

32 TEAMS in the WORLD CUP but NOT a SINGLE WORKING GROUP

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This year's Women's Soccer World Cup has six more teams than it did in 2019. It is a big deal to be hosting the event and women's sport is going gangbusters domestically and internationally.

Interestingly, at least from an executive coaching perspective, even in the sports we associate with individual performance, like tennis, we now hear a lot more talk about a player's team.

It is much the same at work. Come and meet the team. A great team effort everyone. And so on. The word 'team' has come to mean any type of group effort. And, while the popularity is easy to understand, we might find it helpful to make a clear distinction between a team and a working group. Too often we apply team thinking and behaviour to a working group but doing so can actually get in the way of performance.

Too often working groups are treated as teams

It is hard to find a sport that has more of the characteristics of a working group. Perhaps an athletic or swimming relay comes closest and starts to open up the distinction.

In a relay, each individual is ultimately responsible for their own performance. Australia would not have won the Women's 4 X 100m freestyle relay at the Tokyo Olympics had Emma McKeon not swum a sizzling 51.35 seconds in her leg of the event. We would not have won had not Cate Campbell swum her leg, also in a world record-beating time, of 52.24 seconds. The point is that individual performance and accountability are so much clearer in this type of event, compared say to the contribution of a mid-field footballer.

I'll leave the sports analogy on the bench now. Suffice it to say there are times when we need to be very clear about whether or not people are operating in a team or working group environment. Our thinking and behaviour in relation to factors such as performance and accountability will differ markedly from a team to a working group. Let's consider the most defining characteristics.

Leadership is the place to start. In a working group, there is a single, strong, focused leader. In a team, leadership is more of a shared responsibility. Even though a team might

have a captain, the group dynamic will be more collaborative. In a working group, there is no ambiguity as to who has the final say.

Accountability in a working group is clear cut and the expectations and responsibilities of each individual should be spelt out. In a working group, each individual has tasks to perform, and they rely on their own expertise and know-how to complete these tasks. By contrast, a team has both individual and shared accountability. Watch how accountability is shared the next time you hear a losing team's coach or players debrief in front of the cameras.

This one is a bit abstract, but the purpose of a working group tends to be closely aligned with the organisation's defining mission, whereas a team might have a very specific purpose and set of deliverables that are a subset of the organisation's purpose.

A working group is altogether more disciplined when it comes to performance. Individuals are expected to be both effective and efficient, meetings run efficiently, there is limited or little open-ended discussion. And the measures by which individuals and the group are expected to perform are well understood by all.

Don't let style get in the way of substance

As you might imagine, the way a working group's meetings and communication flow are very different to the way team meetings and communication occur. They both have merit. As executive coaches, we often help leaders be clear from the outset whether a team or a working group best matches the purpose at hand.

The purpose of a working group is to discuss, decide and then delegate work. The leader sets the agenda and makes the final decisions. Teams typically make group decisions based on open-ended discussions. In many cases, the equal status of team members and shared accountability are simply not required and can be counter-productive.

So, as much as modern workplace culture tends to favour the qualities we find attractive about team dynamics, in practical performance terms, working groups are often better placed to get the job done. Don't let style get in the way of substance.

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