

WAYS IN WHICH THE ASSISTANT INFLUENCES AND CHANGES TEAM
DYNAMICS

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Introduction

Throughout the process of a production, the Production Stage Manager (hereafter the PSM) is a constant source of information and the liaison between all of the various departments. But what about their team? What about those who the PSM chooses to complete the stage management team? Are they merely there to aid the PSM? Is it an individual victory for the PSM if they choose a productive team? Or is it a collective “win” for the team if the PSM succeeds?

More often than not, the PSM will be in charge of hiring their team or at least have an input. In the commercial world or big not-for-profits, this will consist of a Stage Manager, or “first” assistant (hereafter the SM) and if the contract allows, an Assistant Stage Manager, or “second” assistant (hereafter the ASM). They may also have the luxury of adding one or multiple Production Assistants (hereafter the PA) to aid in the rehearsal process up until Opening Night. In the non-commercial productions the PSM may only be allotted one assistant and one or no PAs.

Does this change in numbers change the criteria that a PSM looks for when putting together their team? Are certain characteristics more important than others? Once the PSM does assemble their team, what does the assistant bring to the team? How, precisely, do they influence the team? How does the team become successful? What dynamic does the team need? What can potentially hinder the team from becoming successful?

This paper will look at all of these questions, in turn. It will explore the PSM’s responsibility in creating a team; what they should be looking for in their team members. How a team becomes successful. And, if by chance, your team is unsuccessful, ways to improve the team dynamic. It will look at the roles which are needed to create not only a positive work

environment, but also a productive work environment. Ultimately, it will examine whether or not the ASM is just as responsible for the dynamic of the team as is the PSM and determine who has the power to influence and change the dynamic of the team.

The Production Stage Manager as the Leader

The PSM, for all intents and purposes, is the leader of the team. They are the head of the dragon; they are in the driver's seat. They are the individual who is seen as responsible for their team. Usual characteristics of a good leader include: calm; self-disciplined; enthusiastic; compassionate; inspirational; motivational; and adaptable. Leaders should be able to take hold of any given situation. They should be able to reach their own judgement based on an impartial assessment of what is needed in any given situation.

One would presume, if a PSM has worked their way up through independent theatre, they have undoubtedly worked on shows without having assistants. Therefore, one could presume that the PSM should be able to get everything accomplished on their own. On bigger shows, without the obvious constraints of one person not physically being able to do all the work or being on deck while calling, they could presumably be able to do all the tasks that is required of the team. So, if the PSM has all the skills to begin with, what do they look for when choosing their assistants? What do they need to better their team?

Creating the Team

When searching for an assistant of any level, a PSM must recognize the potential of the prospective individual. Chances are, the PSM will want to work with someone they have worked with before. The advantage of doing so is that they already know the potential of this person; they have seen them work and they know what they are capable of. But if they don't have an assistant readily available, they are probably going to have to choose from some sort of 'cold' pool of individuals.

Hypothetically, let's say the PSM sees all of the potential candidates' resumes. Looking at the range of resumes, the PSM can probably come to a decision about who is technically able to do the job at hand. The PSM will then hold interviews with all of those they've deemed worthy. If all of these interviewees are technically adept, then what is the PSM looking for? Tripp Phillips, the PSM of *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, says that it usually comes down with who meshes well with them. He wants someone who he is going to enjoy spending time with. This sentiment is shared by Peter Lawrence, Diane DiVita and many other Broadway and Off-Broadway PSMs.

So, in this hypothetical situation, the PSM has now chosen an assistant who they may not *actually* know if the individual is capable of the work involved. Yes, their resume most likely states shows of a similar nature. Yes, they have had a conversation with the PSM and it appears as if the two will get along. But in actuality, neither of those are reasons to believe that this new assistant will actually perform well.

Therefore, the PSM must make sure that they give their new assistants job flexibility and fitting roles within the team. What is needed is not well-balanced individuals but individuals who balance well with one another.¹ It goes back to recognizing the potential of a team member. Everyone does not need to do everything well, but the PSM should want to create a team in which the *team* can do everything well. If the PSM can see where the gaps are in their own ability, and recognize the strength of their team members, they should be able to create a well-balanced team. The individuals will have various strengths, but the team will be strong on the whole.

Key Features to the Team

Leading Teams suggest that the four features of a real team are: a team task; clear boundaries; clearly specified authority to manage their own work processes; and membership stability over some reasonable period of time.² Laying down these four concepts for a team will create the foundation for them to be a solid, well-conceived team that the rest of their structure will be able to emanate from. If a team has all four of these set in place, they are likely to be a successful team.

The PSM should also take explicit initiatives to put in place the basic structures that will foster team effectiveness and minimize the organizational obstacles to teamwork.³ On the first day of pre-production in which the whole team is assembled, the PSM should lay out ground

¹ Belbin, R. Meredith. Management Teams (Oxford, Great Britain: Genesis Typesetting Ltd, 2004) p.73

² Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.41

³ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.95

work for not only how *they* like to work, but also how they want the responsibilities broken up; the tasks of each member.

The PSM should always either design the work for the team, or design it for individuals. Assigned tasks are only going to be productive if the team knows whether or not they should focus on the task as a team, or for one individual to focus on the task and then report back to the team. Robert Witherow, the current SM at *Violet*, believes that you should always design the work for the team. He believes that a PSM should remain flexible and open to dividing the various tasks to their team members.

Monica Cuoco, the current ASM at *If/Then*, cautions to be careful of how a PSM disseminates information to the team or to the individual. Often, Cuoco has witnessed information that was meant for the group being bottle-necked by one individual; that person who received the information from the PSM becomes a dam and the rest of the team never receives the information. Therefore, tasks that were intended to be shared cooperative events remain with one person (especially if there is an unhealthy competition between the team members). Cuoco notes that if a PSM truly wants a task to be performed by the group, it is essential for the PSM to explain it to all members at the same time.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Cuoco has tossed things out to the group in an off-handed “we need to do this” way and then had it fall through the cracks because she wasn’t specific enough in giving it to an individual. The group was not given explicit instructions and therefore each of them thought another member of the group was going to accomplish the task. Whether it’s an individual bottle-necking the process or a group dropping the ball, it is the PSM’s responsibility to know their team well enough to make decisions about whether to assign

tasks to individuals or to the group and to know what problems may arise in each of those processes.

Boundaries are usually created by the influence of team authority. The PSM should be specific when a team is formed as to just how much authority the team initially will have and to make sure that members understand clearly what decisions are and are not theirs to make.⁴ While each member should feel empowered to do their own distinct jobs set out by the PSM, members of the team should know as to where and when their authority can reign, and when to relay the authority to the PSM.

When I was the assistant on *Thumbprint*, I was consistently asked questions by the designers. Therefore, I had to be sensible about when I could and could not answer their questions. Normally, if the question was about anything to do with matters that concerned the blocking or backstage, I could easily answer. Questions that had to do with scheduling or anything that the director had to be involved with, I either relayed to the PSM or directed the questioner to the PSM. In that situation, I knew that there were many email conversations that had happened between the PSM and the director, and I simply was not fully knowledgeable about certain things. Since the PSM had been clear that there had been conversations, but did not indulge me with the specifics of the emails, I would encounter situations when information or questions had to be directed towards his authority rather than my own.

⁴ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.50

However, both leaders and team members typically experience a measure of anxiety, angst, and ambivalence when authority is transferred from management to a work team.⁵

Therefore, membership stability within the team is probably the hardest to achieve.

The PSM should be conscious of the how and when authority is transferred between them and their team. Often times, this will coincide when moving into the theatre. No longer is the whole team seated at one table, but rather dispersed between a tech table in the house and the backstage, or the calling desk and the deck. While it is a group effort to create an ‘easy’ transition from the rehearsal room to the theatre, the PSM should take the lead on ensuring that stability is maintained throughout the transition.

I had the privilege of watching Kristen Harris execute this concept on *Romeo and Juliet*. With a stage management team of five, including herself, she always made sure that we checked in at the top of a break. By doing this small thing, she did two things. The first, and most obvious, was that we would all be on the same page when we came back from our break. Therefore, we would be able to answer anyone’s questions about where we were going from and the whole stage management team would be ready. The second, was that she was creating face time between the members. During tech of *Romeo and Juliet*, Harris would be seated at the tech table, Robert Witherow (SM) and Kelly Stillwell (ASM) would be on opposite sides of the deck, I (PA) would be in the house, and Luke Anderson (PA) would be floating, oftentimes in the office. Therefore, our main communication would be via headset. Yes, Harris would see Witherow and Stillwell onstage and could communicate with them via headset if needed, but there is a difference between that and communicating face-to-face. Therefore, these brief ‘check

⁵ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.50-51

ins' of all five us created a feeling of stability within the team, whether we were aware of it or not.

Creating a teamwork-structure that fosters collective internal motivation is never as simple as just tossing the team a task and letting members run with it. You can never expect to "see where the cards fall". Creating a positive, productive work environment is something that the PSM should always be conscious of. The key to a good team design is to differentiate wisely between critical and unnecessary structural features.

Witherow believes that the most critical aspect of team structure is apparent during the rehearsal process. It is the team's responsibility to create a secure rehearsal environment. For Witherow, this manifests itself with the team's ability to be on-book; it "really tests the team". You have to find the people on the team that are strong at it and use them, but also have the ability to instantly cover for each other. His team on *Violet* used signals amongst themselves because it was a new play and they knew that no one could drop the (proverbial) ball.

Defining or finding examples of necessary structural forces is a little more difficult as what works for one team will not work for the next. Often, teams won't even realise that they've put in place a necessary structural force because the results of doing so is that the team functions well. Witherow remembers that Stillwell introduced him to the blank sign-in sheets on *Romeo and Juliet*. Prior to that, Witherow would always have the dates and times typed out on his sign-in sheets. This would constantly create extra work for the team because every time the call time changed, they would have to reprint new sign-in sheets, especially during tech and previews as the call times for the cast are constantly changing. With a blank sign-in sheet, one of the team

members simply has to write in the date and time and then everyone is good to go. Witherow liked this system so much that he now uses it on *Violet*.

The key to distinguishing between critical and unnecessary structures is to be aware of whether there are structural impediments to the team's system or not. A PA needs to be able to run the rehearsal and the PSM needs to be able to set the props and be on book. Everyone should be able to jump from position to position. The PA needs to know to be able to say "we're starting from here" when the PSM runs out of the room because they received an emergency phone call from a designer and the SM is printing music in the office. Suddenly, that PA needs to be able to take charge. If they can't, a team should recognize that perhaps there are unnecessary structural forces at play within their team structure.

When creating a team, the PSM should take into consideration that diverse groups do often experience rough sledding or difficulty with the learning curve early in their lives as members struggle to figure out how to work together.⁶ There will always be a learning curve to throwing a group of individuals together and expecting them to work as a team. Depending on the instance, the team could have immediate work chemistry; they could have immediate personal chemistry but not work chemistry and no personal chemistry; or they could have no immediate chemistry at all. That's not to say that they won't ever experience a positive team dynamic. The learning curve is specific to each team and a PSM should not expect each team to have the same learning curve.

⁶ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.105

The PSM should also remember that any team member's behaviour can be shaped readily by almost any group of which he or she is a member.⁷ This can either be positive or negative behaviour that influences the team's dynamic.

Working on *Romeo and Juliet*, Stillwell, who had a considerable amount of more experience than myself or Anderson, was a positive behaviour changer for the most part. Anderson and I could watch and learn from Stillwell. Personally, I learnt that the ASM should always be on the ball. They should be anticipating any physical need of the space and be able to recognize when they will need to reset for the top of the scene. For the most part, I was the PA on book, but Stillwell still had the positive effect on me to *always* be on my game. Some of those rehearsals can get very discussion heavy, but the assistant should always anticipate being ready.

However, negative influence on a team's behaviour is usually easier to spot. It also usually comes down to attitude. If there is one assistant in the room who does not want to be there, chances are their negative behaviour will influence the others members of the team. Without noticing, most individuals will subconsciously be influenced by the attitudes around them. Therefore, the PSM should always be on the lookout for any negative behaviour since more often than not, it will spread. The PSM should always be able to either eliminate or change the negative attitude into a positive attitude. When the team norm is powerfully shaping behaviour, one does not observe much deviant behaviour.⁸

⁷ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.124

⁸ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.105

Team Roles

Beyond what the PSM can control, the group is bound to take on its own dynamic. Individuals, whether knowingly or not, will change and influence the group based on their assigned role. The group will naturally assume one of three functioning methods: co-acting team; self-designing team; or self-governing team.⁹

A co-acting team is probably what is encountered the least within the theatre world. Members of a co-acting team usually work in proximity to one another and have the same supervisor. But each member has an individual job to do, and that job's completion does not depend on what the others do.¹⁰ This type of function in a team is only efficient in certain scenarios when it comes to stage management.

One example would be if there are multiple rooms rehearsing for a show. In this scenario, say the SM and the ASM are running different rooms completely separate from one another. For each room to run smoothly, the rooms need to function separately from one another for that specific time. If the SM is in charge of room one, they are in charge of making sure *that* rehearsal runs smoothly; it is not effected by whether the ASM is running room two well or not.

The efficiency of a co-acting team in this situation will run into problems if actors need to move between the different rehearsal rooms. In a co-functioning group, one assistant would behave as though the work that they do in their rehearsal room has no impact on the other rehearsal room. Therefore, they would not realise that if they release their actors late, those actors will be late to the other rehearsal room. While there are moments within a stage

⁹ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.53

¹⁰ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.42

management team where the members must function as a co-acting team, it will rarely be efficient if that is the only way that the team functions.

In a self-designing team, the members have the authority to modify the design of their team or aspects of the organizational context in which they operate; sometimes both.¹¹ This is the situation most seen within stage management teams. The PSM will often lay out the ground work and expectations of responsibilities within the team and then the team will carry out those assigned roles. If something is not working within the group, the assistants would be able to change the responsibilities of the team.

For example, say one assistant is assigned the responsibility of prop tracking and the other assistant is assigned the responsibility for costume tracking. After attempting to work under those assigned responsibilities, the assistants could come to a natural conclusion that they are actually better at the other job. Therefore, the two assistants would be able to ‘swap’ jobs in order to benefit the production of the team. The assistants noticed that there was a better breakdown of roles within the team, and since they had the capacity to influence the structure of the team, the two were able to make the change to better serve the team.

The same goes for if there is an organizational context of the team in which could be improved. Working on *Romeo and Juliet*, Witherow showed me technical automation breakdowns that he had from a previous show. He mentioned that he did not like the format of his own paperwork so he gave me the opportunity to better his paperwork. I took his paperwork, broke it down into sections and came back to him with a proposal for the layout of the new paperwork. With a few minor adjustments afterwards, this would be the paperwork that the

¹¹ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.53

whole team used to track all of the different automation elements. Therefore, as the PA, I got to influence and change the organizational context of the team since Witherow had given me the authority to affect change.

The final type in which the group could function is the self-governing team. As a whole, the team decides what is to be done, structure the unit and its context, manager their own performance, and the actual carrying out of the work.¹² In these situations, the PSM would act and behave as though everything is a group decision to be made; they do not behave as the leader of the team, but rather as “one of the team”.

In this way of functioning, all members will contribute to the roles and responsibilities of the team. Presumably speaking, since everyone has an input into the structure of the team, the team should function at a top-notch level. Since there is not one person setting out the ground rules of the team, there should be less of a chance of someone being responsible for a task that they are not suited for.

The members are also more likely to take a stronger responsibility for their own performance. Since they do not have to report to a PSM, they could have a stronger sense of self-accomplishment when they finish a task, and therefore work harder to achieve said task. They also know that they don't have to conform to any one person's idea of how a task should be completed; specific layout of paperwork, etc. Therefore, the actual work could get carried out a lot more efficiently since no one has to learn how to do something in a specific manner.

¹² Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.53

The downfall to a team functioning in this style is that there is no person who is the boss; there is no person who is ultimately in charge. Specifically in stage management, you have to have a PSM who is the boss of the rest of the team. There needs to be an individual of the team who can make a snap decision. The last thing a stage management team wants is for the director to ask a question and for all of the team to need to discuss the options before having an answer. While there are situations where a self-governing team style could aid a stage management team, there are some situations where there simply has to be one clear, distinct voice of authority in the room.

Regardless of the style of the team, all members should take an active, rather than a reactive, stance toward the environment in which the team operates.¹³ All members of the team have a responsibility to carrying out all tasks in which the team is assigned. While the PSM can delegate as much as they so desire, they shouldn't have to constantly be watching to make sure the work is being done. Each assistant should always be surveying and anticipating what is needed.

After watching Stillwell on *Romeo and Juliet*, I was next an assistant on *Thumbprint*. The basic set of *Thumbprint* was four beds that shifted and shaped the space in various configurations. After witnessing Stillwell always be the first to her feet, often ahead of the official word to reset, I implemented that active stance into my rehearsals. I would always make sure that I knew all the configurations of the beds, and which spike marks corresponded to that set up. I would always get up from behind my desk where I was taking notes when I felt like we

¹³ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.106

were approaching a moment where the beds would have to be reset. I did not want the PSM to have to ask me to reset anything; I wanted to be active as opposed to reactive.

As a PSM, I want my assistants to always be active. Having to ask my assistants to reset the stage is not something I should ever have to do. If I have to ask, it shows me that the assistants are either not paying attention to what is happening or being lazy. This was the situation I ran into when I was the PSM on *Wake*. The director would want to go back in a scene, sometimes even specifically asking for the stage to be reset, and I would have to then ask my assistants to actually reset even though they were sitting right next to me when we were asked. When they were finished, I would also have to double check that they had reset everything properly because they would often miss resetting something or another. This showed me that they were taking a reactive stance towards how our team operated, always waiting for instruction from me, rather than taking the active stance and being proactive about their responsibilities.

Whether reactive or active, the team will eventually create a “norm”. Norms within a team are a critical aspect of team structure because they are a powerful and efficient means of coordination and regulating member behaviours.¹⁴ Routine and responsibilities can help team members find that normalcy within their team.

Working on *Romeo and Juliet*, the five members of the stage management team would always arrive an hour before rehearsals began. After a couple of weeks of working together, a natural rhythm slowly crept its way into our collective morning routine. Witherow, Stillwell, Anderson and I would arrive at the rehearsal room usually within five minutes of one another. Anderson would make coffee while I printed out schedules for the day. In this time, Witherow

¹⁴ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.114

would have poured himself a bowl of cereal and then the four of us would sit and eat our breakfast together. With the exception of a few very hectic days, we knew that between all of us, we would be able to get the room set up for the day even if we spent ten minutes eating breakfast when we first arrived.

Not only did this routine aid our efficiency in coordinating the setup of the room for the day, it also goes back to the principle of stability that Harris instilled in the team. Without realising it, because of the stability that Harris created within the team early on, we were able to create a routine together without noticing that we were doing it. On day one, we didn't have a routine. After week one, we didn't have a routine. But somewhere between weeks two and three, all of us recognized consciously or subconsciously that we could fall into these patterns because we were always ready to go at 10am. We collectively came to an unsaid agreement that we could and enjoyed eating breakfast together each morning; our team gradually but inevitably develop a shared view.

When analysing the beginnings of a team, every member, should know and be aware that people are often disinclined to accept the team role for which they may be best fitted.¹⁵ Somebody else's team role could present an irresistible attraction to them. For whatever reason, human behaviour allows for individuals to want to glamorize their role within a team. They never want to feel as though their role is 'less' than any other member's.

For example, a PA may ignore the fact that they know the area around a rehearsal studio really well and could easily do errands in half the time as the other PA because they want the more "exciting" job; they want to remain in the room because they feel as though the role of the

¹⁵ Belbin, R. Meredith. Management Teams (Oxford, Great Britain: Genesis Typesetting Ltd, 2004) p.65

PA in the rehearsal room is more important than the role of the PA doing errands. Human nature can and often will perpetuate a feeling as though the grass is greener on the other side (as the saying goes).

This simple human tendency, which we are all guilty of, will hinder the productivity of any team if natural ability is being ignored throughout the process. Each person of the team should be conscious of this human tendency and, more importantly, be on the lookout for this kind of behaviour. PSMs should especially be aware of this behaviour when an assistant is completely ignoring their best fitted role in the team or when this behaviour is creating an unhealthy dose of competition between team members.

Competition, in the positive sense of the word, can be healthy between multiple assistants. Having a small rivalry between assistants can push and motivate the team to always perform to the best of their ability. DiVita is a supporter of creating a healthy competition between her assistants. However, as soon as she sees competition that is not natural, progressive for all and advantageous for the good of the production, she breaks it down through discussion, observation and strong guidance.

Overall, the effectiveness of a team will be promoted by the extent to which members correctly recognize and adjust themselves to the relative strengths within the team both in expertise and ability to engage in specific team roles.¹⁶ Therefore, not only should team members be aware of their own personal strengths and weakness, they should also be aware of where they lie in the scope of the team.

¹⁶ Belbin, R. Meredith. Management Teams (Oxford, Great Britain: Genesis Typesetting Ltd, 2004) p.124-125

That's not to say that in any given situation, whoever is the strongest at one particular task, should be assigned that task. Sometimes, the other option of what they have to do needs to be taken into consideration as well. Say there are two assistants, and one is to take blocking and one is to be on book. In this scenario, both assistants are confident at taking blocking notes but neither of them are confident at being on book. If the PSM is just to look at the needs of the blocking book, they would most likely choose whoever is marginally better than the other at taking blocking notes.

Now, if the assistant who is marginally better at taking blocking notes is *also* the assistant that is better at being on book, the team (and by extent, the PSM) should maybe consider sacrificing the marginally better blocking book in order to have the better of the two on book throughout rehearsals. This adjustment would create less of an immediate impact on the entire rehearsal room. Everything is a constant re-evaluation of the needs of the room and the whole team should always be observing and analysing those needs. If that first assistant realises that their teammate is struggling at being on book, they should have the right to bring up potentially switching roles with them. Overall, there should be a collaborative effort between all of the members of the team to adjust the effectiveness of the roles needed at any given time.

Opposite to this is that teamwork commonly requires members to handle work-related issues for which their existing knowledge and skill are insufficient.¹⁷ It happens less and less in stage management because university programs are submitting more and more learned individuals into the field, but at some point or another, there will be a learning curve for each individual.

¹⁷ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.157

On *The Testament of Mary* the other PA, Jeff Siebert, had worked in the industry for years...but as a performer and dance captain. Therefore, he had plenty of knowledge and skill about blocking notation but less of an understanding of how automation is programmed and functions. Self-admittedly, Siebert said to me that if he had been in charge of the automation tracking paperwork, he would have struggled. Therefore, he took the initiative to learn about the paperwork even though he was not responsible for it. He never looked at his lack of skill as a negative; he looked at his lack of skill as something to improve on.

If every member of any team is as self-aware as Siebert was about where his skills fall in relation to the rest of the team, no team would have any issue of roles within the team. It takes not only self-awareness but some sort of recognition of the abilities of the other members of the team. In order for the whole team to be effective, each member must take on part of that responsibility. Yes, the PSM needs to implement, oversee and analyse the effectiveness of the roles within the team but that does not mean that they must be alone in creating an efficient breakdown of roles. Each assistant should take an active part in the setup, implementation and analysis of the efficiency of the team. If each member is able to pull their weight in designing and accepting their role within a team, chances are that the team will be a lot more successful.

Successful Teams

The breakdown of roles within a team is only the first step to creating a successful team. Each person of the team must understand his or her personal style of work and recognize the

need for good communication and coordination within the team. One must recognize that communication and coordination are two very different things in this instance.

Communication is defined as the act or process of the interchange of thoughts, opinions, or information by speech, writing, or signs.¹⁸ This is a crucial aspect to having a successful team. If no one talks with one another, no one is going to be on the same page. Communication is needed between all members of the team because some of the information that is shared is crucial to the job.

Coordination is defined as a harmonious combination or interaction, as functions or parts.¹⁹ The difference between the two lies in the words “interchange” and “interact. Communication relies on sharing while coordination relies on interaction. If groups are communicating well, they will not realise that they are not coordinating well until they arrive at the theatre. The most obvious example where a team needs good coordination is backstage during a show. If there is more than one deck SM, they should absolutely make sure that they can coordinate their tracks with one another. The two must first communicate their needs to the other, and then coordinate their movements.

For example, if the stage right SM needs to be in the house for an actor entrance *and* they have a task to do stage right, chances are they are going to want to coordinate with the stage left deck SM to coordinate what makes the most sense. If stage left is particularly dead in this moment, the two could coordinate that it's instead the stage left SM who goes out to the house with the actor. If the stage left SM has a task shortly before the audience entrance, and it's

¹⁸ “Communication.” *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2014. <http://www.merriam-webster.com> (14 March 2014).

¹⁹ “Coordination.” *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2014. <http://www.merriam-webster.com> (14 March 2014).

further from the house entrance, perhaps that one stage right task is added to the stage left deck track. Whatever the decision, the two must communicate, and more importantly, coordinate with one another so that both tasks can be completed.

Information is critical to the development and execution of good team performance strategies. Without a sense of shared data between all members, there is only a slim chance that the team will be able to successfully accomplish any of their tasks.

Working on *Thumbprint*, Bradley Crews, the original PSM, did not share information with me throughout rehearsals. I never asked as to why he didn't, but I presume he felt as though he was not 'burdening' me with all of the details. However, this ended up hindering our performance as a team. Oftentimes, if Crews was out of the room (which happened often) the director would, understandably, look to me for answers. Since I had not been privy to the information in the first place, I was unable to answer; ergo, the stage management team did not perform well.

After Crews left the project, another PSM was brought in, Ryan Gohsman. As the constant member of the team, I needed to share all of the information that I had with Gohsman. He was coming into a situation that I had already been in for three weeks. My amount of knowledge about the production and the personalities in the room was of dire need for Gohsman. Even though Gohsman was my boss, we were put into a situation where I, as the assistant, was entirely more knowledgeable than him. Therefore, until tech, it really fell on my shoulders to move the team along in a successful manner while Gohsman was learning the show. Luckily, Gohsman and I did work well together and the stage management team was able to have a good team performance throughout tech and the run of the show.

If your team has all the information and has good communication and coordination between its members, chances are the team will develop a shared pool of knowledge, accessible to all, and build “transactive memory”. With transactive memory, members of a team serve as memory aids to one another, providing the possibility of collective recollection that exceeds the capacity of any single individual.²⁰

You see this a lot with teams who have worked together on multiple projects. They begin to have a short hand with one another and they begin to understand one another’s capacities not only in a working situation, but on a personal level. Harris and Witherow who have worked together on multiple productions have created this sense of understanding one another. They’ve built a little store between the two of them of every file, every document, every format that they can pass on from show-to-show. They know that they both like that specific format and then they only have to adapt for the specificities of the show. And if another team member has an idea for improving the template, they can then carry *that* new template onto the next show if they so desire. Not only do Harris and Witherow know what the other prefers to do, the two have created a short hand between them. Their team has develop a shared mental model of the performance situation that, with time and experience, is more integrative than the individual models with which they began.

If the team has created a transactive memory between its members, they will better understand those defined roles within the team. They learn who is especially knowledgeable or skilled about which aspects of the work and thereby build the team’s capability to actually *use* what members know. They will also know how to deal appropriately with those of their members

²⁰ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.56

who may be less skilled, either in teamwork or on the task itself, without excessively disrupting the team's progress toward achieving its objectives. It takes time, but once it happens, it can greatly promote a team's stability, process and creativity.

R. Meredith Belbin, author of *Managing Teams*, believes that successful teams need at least one very creative and one clever member; and if these skills are both inclined in one individual, it is a great advantage. Belbin goes further to distinguish that creativity should be treated as an entity in itself and distinct from high intelligence and analytical ability.²¹ With our title of "manager", creativity is not often a word that others outside of the profession would associate with us; they'd probably use that descriptor for directors, actors or designers. But there is a great sense of creativity that must be instilled if a stage manager wants to be successful.

That's not to say that the PSM needs to be the most creative individual of the team. It is perfectly acceptable for the SM or the ASM to be the most creative. Creativity can come in many ways and oftentimes is how a team member can be able to reach a solution to a problem that others can't.

Cuoco knows plenty of PSMs who she would not deem as "creative" individuals. Instead, they are tech-orientated PSMs. If the PSM is aware that they may not be the most creative person on the team, they should rely on others to help them bridge those gaps of their ineptitude. This could be other members of the team, or members outside of the team such as the dance captain or resident director for those artistic challenges. Witherow believes that it all comes down to casting the team. As long as someone on the team is thinking outside of the box, the team will be successful.

²¹ Belbin, R. Meredith. Management Teams (Oxford, Great Britain: Genesis Typesetting Ltd, 2004) p.88

Creativity within a team can lead to animated interaction which can lead to collectively produced ideas which is more often than not, beyond an individual's reach.²² Working as a collective entity enhances the chances that a team will be truly successful. If that one very creative member of a team sparks creativity in the remaining members, not only will the team have a greater pool of options to choose from, the positive proceedings of the team will improve drastically as well.

The more a member of a group contributes, the greater the sense of personal involvement and identification with the object of the proceedings.²³ A sign of a successful team is knowing that each of its members is just as involved as the next. Gradually, members are likely to build shared commitment to the team and measure of caring for one another. This could happen gradually without any of its members being aware that this is happening. A stage management team on a Broadway show will potentially be together for months before opening a show. Oftentimes, seeing their team more than they are seeing their own family. Eventually, the team will have some sort of shared community between them. (And, hopefully, it's a positive shared commitment to one another).

For Cuoco, when she can feel a shared energy between her team members, she knows that they have created a sense of community within the team. Once a community is created within a team, the others will be able to know and be willing to be there for one another. If one member is having a bad day, the others will be able to sense that something's astir and will want to either help that person (if they can) or pick up a little extra work because their team member needs to have less of a workload that day. She does not believe that all the team members have to

²² Belbin, R. Meredith. Management Teams (Oxford, Great Britain: Genesis Typesetting Ltd, 2004) p.96

²³ Belbin, R. Meredith. Management Teams (Oxford, Great Britain: Genesis Typesetting Ltd, 2004) p.30

be best friends and talk about their feelings at all times, but there should be a sense of being there for one another. And if a team can be there for one another, they will be better at being there for everyone else on the production that needs them.

This shared commitment will also provide internal motivation for a team. The collective celebration or shared gloom attests to the fact that internal motivation is just as real for teams as it is for individuals.²⁴ If a team has shared goals in mind, and are truly working together, they will have a collective sense of when a show goes well, and will also share in the responsibility if the team fails. The collective celebration is easier (and oftentimes more enjoyable) than the gloom, but if the feeling of failure is shared among the members, you know that the team is solid. Human behaviour dictates that it is a lot easier to want to share in the celebration and when failure ensues, placing blame instead of sharing responsibility.

For Harris and Witherow on *Violet*, their team really struggled with the on-book aspect during rehearsals which was a gloomy outcome for all of them. It did not matter that neither of them were not the individual on-book; they were all going down together. Since Harris and Witherow took responsibility during that time of shared gloom, they knew that they had to somehow reverse that feeling of gloom and create a reason to have a shared celebration. The team had to have an internal motivation pushing them because without such, they never would have become a healthy group. And with a healthy group, they were able to promote competent member behaviour.

²⁴ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.97

The secret to a successful team is remembering that organic forms are always in a state of development and are never fully finished; it is the architectural parallel of good team structure.²⁵

Theatre is unique in that throughout the rehearsal process. There is a goal in mind, but the working environments and day-to-day tasks are constantly changing and evolving. Oftentimes, teams will forget that they have to change with the changes; they get bogged down in the roles and the structure of the team and forget that there's not always one way to achieve success. But, if a team is flexible and adapting to each change, good team structure will naturally ensue.

Unsuccessful Teams

Each team is always working towards being a successful entity, but there are those unsuccessful teams that everyone will, undoubtedly, be a part of at some point throughout their career. Two types of compositions of unsuccessful teams are: those which are productions of culture, and those that have no deeply rooted cause.

Productions of the culture occur when the fault of the management team epitomizes the faults to which the firm as a whole has been subject.²⁶ In these situations, the PSM would generally be receiving negative feedback or have a negative situation with the General Managers, or the director, or whoever, and instead of trying to change that culture into a positive within their stage management team, they feed into that negative culture. Human behaviour more often than not mimics the behaviours and culture that they are surrounded by. Therefore, if the PSM plays into any of the negativity around them, chances are the team will also do the same.

²⁵ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.95

²⁶ Belbin, R. Meredith. Management Teams (Oxford, Great Britain: Genesis Typesetting Ltd, 2004) p.79

Having no deeply rooted cause within a team is often linked with an unfortunate combination of characters and occurs where obstacles prevent individuals finding their preferred team roles.²⁷ While these situations could be avoided, sometimes there are just personalities that do not work together, cannot attempt to work together, and never will work well together. It's not the fault of any one person, but of an unfortunate series of circumstances that has put individuals together who are not meant to work with one another.

DiVita experienced this with her last show *The Commons of Pensacola*. There had been a (friendly) interference from the organization on whom she would chose as an assistant. She was told that it had to be a male and also someone with whom the director would respond to. The organization did not like the first gentleman that DiVita proposed and she was therefore hard pressed to find another assistant who was male and would accept the Lort B pay scale. The team that she ended up having to assemble (based heavily on whom the organization wanted) was not up to par. DiVita noticed the skill set of both her assistant and her PA during pre-production and she was not pleased. She believes that had her SM been stronger, her PA may have been able to rise to the occasion. Eventually, the lack of skills on both of their parts was noticed by the director and other members of the organization and DiVita was left with no option other than to fire the two of them. The team had been dysfunctional from its start and a dysfunctional group can invite all manner of bizarre individual behaviours which, ironically can then be used to explain the problems of the group as a whole.²⁸

Human tendencies are great factors in why teams are unsuccessful. The first ordinary human tendency is our disposition to react to whatever captures our attention and demands a

²⁷ Belbin, R. Meredith. Management Teams (Oxford, Great Britain: Genesis Typesetting Ltd, 2004) p.80

²⁸ Belbin, R. Meredith. Management Teams (Oxford, Great Britain: Genesis Typesetting Ltd, 2004) p.38

response, rather than to actively scan our environment for less obvious problems and opportunities that may call for nonstandard actions.²⁹ This snap, stimulus-response does work in certain situations, but doesn't in most. In these situations, bigger and/or more important tasks are overlooked which can lead to the team being unsuccessful.

The second human tendency is our understandable impulse to have harmonious interactions with others, to be approved rather than rejected by our teammates, and generally to keep anxieties as low as possible.³⁰ It is understandable because who wouldn't rather work in a positive environment? Who wouldn't prefer a happy work environment? The downside is that if everyone is focusing on the harmonious side of the team, no one is focusing on the actual work. No member should be intentionally mean to another member as to promote fear, but sometimes a little urgency can go a long way within a group. If the work comes first, chances are the harmonious interactions will follow.

A third human tendency of individuals is to slack off when working in groups. Psychologist Ivan Steiner refers to this tendency as the "motivation decrement". (Other psychologists refer to this a "social loafing" and economists refer to it as "free-riding").³¹ Regardless of what term you are using, Steiner notes that it is almost always present to some extent in group work. Individuals feel that since they are part of a group, they don't have to put in as much individual effort since others are also putting in effort. The irony is, if you are part of a two person team, and each is only putting in 50%, you still only have 100% effort as opposed to the 200% effort that the team should be creating.

²⁹ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.108

³⁰ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.109

³¹ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.99

Problems of this nature are likely to emerge when managers *tell* team members that they have the authority to manage their work and that they therefore are accountable for the results – but then specify work procedures in such detail that members have no way to actually exercise that authority.³² It's like a false sense of hope; the team members get a glimpse of what they could accomplish, but have no way of proceeding individually. Therefore, they lose their internal motivation and adopt a “get it done” mentality.

If a PSM were to do this, they could argue that they are lowering the probability of disaster occurring – but in doing this, they are restricting the team's autonomy to manage its own work.³³ It's micromanaging. And no one enjoys being micromanaged. Being micromanaged can lead to assistants feeling useless and/or bad at their job. After a while, it could lead to the assistant to stop contributing because they know no matter how good of a job they do, there will constantly be a person looking over their shoulder. For Cuoco, it makes her feel as though she's less of a stage manager since working in that environment does not allow for any professional or personal fulfillment. Granted, as an assistant you will most likely have to put up with it to a certain amount because everyone does it, but an acknowledgment from the PSM that they are doing it will go a long way with the assistant.

An unsuccessful team often can be the fault of the leader. One fault the PSM could have is the assumption that everyone knows how to work in a group, and therefore pays too little attention to the interpersonal skills of the members of the team.³⁴ Working in a team basically comes down to members being able to communicate with one another; it's humans interacting at

³² Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.101

³³ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.102

³⁴ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.115

a very basic level. If the PSM is not aware of the interpersonal skills of its team, chances are that one personality will barrel over another. Situations like that could lead to a member feeling closed off or unwanted in a group. Which could then influence them to rely on their human tendency to want to create a harmonious situation even though they are feeling a great sense of anxiety of working within a team.

Another fault of the PSM could be their over-dependence on a single individual. If a PSM has multiple assistants and they only ever give tasks to one of the assistants, often this will create a personal wedge between the assistants. The individual who is not in the favour of the PSM could be left feeling resentment towards the individual who is receiving the favour. The individual who is in the favour could feel overworked and put a higher level of personal pressure on themselves to accomplish all that they have been given to do.

A phenomenon that happens in unsuccessful groups is “splitting”. In emotionally charged settings, people sometimes deal with their uncertainties and ambivalences about how things are going by unconsciously splitting the positive and negative affect they are experiencing into separate parts, assigning all the former to one person (the hero) and all the latter to another (the bum).³⁵ If you have a PSM who is favouring one out of three assistants, often the other two assistants will look at each other as the hero while they regard the favoured assistant as the bum; all of the negativity that they are experiencing gets projected to that third assistant while the two of them, project all of their positive feelings onto one another since they are in the same, unhappy boat, so to speak.

³⁵ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.127-128

Unsuccessful teams usually are a result of the design or composition of the team.

Sometimes, when a leader is putting together a team, they will assume that people who are similar to one another will get along better, and therefore compose a team that is too homogeneous. *Managing Teams* refers to these teams as Apollo teams; and they're usually created because clever people tend to overvalue clever people.³⁶

Due to the similar personalities in Apollo teams, members may get along well together but they lack the full complement of resources needed to perform well. Ask any PSM what they look for when choosing an assistant and chances are they will say they look for someone who compliments them. The problem with this statement is that similar personalities do complement each other. An excessively homogenous group may have a rich diversity of talent and perspective and seem as though they would work well together, but their downfall is that they will be unable to use that talent because the members of the group are too different in how they think and behave.³⁷ Therefore, no one will be able to convince another member to change their opinion nor will they be willing to change their own opinion.

Overall, homogenous teams are less likely to promote member learning than are experiences in a more diverse team. However, the phenomenon of learning is not only a problem in homogenous teams. An unsupportive context of any team limits the performance of even a well-designed, non-homogenous work team. Nor will a wonderfully supportive organizational context enliven a team whose design is fundamentally flawed.³⁸

³⁶ Belbin, R. Meredith. *Management Teams* (Oxford, Great Britain: Genesis Typesetting Ltd, 2004) p.115

³⁷ Hackman, J. Richard. *Leading Teams*. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.122-123

³⁸ Hackman, J. Richard. *Leading Teams*. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.134

Generally, teams will feel unsupported when there is not a clearly defined structure within a well-designed team. A PSM must remember that it is not okay to send mixed signals; to use the rhetoric of teams when the work should really be performed by individuals, or to directly supervise individual members when the work is really the team's responsibility.³⁹ Either of these situations will lead to team members feeling dissatisfied with the functionality of the group.

If the PSM has clear structure and is supportive to its members, it can still be an unsuccessful team because of the design of the team. Members of poorly designed teams are prone to ignoring or deflecting opportunities to learn and improve even when they receive abundant feedback about how they are doing.⁴⁰ The design of a team comes down to balance. There has to be balance between backgrounds, personalities, schedules and skills. If you were to create a long list of all the things that a stage management team needs, a balanced team would be able to cover the whole list. This also means that you have to take each other's deficits into consideration. If a team has a shared pool of knowledge of what everyone's strengths and weaknesses are, the team will be able to help one another. Witherow believes that he and Harris are a great balance for each other. She's a mom of a five-year-old; he's a single man. She wakes up at 7am each morning; he wakes up at 10am. There's a lifestyle balance between the two of them. Each person is understood and appreciated for exactly who they are which allows them to know what the other does and doesn't like to do. Without that sense of balance, an unsupportive relationship may occur. One must remember that an unsupportive context will limit the performances of even a well-designed work team while all the support from the PSM will not change a flaw in the design of a team.

³⁹ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.43

⁴⁰ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.103

Improving a Team

With all the potential possibilities for unsuccessful teams, every member of the team should be able and willing to improve the productivity of the team. However, it is not always apparent where or how to improve a team. Weakness in a member is the easiest thing to compensate for within a team.

If each member comes in with self-knowledge about their own weaknesses, the stronger the team will be. This goes for helping the individual with their weakness and with the team as a whole. If the team has something less than the ideal distribution of talents, they could compensate for shortcomings by recognizing a latent weakness and deciding to do something about it.⁴¹ If the team is not upfront about its weaknesses, two things could happen. The first is that those weaknesses are never exposed and everything goes swimmingly. (Not the most probable of outcomes). The second is that the weakness of the team comes to a raging halt and the team is unable to overcome their challenges. Worst case scenario, the producers or general managers could feel as though part or all of the team needs to be replaced since the team was unable to overcome their weaknesses.

Overcoming group weakness is not necessarily an easy task. Thinking and acting at a *group* level of analysis is not something that most of us routinely do in our daily lives.⁴² Therefore, the PSM should try to promote this type of thinking as soon as possible. While individual successes should be recognized, the PSM should try and promote that sense of shared celebration among the members of the team.

⁴¹ Belbin, R. Meredith. Management Teams (Oxford, Great Britain: Genesis Typesetting Ltd, 2004) p.92

⁴² Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.38

Training team members *together*, rather than as separate individuals, can jump-start the development of performance-enhancing team process.⁴³ If you look at stage management teams that have been together on multiple projects, they have naturally done this throughout their career together. They have gone through multiple journeys as a team that have strengthened their bond. But how do you get to that connection early on in a new stage management team?

It really is that sense of training *together* that is going to enhance the performance on the team early on in a rehearsal process. However you look at it, you are putting people together who don't know each other, but somehow have to be presented to a room full of actors, designers, etc. as though they are one collective unit. To do so, you should start training as a team during preproduction.

Getting the binders together, taping the floor, organizing the office, are all tasks that the team can do together. Yes, they are not the most difficult of tasks, but the team will have to work together to successfully accomplish any of these tasks. Assistants get less prep time than the PSM, but there are countless SMs ASMs who go in before they are officially getting paid because they want to be on the same page as the PSM going into rehearsals.

Lawrence, a veteran Broadway PSM, likes to have his complete team meet, usually at his apartment, for an evening to put together the binders. This allows the whole team an informal evening to get to know one another while still accomplishing a task. Eventually, with individuals that he has worked with on multiple shows as is the case with Jim Woolly, the two know what the other is going to want to do during this pre-production time and then they delegate the rest of

⁴³ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.56

the tasks to the other team members. Without being too obvious, this structure of pre-production work kick-starts team bonding.

I had a similar experience on *Romeo and Juliet*. Literally, the day I was hired, Harris asked me if I could come in and help tape out the floor with Witherow and Stillwell (Anderson had yet to be hired). With no conflicts of my own, I went in to help. Even though Stillwell and I were not getting paid for our work that day, Harris insisted on buying us all pizza and beer for our contribution for the day. This small gesture of gratitude was enough to show us that she did appreciate volunteer participation as well as illicit team bonding. We could have easily all come in for the day, done the task and then left. Instead, after we finished our work, there was a moment of shared celebration that we experienced as a team – allowing the rest of the team to get to know me and vice versa.

Early on in rehearsals for *The Testament of Mary*, if it was a particularly slow day and there was only one task for Siebert and I to complete, instead of one of us completing it on our own, we would sit together and do the task together (or as much as possible). This was especially true for the blocking book which Siebert was in charge of. I would often sit next to him while he was working on it so that I would have a general idea of what was happening, while making sure I understood his notation. Siebert was a great teacher for me, always making sure that I knew what was going on since it was my first Broadway show. Working together also gave Siebert someone to double check with in case there was a particularly tricky bit of blocking notation; someone to double check what he had created made sense.

Regardless of the situation, if the team, helmed by the PSM, is aware of the need to train together, and sequentially bond earlier in the process, the team is going to have a more likely

chance of being successful. Stage management, or really any job in theatre, is odd. We are forced into a room and are expected to bond with one another for just a short period of time. In more traditional business or corporate settings, teams could potentially work together on a project that is going to take years; or the team is pulled together by members who already have an individual job within the company. Therefore, the need to start training together is exponentially greater to a stage management team due to the nature of its composition.

In those first couple of sessions of training a team together, the merits of each member should be raised in terms of what technically he or she can contribute and the role that he or she is likely to play in the group that is being formed.⁴⁴ While knowing the weaknesses of individuals is key to improvement, the strengths also need to be taken into consideration.

Any member of a team could be oblivious or un-willing to admit any of their faults but chances are they will be willing to admit to their strengths. Human behaviour dictates that we would much rather talk about our positive attributes rather than our negative. Those first few sessions of being a team should be able to enlighten each member to the strengths of the others. Therefore, when the team is deciding roles, the members should take those strengths into consideration. In remembering that sometimes human behaviour will allow us to flock to a role that is not necessarily best suited to our abilities, the team should make a conscious effort to find out early on the strengths of each individual. Only looking at the weaknesses of members, can impose a negative context of what the team can't do. Looking at what the team is already able to do can impose a positive energy into the group.

⁴⁴ Belbin, R. Meredith. Management Teams (Oxford, Great Britain: Genesis Typesetting Ltd, 2004) p.134

To greatly improve the potential ability of a team, the team must also take personalities into account. Yes, it would be more advantageous if a team could solely look at the technical ability of a team member, but the reality is that within stage management, personalities must be taken into account as well. A team must find a way to harvest the contributions of those with shaky interpersonal skills, and do so in a way that minimizes the risk of the team and its work.⁴⁵

The difficulty of doing so is that there isn't a set formula with solving this problem; each situation is going to be different. Deficiencies in an individual's interpersonal skills can be dependent on them as a person, on whom they are interacting with, on the day, on the situation at hand, and the list goes on. Even if you have worked with someone multiple times, it does not mean that they are going to react or act in the same way that they did last time. Therefore, to help improve the team, the team must recognize the potential risk of that member as well as remember that the team is an organic creature that must evolve and change. More often than not, this responsibility of risk analysis will lie with the PSM, but all members should at least contribute to harvesting the contributions of that member regardless of their lack of interpersonal skills.

The most influential way to help improve an unsuccessful team is through feedback. If the team does not receive feedback about how it is doing, there is no way the team will learn. And unless a team learns, there is no way it can improve. It is probably the simplest idea in theory, but shockingly difficult to execute.

Giving constructive criticism is an art on its own. Not everyone has the ability to give criticism in a way that the critique will be taken in a constructive manner. And that's the key. If

⁴⁵ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.126

the critique is not given in the “right” way, chances are that the person on the receiving end of that criticism will not be open to accepting the note. It is simultaneously the easiest thing to do but also the most challenging.

Improving a team is not a simple task. It takes time, energy and a great deal of analysis. Generally, finding the problem within a team is simple. It’s the manoeuvring and negotiating all aspects of the team that makes it difficult to improve an unsuccessful team. If the team is willing to cooperate, and along with the PSM pre-emptively analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the members, train the team as a collective, and criticism is delivered in a constructive manner, there is no reason that an unsuccessful team will be able to improve into a successful team.

Balance of Power in a Team

Everything between a PSM and their assistants comes down to power. The PSM influences the team dynamic based on their power to control and oversee the team, and the assistant influences and changes the dynamic based on their power to cooperate and advance the team.

Sociologist Richard Emerson views power as a property of a relationship. In Emerson’s way of thinking, relational power has two parts. The first is your power over me, which is the degree to which I am dependent on you for; you have something that I cannot readily obtain from other sources. The second is my power over you, which is the degree to which you are

dependent on me for. It's something I have that you want and cannot readily obtain from other sources.⁴⁶

In other words, for a team to be successful, they must create a relationship between all members, and all members must have something to contribute. The PSM and the assistant cannot be mutually exclusive to one another. There is a recognition of mutual power that must exist between the two, and the recognition and acceptance that power cannot solely lie in one person.

Each person has a role to play in a team, and whether or not they actually play that role is how they influence the team's dynamic. If each member is playing the role they were assigned, chances are the team will be successful; if they aren't, chances are the team will be unsuccessful. Roles help a team breakdown structure. If the structure of a team is easily tangible, than the members of a team will have an easier time negotiating where and how they fit with the team.

Furthermore, each member of a team is a person. And has their own unique personality. Human behaviours influence and change those around them. Therefore, all team members are going to be perceptive to the attitudes and behaviours of their fellow team members.

Personalities are the hardest part to manoeuvre in a team. Therefore, the team should always strive to create a sense of power balance within the team. A balanced power relationship is one in which both sides of the team (the leader and the members) are more or less equally dependent on each other.

⁴⁶ Hackman, J. Richard. Leading Teams (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) p.154

Conclusion

Overall, the PSM has the power to create the team, but it's the responsibility of all members of the team to make it a successful team. There is no set formula for having a positive team dynamic; everything is constantly changing from production to production but that does not mean that there are not ways to help aid a stage management team to becoming a success.

It starts with the PSM. The PSM needs to remember that regardless of being a member of the team, they have to first and foremost be the leader of the team. They have to remember self-discipline, an enthusiastic composure, compassion for their fellow team members and to remain adaptable at all causes. As the leader, the PSM should put basic structures in place for the team and remember to always design the work for the team or for the individual.

At some point in the process, the PSM must give authority to the other members of the team. While both leaders and team members may experience anxiety or angst when the authority is transferred from one to the other, the transfer of authority will benefit the team as a whole in the long run. The transfer of authority invokes trust within the members of the team which, in turn, creates a collective internal motivation amongst its members. But, it is not the only factor in fostering internal motivation.

Internal motivation can also be created when structural forces are put in place. Every member of the team should be able to distinguish between what is critical to the structure of the team and what is unnecessarily put in place. Unnecessary structural forces may be difficult to spot, but once addressed the team will be able to prosperously move forward.

Everything has its learning curve. There is going to be a learning curve for everything from how the team works together to how the team functions in the rehearsal room. In each process, teams will have to try to manoeuvre through this learning curve as fast or as best as possible until they've reached an understanding amongst all members.

During that process and any time afterwards, *any* individual's behaviour on the team is able to shape another member's attitude. Whether it's positive or negative behaviour, all members of the team need to realise and be aware that they have an impact on the team's dynamic. The team will eventually take on its own dynamic based on the individuals that make up the team, so everyone should be cautious of negative behaviours seeping into the overall quality of the team.

Equally detrimental as negative behaviours are to the team, having a team that takes a reactive stance rather than an active stance can cause problems in the way the team functions. Therefore, all members should feel the responsibility to carry out all tasks. This should manifest itself with each member of the team always surveying and anticipating what is needed in the rehearsal room. Eventually, the team will begin creating norms amongst its members. These are critical to team structure because they can become powerful and efficient means of regulating behaviours.

It is everyone's responsibility to have some sense of recognition of each member's strengths and weaknesses. The effectiveness of a team will only be promoted by the extent to which members can correctly recognize and adjust themselves to the relative strengths within the team both in expertise and ability to engage in specific team roles.

If each member of the team has some recognition of each other's skills and deficits, they should be able to create better communication and coordination between all members. Once the team is working well together, the team may build "transactive memory" which provides the possibility of collective recollection that exceeds the capacity of a single individual.

Since we work in an artistic field, creativity is essential to exist within the team. Not everyone needs to be creative but there should at least be one creative and clever member of the team; and that person does not need to be the PSM. Creativity within the team can lead to collectively produced ideas that may have been beyond an individual's reach. If this does happen, the result of working together will create a sense of shared commitment amongst the members of the team.

This shared commitment, this sense of connection to other team members, does lead to internal motivation. That internal drive is what ultimately makes a team function. If the individuals in a team have no want to be in the rehearsal room or work with the other members of the team, there is no chance of the team to become successful. One must always remember that organic forms are constantly in a state of development and therefore they should keep common goals in mind. If a team is willing to be flexible and adaptable, good team structure will naturally ensue.

If a good team structure does not ensue, chances are it is either a result of the production of culture or a deeply rooted cause. If it's a result of the production of culture, chances are that forces somewhere else in the structure of the production, above that of the stage management team, are awry. There is the opportunity to change that culture within the team itself but the team will constantly be in opposition to that initial force. If it's a deeply rooted cause, chances are that

the members of the team are simply not compatible. There will be some instances where a team is assembled that ultimately the members were just not meant to work together.

Regardless of whether or not the team is successful, the team must take human tendencies into account. Human tendencies can manifest themselves in a variety of ways – whether it's our impulse to have harmonious interactions with others or to slack off when working in groups – they exist and they must be taken into the group's consideration. The assumption that everyone knows how to work in a group can be detrimental to a stage management team. If there is that assumption within the team, too little attention is usually paid to the interpersonal skills. It is those interpersonal skills that are going to either make or break a team.

For a team to improve, they must overcome the *team's* weaknesses. Yes, each member of the team must also look to their own talents and shortcomings, but they must also look at the overall weaknesses of the group. Thinking and acting on a group level of analysis is not something that most people would routinely do so it does take some work. To help counterbalance potential weaknesses, the PSM can impose a sense of everyone training *together*. Since this happens early on in the process, the group may have an easier time overcoming their weaknesses since they have had multiple opportunities to bond.

Most importantly, for a team to improve, all members must be willing to give and receive feedback from one another. Constructive criticism is an art on its own and not everyone has the ability to give it in a way that it can be processed and understood. Each member of the team, whether the PSM or the PA should feel empowered to give feedback to any other member as long as they do so in a positive and constructive manner. Each member of the team should also

remember to remain open when receiving feedback because the only way to learn and improve is to truly listen to their peers.

That give-and-take between members of a team is what makes the design of the team; the design of a team comes down to balance and power. Without a balance of power, there is absolutely no way that a team will be able to succeed. Power should always be remembered by everyone that it is a reciprocal agreement between all parties. The PSM influences the team dynamic based on their power over the team and the assistant influences and changes the dynamic based on their power to cooperate.

Overall, the PSM and the assistants cannot be mutually exclusive to one another; they *have* to work together. While each member of the team has their own role to play within the structure, there has to be a realisation that this is a shared experience and that the team cannot rest in the power of one. While the team must function *as a team*, the individuals who make up that team are responsible for the team being a success. It is the individual's effort that influences and changes the dynamic of the team on any given day. It does not matter the position of that individual. Ultimately, the assistant is just as responsible for the dynamic of the team as is the PSM.

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