Introduction
There appear to be a wide range of approaches to building and developing effective teamworking. Within the literature there are examples and case studies demonstrating the benefits of each of these approaches[1-3].

From the cases and methodologies presented it is evident that they have all been effective. However, it is also evident that the situations and contexts within which they have been applied have varied considerably. The impact of context on teams is well established and rooted in the theories of group dynamics[4].

Rather than seeking to debate the pros and cons of differing methodologies it may be more fruitful to consider the way in which the context in which a team is working might be linked to the selection of an appropriate intervention. A very useful framework for such decision making was presented by Blake and Mouton[5] and is summarized in Table I. An example of the application of this framework is explored below within the context of a specific case study.

Background to the case
I was asked by the chief executive of a financial services company to help him to improve the way in which his managers worked together as a team. I had already been working for six months on team development programmes in the company, through a series of workshops. The CEO’s belief was that “a short training programme would help to improve top team working” and not a “long programme” such as that used for middle managers. In discussing the stated issue we reviewed the framework in Table I and agreed to step back and review the issues before determining the nature of the required intervention.

The issue
The starting point for development planning was a series of discussions with the chief executive to explore the reasons behind his request for help. His initial response to questions focused on his perceptions that the group members needed to exhibit better interpersonal skills in working with one another and be more mutually supportive. Subsequent discussion revealed a mixture of behavioural and business issues giving rise to his concerns. These issues may be summarized as: poor business performance; consistent failure to produce realistic and achievable business plans; ineffective
implementation of corporate projects; unwillingness to debate performance issues in team meetings in terms of anything other than generalities; lack of support between the functions managed by members of the executive group; and generally stilted and difficult interaction between members of the group in team meetings.

While the CEO was able to demonstrate the business shortcomings, he was less sure of the interpersonal problems. We agreed that, before designing any formal intervention, I should do two things: sit in and observe an executive team meeting; and interview a number of executives about the need for improved teamworking. We also agreed that these actions were interventions in themselves and may raise concerns or expectations, which could have an adverse impact on future teamwork. In discussing potential interventions we agreed that they fell within either the catalysis or confrontation elements in the overall model.

Much time was spent debating the need for the CEO to commit to seeing the process through, and potentially changing the way in which he interacted with group members. He agreed to such a commitment and communicated his desire for improvement to the executive team members.

My observation of the team meeting and interviews with a number of executives identified the following issues relating to the overall need: lack of clarity on individual roles; lack of vision, leadership, direction and feedback from the CEO to team members; common acceptance that company business and planning was poor, and a reluctance to discuss the underlying reasons; high level of friendship between team members, with a high level of functional conflict between friends; lack of willingness to be open in discussions in team meetings; and cynicism towards “touchy-feely” issues such as teamworking.

The approach adopted
Concern over role clarity and expectations was very high and it was agreed that these, combined with strong linkage to business issues, should be a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention mode</th>
<th>Keywords</th>
<th>Indicated when</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catharsis</td>
<td>Emotional release</td>
<td>Pent-up feelings are blocking thought and action; “immobilizing tensions” are barriers to constructive action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalysis</td>
<td>Strengthen perception</td>
<td>Poor communication has resulted in pluralistic ignorance about what is going on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>Value identification</td>
<td>Values, often hidden, are having negative effects and must be brought into focus before the causes of problems can be worked on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescription</td>
<td>Giving answers</td>
<td>There is impasse, hopelessness, or despair, and yet immediate action is imperative to avoid further negative consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory</td>
<td>Concept-based insight</td>
<td>Team members are ready to diagnose and to solve problems systematically, using pertinent theory as the basis for contending with future problems</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Decision-making framework
cornerstone of the process if it was to succeed. This, in essence was a
*catalytic* intervention.

The executive team had a retreat once a year to review strategy and finalize
annual business goals and plans. The members decided that this meeting
could be extended to address team issues and that real progress could be
made if a clear relationship could be established between team behaviour
and business performance. Although this event provided a good opportunity
to examine teamworking issues, it seemed to be important to prepare
individual participants for the discussion and to create a framework or
language to help them to review interpersonal issues in an acceptably
analytical way. (This suggestion was based on the hypothesis that, given
their background and experience, most participants would be logical and
analytic thinkers and decision makers.)

With these points in mind, a process was developed to enable them to define
their roles in terms of required contributions and behaviours; provide pre-
meeting feedback on interpersonal styles; expose them to discussing such
feedback openly with another member of the executive group and expressing
their requirements, expectations and perceptions. The meeting was
structured to enable interpersonal team issues to be examined in conjunction
with business issues. This stage of the process entailed working at the
*confrontation* level within the overall model. This process is summarized
diagrammatically in Figure 1.

It is not practicable to describe in detail here the process which took place
over a four-month period. However, I will highlight some of the elements
that I believe had a significant impact on the eventual outcome.

**Role profiles**

In developing the role profiles, we discussed with the participants
individually their accountabilities and the way they work in practice to fulfil
them. Working from this, we agreed a combination of technical and
behavioural requirements. The behavioural requirements were grouped
under the following headings: personal; interpersonal; managerial;
intellectual; and motivational.

This group was common to all profiles and created the basis for a common
language for use later in the process.

---

**Figure 1. Adopting an approach**

---

**Examining teamwork issues**

**Technical and behavioural requirements**

---

![Diagram](image-url)
Assessment and feedback

Once the role profiles were finalized, team members agreed to complete a battery of psychometric tests, selected to explore their personal profile in relation to required behaviours. This was one of the most difficult parts of the process, given participants’ cynicism about such processes, and real concerns relating to ownership of the data provided. The CEO was personally concerned about this element of the process. To deal with this concern, he agreed to pilot a battery of tests to develop an understanding of the type of feedback provided and how it might be used.

The profile produced from this test battery showed significant mismatches with the required role profile. While he accepted much of the feedback, he was unsure as to how much he could change, and hence how valuable the process was. At this point external pressure helped to resolve some of his concerns. The UK company is a subsidiary of a European organization. The overall chairman had been informed of the pilot assessment, and was eager to see the results. He had major concerns about the UK subsidiary’s performance, and thought that reviewing the CEO’s profile might identify potential causes. He asked him for a copy of the article. Discussion of this led to a number of specific agreements. For example, the chairman agreed to be more directive in future meetings, openly expressing his views, and confronting differences in opinion.

As a result of this experience, the CEO realized that the testing was valuable, and sold it to the other executives, on the basis of a contract agreed between himself and the team. The main aspects of the contract were that no one other than the participant would be told about the results of the assessment, unless that person wanted to share the information; participants would discuss personal development plans with the CEO, who would ensure that support was provided; and the CEO would take part in the process.

Individual feedback sessions focused on the issues raised by the psychometric test profile in relation to role requirements. Participants were encouraged to examine business performance implications of behavioural mismatches, then detailed personal development plans were agreed.

Because of his own experience of sharing his profile with his chairman, the CEO was keen to encourage open sharing of feedback. He began developing this by discussing his own profile with each executive in turn. This was a bold step, given the culture of the company, and the significant gaps between it and his personal profile. His action led to the majority of the team volunteering to review their profiles with him. Many of them went further, following his example, by reviewing their profiles with their direct reports. This encouraged openness and helped to identify ways to improve interpersonal behaviours. Some members of the team exchanged the written summaries of their feedback sessions with other members of the executive team.

External pressure

The profile produced from this test battery showed significant mismatches with the required role profile. While he accepted much of the feedback, he was unsure as to how much he could change, and hence how valuable the process was. At this point external pressure helped to resolve some of his concerns. The UK company is a subsidiary of a European organization. The overall chairman had been informed of the pilot assessment, and was eager to see the results. He had major concerns about the UK subsidiary’s performance, and thought that reviewing the CEO’s profile might identify potential causes. He asked him for a copy of the article. Discussion of this led to a number of specific agreements. For example, the chairman agreed to be more directive in future meetings, openly expressing his views, and confronting differences in opinion.

As a result of this experience, the CEO realized that the testing was valuable, and sold it to the other executives, on the basis of a contract agreed between himself and the team. The main aspects of the contract were that no one other than the participant would be told about the results of the assessment, unless that person wanted to share the information; participants would discuss personal development plans with the CEO, who would ensure that support was provided; and the CEO would take part in the process.

Individual feedback sessions focused on the issues raised by the psychometric test profile in relation to role requirements. Participants were encouraged to examine business performance implications of behavioural mismatches, then detailed personal development plans were agreed.

Because of his own experience of sharing his profile with his chairman, the CEO was keen to encourage open sharing of feedback. He began developing this by discussing his own profile with each executive in turn. This was a bold step, given the culture of the company, and the significant gaps between it and his personal profile. His action led to the majority of the team volunteering to review their profiles with him. Many of them went further, following his example, by reviewing their profiles with their direct reports. This encouraged openness and helped to identify ways to improve interpersonal behaviours. Some members of the team exchanged the written summaries of their feedback sessions with other members of the executive team.

Developing the structure of the top team development meeting

The profile analysis and feedback process was thought by the CEO to have been a success. He found that interaction on an individual basis with his executives was improving. However, he still thought that, to secure lasting change and begin to improve team interactions, the focus on interpersonal performance had to be linked to business performance. A format to achieve this at the annual planning retreat was developed. This entailed a series of
discussions, and working sessions, which examined business issues, team issues, and the interplay between the two. The retreat lasted for three days, and was structured as follows:

1. Day 1 – identification of issues: review of 1990 business performance; future vision; business strengths and weaknesses; business projections; gaps in projections; team gaps; values gaps.
2. Day 2 – identification of options for improvement: ideas and options to close business gaps; ideas and options to close values and team gaps.
3. Day 3 – action planning: priorities; actions; decisions; responsibilities.

Some of the significant aspects of this design are highlighted below:

- The identification of team gaps was based on an analysis of all individual profiles. For example, as a group, the majority of participants had gaps against the role profiles in areas such as openness, creative problem solving, persuasiveness, risk taking, and interpersonal sensitivity; these were presented as team gaps, while individual gaps were still not revealed.

- Values referred to perceived organizational values. The gaps were identified (via a questionnaire to participants before the workshop) in terms of where practice was not in line with values. For example, a key value was seen as being customer focused, in reality, practice was seen by executives as largely ignoring customers’ needs! Overall this represented a confrontation need.

- The implications of the team and values gaps were discussed in relation to the identified business gaps.

- While days one and two separated discussions of team and business gaps, the action planning day focused on interrelating the issues in determining priorities. Within the context of this day the opportunity was taken to introduce teamthink and thus make a theory intervention.

Results

It is useful to look at the results of the process, in terms of outcomes. All team members had circulated their individual written feedback summaries to one another, and openly discussed them. They agreed on the way they wanted the CEO to behave on a one-to-one, and group basis with them. He agreed to work towards meeting their expectations, which included his being more open about his views and preferences on issues being discussed by the team. A series of specific actions was agreed, for example, creative thinking was to be encouraged by greater use of brainstorming at executive meetings.

By the end of the workshop, the level of openness in discussion had increased noticeably. This development was viewed positively by all team members. One notable example was the willingness of the group to challenge sales forecasts, and discuss these openly, without the issue being seen as a personal attack on the sales director. Participants thought they had developed a business plan that was realistic and achievable. Sales forecasts had been dramatically reduced, but were at a level the whole group believed to be achievable. This shift from the previous macho forecasting enabled more realistic support activity work programmes to be developed.
The business plan included a number of major projects involving a high level of joint, cross-functional working. The project teams were established to achieve development goals for individuals, as well as business goals. For example, the group thought a greater input on marketing issues from the investment director would be a valuable way of increasing her involvement with the team, and broaden her role understanding. As a result, she agreed to play a significant role in a customer research project being led by the marketing director.

The team proposed that it should spend some time once a month, at one of the regular executive meetings, to review processes and progress in working as a team. It also proposed holding a follow-up retreat at the time of the year-end business progress review.

It would be impressive to be able to say that, as a result of the process, business performance has improved. However, it is certainly too early to have the data to support such a claim, and given the current economic environment and its impact on the financial services sector, it is unlikely that the company will see spectacular growth in the near future. On the other hand, the company’s business plans are seen by their parent organization as being far more realistic.

Other changes and post-workshop results include major successes in introducing a new product line and establishing the computerization of customer account management processes, within budget and on time. There have been increased levels of discussion of performance issues in executive team meetings. Two roles have been redesigned to match executives’ strengths, with full co-operation from the other members of the team. Changes in organizational structure, such as the shift from a functionally designed to a product-driven senior-level organization, have been smoothly implemented, although such changes were resisted prior to the workshop.

Not all the post-workshop changes have been positive in the short term. One member of the executive team resigned. This represented a major threat to the credibility and apparent value of the process. However, in discussions with him and other team members, it became clear that the degree of mismatch between him and his role meant that both he and the company would benefit from the change.

The discussions around this incident may well be classified within the overall model as being a prescriptive intervention.

Lessons from the process
A recent review with the CEO of the process and progress helped to clarify some of the lessons I think I have learned from this experience.

Among the most significant was the importance of clarifying and agreeing realistic expectations. During the process, the CEO became frustrated at the “slow pace of change”. I had failed to make explicit the difficulty in bringing about behavioural change in an organizational context. As a result the CEO made a number of unilateral interventions to “speed up the process”, which in reality raised doubts about his motives among team members, and increased the difficulty in securing their commitment. There is also the value of building a common framework and language. Many
communication and perceptual problems were avoided because they had a common language for examining roles and behaviour.

We found also that there is a bonding value of a shared experience that is seen as challenging. Participants found the assessment process somewhat threatening and difficult to handle. War stories about their experience of the process established a common ground on which improved relationships were subsequently built. Commitment from the top was critically important. There can be little doubt that the fact that the CEO underwent the same assessment process as the rest of his team, and was the first to share his results, played a major part in securing buy-in from other team members. We confirmed the importance of building real and acceptable links between behaviour and business performance. I am sure that the process would have remained cynically viewed as peripheral and “touchy-feely” unless its value as an aid to dealing with business issues had been clearly established.

It is often difficult to substantiate team development interventions in terms of quantifiable value added. However, I do believe that the process outlined, by focusing on resolving real business issues, rather than working from an idealized vision of teamworking, has been seen by participants as adding real value. The process and behaviours developed have been acknowledged to have a positive impact on areas such as quality of business planning, in which members’ performance is judged. This will increase the likelihood of the changes in teamworking being sustained. In addition, consciously matching the nature of the intervention with the issues and context provided a basis for enabling real results to be achieved.

Conclusions
The overall value of matching the nature of team building and development intervention to the context and issues facing the team is reinforced by this case study. In addition it highlights the importance of the facilitator not only being sensitive to organizational issues and requirements but also to an understanding of the complex nature of group dynamics and teamworking factors and processes.

References

Malcolm Higgs

Malcolm Higgs is Principal, Towers Perrin, and Editor of this journal.