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PRESENTS THE COACHING SERIES...

## **“A PANE IN THE GLASS “**

### **IT'S TEAM DYNAMICS STUPID**

We're all familiar with the KISS theory (Keep It Simple Stupid). That philosophy has helped millions see their way through seemingly complex situations.

In 1992, candidate William Jefferson Clinton of Arkansas had a campaign manager by the name of James Carville. Mr. Carville knew that Bill Clinton's strength was his ability to manage financial affairs of state so he used the KISS theory to focus on that strength and coined, what has become one of the most famous campaign slogans in U.S. political history, "It's the economy stupid!"

Well, in my humble opinion, in our sport, "It's Team Dynamics stupid!"

And what's the "it"? It's about winning but as I prefer, performing. No, it's definitely not the quality of your curling delivery. No, it's not the cunning of your game plan. No, it's not what you eat or how you train. No, it's not the mental strategies you have in place. It's not any of these by themselves. They are all important but to my mind, after decades of working with the best athletes, coaches and instructors in this sport, the key to team performance is the quality of the team's dynamics.

Permit me a story and it's one I've told before. This one took place west of Banff, AB when I was the National Development Coach for the Canadian Curling Association in Calgary. I'm an avid skier and when I moved to Calgary from my life-long home in southern Ontario, I made a promise to myself that I would take full advantage of some of the best alpine skiing in the world which I did on a regular basis.

My partner at the National Training Center at that time was Helen Radford. She and two of her friends invited me for a day of skiing at Lake Louise. Normally I'm a Sunshine Village kind of a guy but heh, it's Lake Louise stupid! There was something special about Helen's friends. Both were former members of Canadian national teams, one for soccer and one for basketball. On the quad chair lift, sitting between Helen's friends, one asked the classic question many might have asked about our sport. "Bill, why does Canada not choose its four best athletes to represent the country in international competitions?"

Coming from soccer and basketball athletes, who were accustomed to attending selection or try-out camps to "make the national squad", this was a perfectly logical question. My reply was this.

"Curling is a unique sport. Each member of the team contributes 25 % of the effort but does so 100% of the time."

I went on to explain that the role of the athlete is to be prepared for all circumstances that might occur in the context of the game. Everyone delivers two stones each end and there is no telling which player is in the hack with the "killer shot" to be attempted (and in every game there IS a killer end and in each end there IS a killer shot and I'm amazed how often that player is NOT the skip). Except for occasional times, there are no reserves to be called upon if one player is struggling. There are very few if any opportunities in the game for the players to "regroup". Some teams don't even have a coach to take that precious arm's length view on matters of the contest and even if they did, there are scarce opportunities to dialogue with the coach. No, curling is the ultimate players' game.

The coach's task is to empower the team to be ready and react appropriately to a series of ever-changing conditions, emotions, situations and circumstances. Interestingly enough, as a coach, my goal is for the team, in context of the game, to be so prepared that the team does not need me!

It was my way of saying, the same thing the late Herb Brooks (played so well by actor Kurt Russell in the motion picture "Miracle", the story of the 1980 Olympic Gold

Medal U.S.A. men's ice hockey team in Lake Placid, NY) said when asked about the list of 26 players he handed to his assistant coach, Craig Patrick, on the second day of the two week selection camp. Coach Patrick noticed that Herb Brooks had left some of the best players off the list. To which Coach Brooks replied, "I'm not looking for the best players. I'm looking for the right players."

Herb Brooks knew what so many take years to learn, that a team is made up of players who want to contribute to the success of the team, and not to their personal success. Often, the right players are not the most individually gifted players, very often, more often than we realize!

My reply to the athlete's question that day at Lake Louise also spoke to the importance of team dynamics on a curling team. I have addressed this issue in countless presentations and other articles so I won't repeat them here but suffice to say that ***most of the distractions that negatively impact upon the performance of a team come from within the team itself.*** Team dynamics have to be solid.

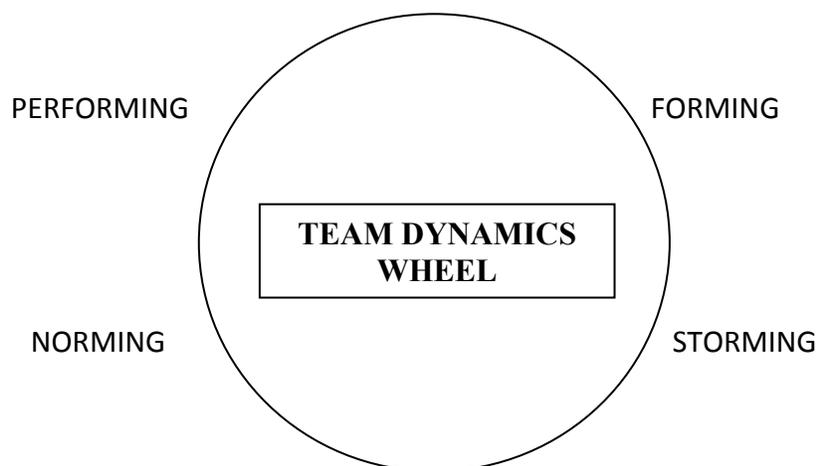
One example I use when I present this topic at high performance camps is that of Garry Van Den Berghe, the long time former second of the Jeff Stoughton team. He's rarely the best second in a competition from a shooting statistics perspective (don't get me started on shooting statistics) but Jeff knew that what Garry brought to the team (notably spirit and mental toughness) was a key element to the success of the team and wouldn't consider anyone else at that position.

If I might digress for a moment to make another point, a curling "coach" has challenges that his/her counterparts in most other team sports do not face. A curling coach has minimal contact with the team during a game and therefore must have his/her charges totally prepared for all occurrences that may take place through the course of the contest. Unlike his/her ice hockey, basketball, soccer colleagues who can interchange athletes for specific situations in a game and interact with anyone of them pretty much at will, this is not the case with a curling coach and his/her athletes. There, for all my coaching colleagues, that paragraph was for you!

I hope by now, my message to you is clear. Look for the right players when you form your team, not just the players with the most aesthetically pleasing delivery. Consider the intangibles. Look for the Garry Van Den Berghes. That's who you want on your team!

For a team to succeed, it must become greater than the sum of its parts. That takes time my friends, time, and in most cases, lots of it! The large number of excellent curlers in Canada works against us so much of the time. It's so easy for a team to change players, looking for that magic "chemistry" as the key to instant success. Meadow muffins! That's a fool's game if there ever was one in our sport. Find the "right players". Pay the price. Learn how to play together and success will come. Oh yah, you might consider attending a high performance camp along the way to make sure you're not just getting really good at doing the wrong thing or worse, ignoring areas that are necessary for team success. So many teams keep doing the same things over and over again, but expect different results. If you do what you've always done, chances are you're going to get what you always got. It's your choice!

To better understand this whole "team dynamics" thing, let's take a look at a graphic that I believe will help. It's called "The Team Dynamics Wheel".



The first stage is the “forming” stage. As a member of a group, an athletics team, a workforce group, a group of students working together on a school project etc. all the members of the group will be very cautious at this stage, watching very carefully what they say, how they react, what they wear perhaps and how they project. Most will not reveal their “real self” at this stage.

As the novelty of the group wears away, the members start to reveal the person they really are. And, that can cause problems as members of the group begin to challenge one another for positions of leadership. Tough questions can be asked of one another. Power struggles can result. This “storming stage” can get down right uncomfortable for the members of the group. But the upside is that this stage avoids the dreaded “elephant in the living room”. If you’re not familiar with that expression it simply means that there is a huge issue that cries out for resolution. Everyone knows it exists but no one wants to acknowledge it.

But, as the group works through the storming stage, they begin to respect one another’s differences and see the diversity within the group as strengths, not weaknesses. A communications protocol emerges so that the discourse among the members of the team is a positive rather than a negative distraction (more about that later). Generally, this stage is the beneficiary of the previous.

Finally, the group starts to see that only when the members work together, does the group “move its performance yardsticks” forward. Clearly the group has entered the final stage and begins to perform to its potential. It has become “greater than the sum of its parts”!

By the way, don’t think that just because you’ve arrived at the performing stage, you will never revisit the storming stage and work your way back to the performing stage through the norming stage. You will. Many times I suspect.

#### ACTIVITY

There’s a game I play with teams in high performance camps. It’s called, “Win As Much As You Can”. Each member of the team of four has two cards. One has the letter “Y” and the other, the letter “X”.

The format of the game is simple. On ten occasions, I will give the command “up”, and when I do, each member of the group is asked to raise one of the cards, either the “Y” or the “X” so that the other members of the group of four can see it. Therefore, on each of these occasions, there will be a combination of Y’s and X’s. On a chart at the front of the room is displayed the five possible combinations of Y’s and X’s with dollar amounts to be earned for each player depending on the card he/she displays.

There is but one rule. No one (except me of course) may speak! And, remember, the object of the game is to win as much money as you can!

### **WIN AS MUCH AS YOU CAN**

4 X’s (each loses \$1)

1X & 3Y’s (X wins \$3 and each Y loses \$1)

2X’s & 2Y’s (each X wins \$2 & each Y loses \$2)

3X’s & 1Y (each X wins \$1 & Y loses \$3)

4Y’s (each wins \$1)

At the conclusion of the ten raising of the cards I make an important point about the English language. The pronoun “you”, as with many quirks in the language, can be interpreted as either “singular” or “plural”. If an individual viewed the word “you” as singular, he/she would have set out to “beat his/her team-mates”. On the other hand, if an individual viewed the word “you” as plural, then they would have concluded that the competition was among the teams, and the object was to win more money than the other “teams”.

For those individuals who were trying to win as much money as they could for themselves, they would have held up the “X” card every time, hoping for scenario two from the chart above so they could win \$3 while each of his/her “team-mates” were losing \$1. But, for the “team” to win, only scenario five (4Y’s) would win money for the team. But to do so, each member of the team had to “trust” his/her team-mates that they too had the good of the team at heart and not individual glory.

If you examine the chart carefully, the first scenario illustrates that when the team is comprised of members who have a personal agenda, the team loses big time. Even the middle three scenarios are mathematically neutral. Only if the team works together, does it win!

Why anyone would want to “beat his/her team-mates” is a mystery to me! And, oh yes, the “no talking” rule, that’s to illustrate how frustrating it is when one member of the team “gets it” and can’t communicate that to the team. But in curling, we do that all the time.

Communication! How often have we heard successful teams give much of the credit for their success, to the quality of their communications protocol?

Well, what exactly is a “communications protocol”? It’s nothing more than knowing, what to say, to whom to say it, why to say, when to say, how to say and where to say it.

Usually we think of distractions as external. It might be the novelty of a new curling facility, the travel to the venue, the accommodation, the food, the ice, the lighting, the draw, the stones, the officials, the ... well, it could be just about anything animate. But, sorry, that’s less likely to be the case than what we say to one another! You can either be your own worst enemies or your best allies in your pursuit of excellence.

Communication is a complex issue especially on a team with relatively few members such as a curling team. Everything that’s said is critical and up front. It’s hard if not impossible to brush a thoughtless remark under the carpet. As a result, when something is said, it must meet six communication criteria. Haphazard verbiage can leave an interpersonal relationship scar that no plastic surgery can repair. Let’s examine the six communications protocols.

**Who** – This not only applies to the speaker but also the recipient of the message. Sometimes it takes a particular team member who might have established a special relationship with another team member who is the one who must “tell it like it is”. The same message delivered by the wrong person can be disastrous. Also, the right message

delivered by the right person but to the wrong teammate can result in the same negative results.

Getting to know your teammates as both athletes and real people are keys to making sure the “who” protocol is appropriate. That’s why teams “bond” not only at the curling rink but also on the golf course etc.

**How** – The medium is the message! How the message is delivered can be as important as the message itself. It may be a gesture or a look. It doesn’t have to be verbal and sometimes, it’s better if it’s not. Sandra Schmirler’s team, after a big shot would pass the shooter and quickly lock “pinkie fingers” as they acknowledged the shot but not let the opposition know that it was something other than business as usual.

**What** – Again, this comes from knowing your teammates. What you might say to one may be totally inappropriate to another. It takes time to learn what can be said to one and not someone else.

**Why** – On occasion, nothing needs to be said. So before you enter into a discourse with a teammate, be sure to know why you’re doing it. Is it worth it? The very fact that you enter into the communication might be distracting even though you’re the right person, saying the right thing to the right person at the right time in the right location but for the wrong reason.

**When** – Some want news immediately. Others prefer to get it later, some, not at all. Knowing when to deliver the message can be a key element in its effectiveness. In curling, when a teammate misses a shot, some will want to know immediately why it was missed. Others will want some time to work it out for themselves before feedback is provided. Know when to deliver your message!

**Where** – This is clearly part of the “when” protocol. Some don’t mind receiving direct communication on the spot but for others, it would be embarrassing and be a huge distraction. Location is a key element to be sure.

So, let me send a message to you. Communicate with care and preparation. I’m amazed at the number of elite teams who have never formally established the communication protocol for their team. It’s not difficult. Just speak up! But don’t wait

for a situation to occur on the ice to learn the communications rules for your team. Discuss it up front and don't be afraid to revisit and revise the rules. People change and the way in which they wish to be treated can as well.

#### ACTIVITY

In turn, role-play a situation whereby a teammate has missed a shot. Each player records what the athlete who missed the shot wants from him/her as a result. Verbalize your opinion with the player playing the role of the athlete who missed the shot remaining "poker faced" throughout. When the last member of the team has answered, the player having missed the shot will evaluate the responses. When each player has played the role of the athlete missing the shot, move on to another typical game situation (i.e. when a great shot is made). I have had teams who have played together for several seasons learn much about communication through this activity.

Who to say, how to say, what to say, why to say, when to say and where to say – don't be wrong!

For those sceptics out there who still think this "team dynamics" thing is so much pebble water, I will refer you to my friend Lindsay Sparkes, who one day, decided to list, in her opinion, the ten best "characteristics of championship teams". They clearly are not the only characteristics of championship teams but in her career as athlete (national, world and Olympic titles), instructor, coach and national team leader, these were the ones she felt were indispensable.

- a steadfast belief in one another
- open and honest communication
- at peace with the position played
- open to coaching input
- have clearly established goals
- establish routines
- team comes first

- display unity and fearlessness
- pay attention to details
- enjoy the journey

What impressed me most about Lindsay's list is the absence of technical characteristics. There's no "great brushing" or "accurate placement of stones" or "perfect curling deliveries" or "great line calling" or "superb shot selection". I'm sure all of these characteristics would be on Lindsay's list but she didn't feel they were in her top ten and I couldn't agree more.

I don't know how many times I have been contacted by a team asking to meet with me about "an issue". When we sit down to discuss "the issue" which had been described as technical, or tactical or some other aspect of the team's performance, 9 times out of 10, within a very few minutes, the team is talking about some aspect of team dynamics!

A good friend with whom I shared the task of presenting a coaching symposium in Prince George during the Scott Tournament of Hearts, Dr. Peter Usher, taught me about "the oil light". The "oil light" to which Dr. Usher referred is sometimes known as "the engine light" on your vehicle.

If you were driving down the road, and the oil/engine light illuminated, you must do three simple things and they must be done in a particular order. First and foremost, you must stop. There is a critical situation with your engine! Driving with the oil/engine light "on" will likely result in a dead engine followed by a costly repair. Next, you need to find out what's wrong which may require the assistance of an expert (i.e. mechanic). Lastly of course, the necessary repairs must be made.

Curling teams have an "oil/engine light" too. When it illuminates, the team must stop, find out what's wrong and make the necessary repairs just like your vehicle. You will know when the oil/engine light is "on" when team performance drops, you lose trust and faith in one another and when one team member "blames" another for the team's lack of performance. Teams without a certified coach frequently don't recognize

the oil/engine light and stick their collective heads in the sand hoping the problem will resolve itself. It seldom does. Fortunate is the team that has a certified coach who not only recognizes the oil/engine light, but knows enough to stop, discover and repair before the team has “an elephant in the living room”. The activity described below is the best one I know to accomplish that task and better still, avoid that pachyderm in the first place.

The activity is called “STOP-START-CONTINUE”. It's simple and highly effective. Here's how it works.

At the top of a blank piece of paper, each team member (and the coach if applicable) places the words, STOP, START and CONTINUE. In isolation, each team member then creates a list below the appropriate heading the “things” the team needs to stop doing (due to irrelevancy or distraction), start doing or continue to do. When all members of the team have completed the STOP-START-CONTINUE lists, a third party may, especially if the team is new to this activity, anonymously read all the items on the “stop” lists. Athletes are frequently surprised that something they indicated needed to stop was on two or three of their team-mates list as well and no one ever said it up front. Even if only one team member listed something, the others may agree, even though they did not include it on their list, it's worth ceasing. Then move on to the “start” and “continue” columns.

Someone on the team needs to make a summary of the results of the activity especially the items agreed to on the “continue” column. It's my participant observation that team's rarely if ever, identify the “things” they do that promote performance. They talk lots about their failures but little about what makes them succeed! STOP-START-CONTINUE should be done at regular intervals throughout the season.

Before I close, I will leave you with one more activity that has proven useful to teams and it's another “circle activity”. This time the team uses one sheet of paper and scribes a large circle. Inside the circle, co-operatively they list all those aspects of a pending competition over which the team has total control or a high amount of

influence. Outside the circle, the team records all those aspects of the competition over which it has either no control or very little influence.

By now, you should be able to see the value in this. Why would a team waste time, psychological energy, mental energy, nervous energy or physical energy on those aspects of the competition that are outside the circle?

That's it! I've rambled enough. I hope I have put a burr under your saddle. I also hope I've given you some tools to remove it and move those yardsticks.

Enjoy working with your athletes!