the joy they feel despite their hardships, problems, and tragedies is worth studying in greater depth. Could it be that their simple wisdom and the good-naturedness reflected in their human relationships hold a lesson for humankind in our postindustrial society? When I first read of the pygmy way of life, I became curious to learn more about their ancient, primordial culture, their ways of doing things. I also wondered whether their effectiveness in operating as a team—an effectiveness that I later experienced in my personal dealings with them—could teach us something about operating in small groups in the workplace.

This issue is very topical, since most of the work in organizations is done in small groups or teams. The capability for effective teamwork is essential to success in the "global village," with its rapid changes in product and market conditions. The ability to operate successfully in teams is critical in the postindustrial organization, given its networking focus and its need for process orientation. Organizations that know how to use teams effectively can get extraordinary performance out of their people, while companies that lack that knowledge encourage mediocrity. Thus it will not come as a surprise that effective teamwork has been identified by researchers as one of the core values in high-performance organizations. Companies that continue to perform successfully have cultures where teamwork occupies a central position.

Labels such as "teamwork," "quality," "respect for the individual," and "customer orientation" can be overheard in most organizations, but they quickly turn into clichés. Take "teamwork." Expressing the wish to be a team-oriented company is both easy and popular; actually *implementing* that wish is difficult in the extreme. Many of the companies I have studied have a long way to go to reach a genuine team orientation. The pygmies, however, as described in the seminal work of Turnbull (1961, 1965) and other anthropologists (and as observed by me), seem to make teamwork happen. Their approach to teamwork makes them less susceptible than most corporate teams to the processes that corrode group efforts. Many of their practices become a model for effective human behavior.

What Destroys Teamwork?

Many factors can hamper successful teamwork. If we identify those factors, perhaps we can find ways to counter them in the workplace.

Conflict. One of the most obvious team-destroyers is conflict—whether covert, or unresolved and overt. Although occasional tension is inevitable in teams (by virtue of their nature as collective phenomena), conflict has to be brought out and addressed. When conflict is left unresolved, hidden agendas take over, detracting from the real work at hand. Even a discussion that seems to be centered on substantial issues may, at a deeper level, concern issues of power, prestige, and other personal needs. The fact that lack of trust between team members is often the catalyst for conflict-concealing dysfunctional behavior makes the problem especially insidious, because the cure is all but out of reach: in the absence of at least a minimal level of trust, constructive conflict resolution is a daunting task. In the meantime, crucial decisions are tabled and deadlines are missed; meetings flounder, sometimes degenerating into rituals whereby everyone assumes a fixed position and plays a stereotyped role. When team members are merely going through the motions, constructive and creative ideas are stifled.

Power Hoarding. Another common weakness of teams is their susceptibility to control by specific individuals or small coalitions. Power hoarding has two primary negative consequences: to those in power, winning may become more important than constructive problem solving; while to those lacking power, participation may seem futile. Those in the latter category—the majority, generally—take on the role of silent bystanders, keeping their real opinions to themselves and limiting their self-involvement. Convinced that they are not being heard, they stop putting their opinions forward and simply give up. As a consequence of this dysfunctional behavior, agreements may be realized prematurely, mediocre compromises may be reached, a course of action contrary to what each team member envisioned may be chosen. Any team members who do not feel committed to the resulting action plan—a group that probably includes all members who did not contribute (or whose contributions were ignored)—may resort to tacit subversion, insubordination, and even outright sabotage.

Status Differences. This kind of self-limiting behavior may be exacerbated if one or more team members are perceived as having special expertise, as being especially qualified to take decisions about the issues on the table. In addition to this respect-conferred status, status differences due to position may confound teamwork: lower-status members may doubt their ability to contribute. Hidden agendas may also play a role. As an example, lower-status team members may be more concerned with making a favorable impression on senior team members than with solving the problems.

Self-Censorship. Members of the team who believe that they are the odd person out may opt to keep their opinions to themselves. They may keep quiet in group deliberations and avoid issues that are likely to upset the group, a lack of action they may come to regret later on. Because people assume that those who are silent are in agreement, self-censorship often leads to an illusion of unanimity among the members of the group—a sort of pseudo-consensus. Sometimes self-censorship also turns into censorship of others: those who feel the need to protect the team leader and/or other key members of the team from information that might shake the complacency of the group put "mind guards" in place.

Groupthink. In this context, the phenomenon of "groupthink"—the pressure to conform without taking seriously the consequences of one's actions (Janis, 1972)—should be mentioned. Team members (or organizational executives) suffering from groupthink may intimidate members who express opinions contrary to the consensus, creating enormous pressure to conform, to submit to the "party line" and avoid rocking the boat. People who disagree vocally may be labeled as obstructionists. If team members succumb to that overwhelming drive for consensus and compromise, dysfunctional group dynamics sway the decision-making process and inhibit the potential for healthy dissension and criticism. This is dangerous not only because of the bad decisions that may result. Groupthink also leads to an absence of individual responsibility: those who wanted to dissent but felt pressured to keep quiet feel no responsibility for team decisions and consequently behave less carefully than they would have done otherwise.

In situations of groupthink, team members may also develop the illusion of invulnerability, the perception that there is safety in numbers. The consequence may be excessive risk taking, as manifested in a failure to regard the obvious dangers of any chosen course of action. Team members may collectively construct rationalizations that discount warnings or other sources of information that run contrary to their thinking; they may discount sources of negative information in their group deliberations. Stereotyped perceptions of other people or groups may come to the fore, clouding the group's judgment and blocking possible relationships with the colleagues in question.

All these factors can and do stifle the efficacy of successful teamwork; they turn teamwork into a waste of time and energy, and they dissipate synergy. Whatever the objectives of a team ruled by these factors, the outcome will be disappointing.

Into the Heart of Africa: Effective Teamwork

In light of all the things that can go wrong in teamwork, we ask ourselves, How can we avoid the pitfalls? What are some of the qualities of successful teams? What makes for effective teamwork? More specifically, in this case, we ask, What do the pygmies do to make teamwork happen? Are there lessons to be learned from pygmy society that are relevant for organizations in our postindustrial age?

Lesson 1: Members respect and trust each other

Among the pygmies, given the potential hardships of the forest, there is a great dependence on one another. Staying alive can be an arduous challenge; simple things that we take for granted can be major burdens. Food is not always plentiful, for example, and hunting can be dangerous. After all, the forest is inhabited by vicious red buffaloes, short-tempered forest elephants, swift-footed leopards, deadly snakes, and frightening army ants. These dangers have to be dealt with, not once but almost daily. To overcome such threats, trust and mutual dependency play an important role.

Because without trust the hazard of these existing dangers would be magnified, it is an essential factor for survival in the pygmy community. Each person needs to be counted on. This mutuality and trust anchor the pygmies' hunting-gathering society and allow it to function. When there is trust, whatever the forum—rain forest or Western workplace—many other things fall into place. It simplifies life in whatever organization a person is part of. Trust is an antidote to a proliferation of rules and regulations.

Pygmy society is a good example of what trust can do to simplify and expedite decision-making processes. Although to outsiders life in a pygmy community may be striking in its simplicity and apparent lack of organization, it is undergirded by a complex, though informal, system based on trust; the informal rules that make up this system help the community function effectively. While an *excess* of rules and regulations is a good indicator of a trust disorder and paranoid thinking, a high degree of trust allows the informal organization to dominate the formal one. In other words, implicit rules become more important than explicit rules.

Trust also implies respect for the other members of the group. In a trust-based community, differences are appreciated. And as students of high-performance teams understand, diversity can be a competitive advantage. Pygmies know how to harness the energy from the different parts of the small group into a well-functioning whole. They also exhibit great fluency in relationships and roles; rigidity in behavior is very much absent.

The mutual respect so essential to good teamwork also characterizes male-female relationships among the pygmies. Unlike in other populations of Africa, the woman is not discriminated against in pygmy society. As mentioned before, male-female relationships are extremely egalitarian. Sex role flexibility is the norm. A good indication of that is the fact that pygmy language is genderless. Husbands and wives cooperate in a wide range of activities, at the same time respecting each other's feelings and peculiarities. They will never force the other to do something against his or her will.

Apart from spear and bow-and-arrow hunting, there is very little specialization according to gender. Women are essential partners of the work team. They contribute substantially to the diet and are actively involved in the distribution and exchange of food. Both men and women net hunt usually together. A man collects mushrooms and nuts when he comes across them, gathers firewood, fetches water, cooks, washes up, and cleans a baby when needed. A woman participates in the discussions of the men and does heavy work when required.

The moral in all of this is that if we want teams to work, we need to build trust and mutual respect among team members. If such feelings are not present, other factors conducive to effective team behavior become irrelevant. When there is no sense of mutuality among the members of a team, the group soon becomes dysfunctional and suffers from many of the problems listed earlier.

Trust does not occur instantaneously, however. It is like a delicate flower that takes time to blossom. Trust grow best if the basics were met for each team member in childhood—if each person developed a trusting attitude as one of the anchors of his or her personality (as is the case in pygmy society). In such instances, the trust equation falls more easily into place. When there is a certain foundation, however, trust can be learned, as we cultivate honesty, integrity, consistency, credibility, fairness, competence, and the ability to listen. Leaders who "walk the talk" and do not kill the messenger of bad news exhibit behavior patterns conducive to a culture of trust.

Lesson 2: Members protect and support each other

One corollary to trust and respect is a system of a mutual support and protection among the members of a team. Members of any work team should share the conviction that they can rely on each other. An important component of that mutual support equation is the maintenance of each person's self-esteem.

Let us again take the behavior in pygmy society as a point of departure. In spite of the mutual supportive nature of male-female relationships, marital conflicts do occur.

Physical violence against women is almost nonexistent. Quarrels are usually resolved through dialogue, mediation, the use of jokes, by temporarily leaving the camp, or through the reframing of the conflict. In general, however, women are more outspoken than men in showing their displeasure. A common way for women of showing their anger with their husbands is by tearing down the house. (As women tend to be better house builders, the huts in which the pygmies live are considered to be the woman's property).

Turnbull gives an example of a domestic quarrel that was getting out of hand leading to a sequence of events that—as I understood from my discussions with the pygmies—is not uncommon. In Turnbull's case, the matrimonial argument had come to an impasse. The wife, to express her displeasure, began to methodically pull all the leaves off the hut. Usually, the woman would be stopped halfway by the husband. In *this* case, however, the husband seemed to be a rather stubborn fellow and did not budge. Consequently, his wife saw no alternative but to keep going. Eventually, the hut was stripped of all its leaves. At that point, the husband commented that it was going to be awfully cold during the night. Because the woman felt that her husband still had not reacted in an appropriate way—a way that would settle the dispute—she saw no choice but to continue. Hesitantly, she began to pull out the sticks that formed the frame of the hut.

By this time the whole camp, party to the quarrel since the beginning, was upset. Clearly things were going too far; the boundaries of mutual care were being transgressed. The woman was in tears; the husband was equally miserable, because the last thing he wanted was to lose his wife. (If the hut were completely demolished, the woman would have no choice but to pack her belongings and return to the home of her parents.) The question became how to reverse the situation, how to stop the conflict while preserving each person's self-esteem and allowing each to save face.

In this instance, the husband had a flash of insight into how he might solve his predicament. He "reframed" the whole conflict. He mentioned to his wife that there was no need to pull out the sticks, as it was only the leaves that were dirty. Initially

puzzled, she quickly understood what he was trying to do, and asked him to help her carry the leaves down to the stream. There they both pretended to make an effort to wash the leaves; then they brought them back. She cheerfully started putting the leaves back on the frame, while he went off with his bow and arrows to see if he could bring back some game for a special dinner. He had defused the argument by pretending that the leaves were taken off not because she was angry but because they were dirty. Everybody knew what had *really* been the matter, but people were happy that the quarrel was over. As a matter of fact, to show solidarity and support some women took a few leaves from their own huts to wash in the stream, as if this were a common procedure.

This incident illustrates an important factor in effective work teams. Conflict is inevitable; indeed, it is part of the human condition. But while that may be the case, when push comes to shove in an organization, each team member must be willing to support, protect, and defend the others. In effective teams, members go to great lengths to sort out differences between themselves while maintaining individual self-respect. Whenever possible, what can be interpreted as *conflictual* will be reframed as *collaborative.* It is part of the mind-set of team members that they all have a stake in a constructive outcome. Such an attitude of mutual support and protectiveness provides the glue that makes for teamwork and helps a team survive when times are tough.

Lesson 3: Members engage in open dialogue and communication

In pygmy society, participation is an essential part of the group culture. Everyone can expect it; everyone can demand it; everyone is supposed to give it. Obedience to authority figures is minimal among the pygmies. Nobody has the right to force someone to do something against his or her will. Nobody is afraid to speak his or her mind. There is not much of a power gulf between the various members of the group. Everyone can have a say in decisions that affect the group. There is interaction by and involvement of all members. Disputes are settled in an informal manner. Constructive conflict resolution is the norm. Although each individual has the personal responsibility to *attempt* dispute settlement, he or she also has the right, if this effort fails, to get others involved in the matter until it is resolved.

For example, if a pygmy male has an argument with his wife that disturbs him so that he cannot sleep, he simply has to raise his voice—remember, the huts of a particular community are in close proximity—and ask his friends and relatives to help him. His wife will do the same, getting the whole camp involved until the dispute is settled. Conflicts are not kept lingering among the pygmies. They are dealt with up front as they occur, to minimize bad feelings; problems are faced, not pushed underground.

Various techniques used to diffuse disputes among the pygmies work well with workplace teams also. Jokes and laughter are common methods of resolving problems between team members. Humor helps people overcome the stresses and strains that are an inevitable part of group togetherness. Diversions are also useful; they help people forget what the conflict was all about.

What we might call "emotional management" also plays an important role in conflict resolution. Pygmies are not at all self-conscious about showing emotions. They love to laugh; they love to sing. Their willingness to express emotions makes conflict resolution much easier. In fact, a *silent* pygmy camp is a camp that has problems. As pygmy interaction patterns illustrate, it is better to err in the direction of "noise." Furthermore, a willingness to show emotions by all members of the team helps reduce defensiveness and leads to more honest communication. The ability to drop one's defenses and bare one's soul is not for everyone, however; it necessitates considerable self-confidence. But one's efforts at self-revelation are generally well rewarded.

When there are pressing issues on the table, it helps to talk about them; open dialogue and communication are important ingredients in making teams work. As can be observed in the pygmy community, effective teams share their ideas freely and enthusiastically; team members feel comfortable expressing opinions both for and against any position. Teams that meet these criteria are the ideal vehicles for creative problem solving.

Frankness and candidness are also key to team effectiveness. In well-functioning teams, shared open, honest, and accurate information is the norm. In addition, members are prepared to provide feedback about the quality of each other's work when appropriate. Critical reviews are viewed as opportunities to learn and do not result in defensive reactions. Moreover, team participants learn to defuse narcissistic injuries and to minimize damage to a person's sense of self-esteem by letting critical comments center around ideas, not people. Substantive issues are separated from those based on personality. Furthermore, members of high-performance teams avoid as much as possible disruptive behavior, such as side conversations or inside jokes.

Lesson 4: Members share a strong common goal

Pygmies have a strong sense of communal responsibility. Indeed, cooperation is the key to their society. Pygmies are "the people of the forest," a forest that provides them with all the necessities of life. To benefit from the bounty the forest can provide, however, they need to share common goals. Certainly one of the overriding goals in pygmy society is survival in an extremely difficult environment.

Hunting for meat is one of the major survival tasks for this population. Of course, a pygmy can take his bow and arrows and try to shoot a bird or a monkey by himself, and this is done regularly. The most effective way of obtaining meat, however, is through communal hunting—driving animals into nets. Net hunting *cannot* be done alone; it would be impossible for a single hunter to cover sufficient territory to drive the prey—an antelope, for example—into a net. A necessarily cooperative affair, net hunting therefore implies shared interests and a common purpose among the men, women, and children of participating families. This shared purpose encourages teamwork. At the time of a hunt, the nets owned by each family in the group are joined together in a long semi-circle. Usually, the women and children drive the animals into the nets while the men stand behind the nets and kill the animals when they become entangled. But it doesn't have to be this way. It can be the other way around having the men play the role of beaters while the women do the killing. Afterward, the meat is shared among the various participants according to a set of very specific rules.

In organizations, as in pygmy society, teamwork is ineffective without mutually agreed upon goals. To give team members a sense of purpose and focus, what needs to be accomplished by the team and the ways to go about that task need to be articulated clearly. If a goal is ambiguous or ill-defined, the group will lack motivation and commitment. Although goals have to be within realistic boundaries, offering a vivid description of what the organization expects of its members, they should also encourage team members to "stretch." When met, stretch goals give a sense of pride; their execution creates a sense of achievement among the members of the team.

In conjunction with a clear sense of purpose, certain mutually agreed upon qualitative and quantitative targets need to be expressed. Such targets help team members determine the degree of their success in pursuing their given tasks. These targets serve as a road map, creating order out of chaos and generating excitement about future direction.

Lesson 5: Members have strong shared values and beliefs

Closely related to a sense of purpose is the group's culture—its shared values and beliefs. Because these values and beliefs define the attitudes and norms that guide behavior, they play the role of social control mechanism. They also provide another form of glue binding the members of a work team. Hence the internalization of shared values and beliefs by team members is extremely important in the realization of the organization's goals.

Although for the uninitiated observer forest life among the pygmies may seem to be happy-go-lucky, that appearance deceives. Beneath the apparent disorder of the community is a considerable amount of order. As mentioned earlier, we should not underestimate the importance of informal systems. All pygmies in the camp, from early childhood onward, internalize rules of behavior that are transferred orally from generation to generation. Cultural values and beliefs are at the base of these rules; they make this small society work.

To understand the making of culture we have to start at the beginning. In other words, we have to take a closer look at early socialization patterns. As indicated before, in pygmy society all adults participate in the upbringing of the children, contributing to their training and helping them understand the rules. They also help the children internalize strongly held social expectations about appropriate attitudes and behavior. What pygmy elders attempt to do is to make effective hunter-gatherers of their younger generation, teaching them the art of survival in the rain forest. They train them early to become autonomous and acquire subsistence skills. They provide them with the collective wisdom that has accumulated over thousands of years; they instill into them the lore of pygmy society.

Pygmy elders want their youngsters to share a common heritage. To reinforce the behaviors deemed appropriate by that heritage, rewards and punishments are handed out when needed. To make sure that the rules are adhered to, pygmy society imposes a number of deterrents. For the most terrible offenses, no action is taken by the other members of the group; indeed, none is needed, because it is expected that some form of supernatural retribution will follow. While in the case of minor infractions, the accused is given the opportunity to argue his or her case with the other members of the group, serious incidents become the affair of the *molimo,* which acts on behalf of the community. The *molimo* players may show their public disapproval of a violation of social standards by attacking the hut of the transgressor, for example, or by attacking the transgressor him- or herself during an early-morning rampage. The *molimo* is an important part of pygmy tradition, representing in this kind of situation the collective conscience of the group.

Sharing, cooperation, independence and autonomy are among the basic values in pygmy society. Another strongly shared value is the maintenance of peace among group members. This desire for peace sometimes transcends even the rights and wrongs of a particular case. Turnbull describes an incident in which one of the younger pygmies had gone on an amorous expedition to the hut of his neighbor, who had an attractive daughter. Shortly after entering the hut, he was thrown out by a furious

father, who was screaming and yelling and throwing sticks and stones at the intruder. Because of all the noise, the whole camp woke up. The father yelled that he was upset not because the young man had tried to sleep with his daughter but because he had had the nerve to crawl right over him and wake him in the process. *This* he felt was unacceptable. Any decent person would have made a date with the girl to meet her elsewhere.

In this particular incident, the argument was not quickly resolved; the commotion kept on going, keeping everyone awake. Finally, one of the elders told the father, in a no-nonsense way, that he was making too much noise; the elder was getting a headache, he said, and wanted to sleep. When the father continued shouting, the elder commented that he was "killing the forest and he was killing the hunt." Although the father was right—the behavior of the young man *was* inappropriate—he was causing a greater wrong by disturbing the whole camp, making so much noise that he was frightening the animals away and spoiling the hunt for the next day.

Although this may seem a rather far-fetched example, it does illustrate the application of norms of social behavior. In this instance, we can see how one norm supersedes the other; how everyone buys into what is viewed as suitable behavior. The lesson that can be learned from this relatively primitive society is that any organization or smaller work team needs to articulate its core values and beliefs and define appropriate attitudes and behavior for its members. The dos and don'ts of social behavior need to be first clarified and then reinforced through stories and traditions; the latter in turn reinforce the group's identity. A specialized language may further add to the bonding of the group. To strengthen this bonding process, successful organizations make a great effort to select as employees people who are likely to subscribe to the core values of the organization. Furthermore, these organizations go to great lengths to socialize their new members, helping them internalize the group's core values and beliefs. Finally, these organizations clearly articulate sanctions for transgressions of the shared values and beliefs.

Lesson 6: Members subordinate their own objectives to those of the team

One of the stories I heard while being among the pygmies concerned the breaking of a major rule of proper behavior. Apparently, one of the hunters had committed one of the greatest sins possible in the forest. During a hunt, frustrated because of his poor luck (not having trapped a single animal all day), he had slipped away and placed his own net in front of the others, catching the first of the animals fleeing from the noise of the beaters. Unfortunately, he was not able to retreat in time and was caught committing the serious crime of placing his own needs before those of the community.

In a small hunting band, as I have noted, survival can be achieved only by close collaboration and a system of reciprocal obligations that ensures that everyone gets a share of the daily catch. This particular pygmy had clearly broken this unwritten rule. He had been selfish. Humiliation and ridicule were the punishment meted out by the group for his unacceptable behavior. He was laughed at by the women and children, and nobody would speak to him; he was ostracized. (This may not sound like much in the way of punishment, but what disturbs pygmies most is contempt and ridicule. Ostracism in pygmy society can be compared to solitary confinement in ours.) The ostracism was only temporary, however. Pygmies do not carry hard feelings for a long period of time. In a very small community, hunters cannot afford to ignore a fellow hunter.

What this example from pygmy society illustrates is that good team members operate within the boundaries of team rules. They understand personal and team roles. They do not let their own needs take precedence over those of the team. They control their narcissistic tendencies and subordinate their personal agenda to the agenda of the group.

Teamwork is an interesting balancing act. A form of participation that can flourish only in an atmosphere that encourages individual freedom and creative opportunity under the umbrella of the overall organizational goals, teamwork represents an interdependent balance between the needs of the individual and the needs of the organization. To make such a balance work, however, each member of the team needs

to recognize the limitations on his or her freedom; and this requires considerable self-discipline.

Lesson 7: Members subscribe to "distributed" leadership

Pygmies are strong believers in the concept of "distributed" leadership. As mentioned earlier, pygmy society is characterized by a disarming informality. Among the pygmies, it is difficult to talk about a single leader. Unlike other African societies, pygmy groups have no "big men" among them; leadership is not the monopoly of one glorious leader. There is no person that has ultimate authority. With no real chiefs or formal councils, their behavior is extremely egalitarian and participatory. The pygmies are probably as egalitarian as human societies can get. Among the pygmies it is considered bad taste to draw attention to one's activities. Many subtle means are used to prevent this from happening. Bragging about one's abilities is an invitation to become the butt of rough jokes, a very effective leveling device.

Pygmies are not intimidated by rank, seniority, or status. All members of the group are empowered to make decisions. Respect may be given to elders, but it is based not on wealth or status but on knowledge and expertise. Likewise, if certain people are listened to more than others in the making of a decision, it is because of their special ability or skill, be it bow making, hunting, or playing an instrument. Although some members' opinions may be more valued than others—those members having become somewhat more "equal" than their peers—every member of the pygmy community is prepared to challenge authority whenever he or she believes that the team effort is jeopardized. As a result, each team member is likely to accept ownership for the team's decisions.

The pygmies seem to have figured out that the best form of leadership is a configuration whereby leaders are distributed throughout the community and everyone can be involved in decision making. However, individuals who are accorded exceptional respect are expected to subscribe to a number of leadership practices that foster effective teamwork. If they fail to, they are reminded of their obligation by the group.

Look behind the scenes at a high-performance organization, and you will find a similar attitude toward leadership. Among the *practices successful team leaders use* to encourage full participation is a willingness to share goals with the other members of the team. Effective team leaders avoid secrecy of any kind at all costs. They treat members of the team with respect, listen to feedback and ask questions, address problems, and display tolerance and flexibility. They offer guidance and structure, facilitating task accomplishment, and they provide a focus for action. They encourage dialogue and interaction among the participants, balancing appropriate levels of participation to ensure that all points of view are explored (and withholding their own point of view initially to prevent the possible swaying of opinion). They capitalize on the differences among group members when those differences can further the common good of the group. They give praise and recognition for individual and group efforts, and they celebrate successes. They accept ownership for the decisions of the team and keep their focus sharp through follow-up. By acting in these ways, they create an atmosphere of growth and learning. In the process, they encourage group members to evaluate their own progress and development.

Authoritative (Not Authoritarian) Leadership

In discussing these "lessons from the pygmies," I have emphasized the important role of team leaders in making successful teamwork happen. Team leaders—and their own leaders in the corporate hierarchy—have to set up the matrix within which teamwork can be most effective. They have to create the right ambiance and lead by example. The old paradigm of command, control, and compartmentalize has to be discarded. In fact, rules and regulations should be minimized.

In the context of team leadership in the workplace, a few more caveats are needed. First, however participatory one likes to be, there is a need for both direction from the top and clear communication about the organization's priorities. Second, executives and team leaders must create an atmosphere that encourages people's natural

exploratory capabilities. People need room to *play*—and they need to see top management's commitment to that endeavor—because with play come creativity and innovation. Without innovation, an organization stagnates and dies. Thus senior executives must not only encourage people to take risks but also accept occasional failure, protecting those who stick their necks out in a good cause.

While strong, committed leadership is necessary to foster innovation, that leadership need not—*should* not—be authoritarian. On the contrary, *authoritative* leadership is a prerequisite of the supportive climate. What organizations need is leaders who are respected because of what they can contribute; who "walk the talk"; who get pleasure out of developing their people; who are willing to play the role of mentor, coach, and cheerleader; who know how to stretch others. Authoritative leaders accept contrarian thinking and encourage people to speak their mind. They know how to celebrate a job well done, how to recognize achievements, and how to put the appropriate reward systems into place to align behavior with desired outcomes.

In our time of transformation and change, conflict in organizations is a fact of life, a given. The ability to solve conflict is therefore an important competency for people in team leadership positions. Those who are effective at leadership in the years to come will be masters of clarity and candor—skills that are important enablers in diffusing conflict. They will communicate what has to be done in clear, unambiguous terms that leave little room for misinterpretation. They will deal with conflict in such a way that it is transformed from an obstacle into an instrument for creative problem solving and increased performance.

Teamwork remains, above all else, a balancing act. On the one hand, every member of the team deserves to have his or her place in the sun, to have his or her achievements recognized. On the other hand, team members need to recognize the value of collaboration, subordinating their own needs to those of the group. Yet collaboration is rarely easy. An atmosphere of constructive give-and-take goes a long way toward making it happen.

A community like the pygmies, operating in a harsh environment like the rain forest, is acutely aware of this need for collaboration. All the problems associated with teams notwithstanding, the pygmies realize that it is harder to operate without teams than with them. Indeed, without teamwork they have little chance of survival, given the challenges of their environment. Members of business organizations would do well to heed these lessons from the pygmies—the product of knowledge accumulated over thousands of years.

Perhaps the most telling lesson of the pygmies is a negative one not yet addressed in these pages. As I mentioned earlier, recent times have not been good to the pygmies. Their way of life is now threatened, because the epicenter toward which their whole being has been directed—the rain forest—is in danger. Their focus on a hunter-gatherer existence has determined their socialization and training practices over the centuries; it created their very unique culture and continues to color their outlook on life. As long as there is a rain forest, their world will be aligned; everything will fall into place, and their life will have real meaning. Unfortunately, the building of new roads—allowing large-scale plantation farming to gain a foothold—and the migration of people from other parts of Africa to the rain forest in search of farmland have led to massive deforestation. The world of the pygmies is disappearing at an alarming rate, creating in these wanderers a sense of dislocation. Of those who have been forced to leave the rain forest, many have been unable to find a new focus. In the agricultural and industrial society that surrounds their old world, their particular expertise has become less relevant. Very few pygmies have been able to adjust to the dramatic societal discontinuities that have taken place around them; very few have been able to make the transition into "our" world. The consequences for their various communities have been dire.

Thus, as a final lesson from the pygmies, we learn that survival requires not only an inward but also an outward focus; changes in the external environment have to be accounted for. Boundary management is important; building bridges with key outside stakeholders becomes an essential task. Members of effective teams recognize the need

for external relations. In the case of the pygmies, making this external adjustment may simply not be possible. Conforming to the larger society would require a complete reinvention of themselves, a draconian transformation of their culture that would mean the end of the world as they know it.

The world of business organizations is not as closed a system as that of the pygmies, of course. There are many other differences as well, but still the parallels are striking. Like the pygmies, business organizations have no choice but to look beyond their boundaries; they have to look out for emerging discontinuities to ensure at least a chance at survival and success. If they do not look beyond their borders in this fast-moving, competitive, globally interdependent world, they too will face dire consequences: an inexorable winding down of their life cycle, culminating in death.

As described in this article, one way of managing for continuity, one way of creating companies that last, is through teamwork. Companies that gain the tools of effective teamwork have a distinct competitive advantage, a leg up toward organizational success. To master those tools takes considerable psychological work, however. The French statesman and novelist François-René Chateaubriand once said, "One does not learn how to die by killing others." The pygmies have taken this statement to heart. They know how to take care of each other. Members of teams in our postindustrial society would do well to gain that same knowledge.

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