

Excellence starts at recruitment. In elite sports arenas this is often called talent identification. If we want therefore to develop great teams and produce excellence, talent ID is key. Typically, it may not be as simple as one may think.

The greatest instinct is to identify who is 'best'. Who has passed the test with 100% and accumulated a variety of A*s? Who comes with the greatest reputation, even if that is one that is self projected? Where are the elite in the field? For sure, skill mastery is crucial for excellence in teams. Skill mastery and talent are not synonyms however. There is not a direct correlation between the team output and the sum of its parts (ask new Chelsea owner Todd Boehly about the effectiveness of such an approach). To create the best teams, we need to consider talent hidden by statistics and reputations.

Imagine that you're a basketball coach. You have two players that played half the game each in the same position. This is their game data:

Player	Points	Rebounds	Assists
Player A	13	5	3
Player B	4	1	2

It is not unreasonable that you observe Player A is outperforming Player B. You may choose to give Player A more game time next match and work out strategies to improve Player B to fix what is clearly going wrong. Perhaps Player B does not feel sufficiently safe to take interpersonal risks?

What if the data showed the following for the time spent on court together?

Player	Points	Rebounds	Assists
Player A	13	5	3
Player C	9	4	2
Player D	10	1	3

Player	Points	Rebounds	Assists
Player B	4	1	2
Player C	21	7	4
Player D	16	4	7

The team performed better with Player B than Player A, despite the gulf in their individual performance. Why?

Shane Battier was a Player B. Battier has been described as a “marginal NBA athlete”, by his coach, but also recognised that “we have been a championship team with him and a bubble playoff team without him.” [1] Apparently, his game is a combination of “obvious weaknesses and nearly invisible strengths.” When he is on court all the pieces begin to slot together. His moniker is Lego as a result. He is an All Star, even if the stats don’t back up the fact.

During the 1980’s, Norwegian Sports Psychologist, Willi Railo, coined the term “cultural architect”. These were people “who possess the ability to change the mind-set of others and they are able to implement the coach’s strategic plan in the team.” [2] This notion of cultural shift leveraging catalytic nodes in a network is still highly influential in high performance environments. The challenge is to identify the catalyst.

Battier creates the “Catalyst Effect”. This is where the “team effectiveness is improved, members raise the performance of others and ultimately higher level results.” [3] He is a true Cultural Architect. One that is typically invisible and under valued in the competition of more storied and celebrated colleagues.

Orthodoxy still largely views teams as complicated systems. We want to maximise each persons’ potential, to enable inter personal risks to squeeze each ounce of performance from the team components. The outputs of this we measure. The performance is valued and rewarded accordingly.

As we begin to embrace and understand systemic complexity, we may find alternative routes to high performing teams and complimentary ideas. In our ever increasingly intricate ecosystem, it is the inter personal synergies that drive team performance [4]. Specialist silo’s would replaced with multi disciplinary perspectives. Performance is not considered discrete, but contextual. Leaders will strive harder to gain sight of the near invisible strengths present in teams and value their no stat All Stars. The catalysts for change may not be who or where they immediately seem to be.

We will need more Lego.

References

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3. Toomer, Jerry, Craig Caldwell, Steve Weitzenkorn, and Chelsea Clark. *The catalyst effect: 12 skills and behaviors to boost your impact and elevate team performance*. Emerald Group Publishing, 2018.
4. Krabben, Kai, Dominic Orth, and John van der Kamp. "Combat as an interpersonal synergy: An ecological dynamics approach to combat sports." *Sports Medicine* 49 (2019): 1825–1836.