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Oshman JCC

SVPMA Monthly Speaker Series

Guest: Christina Wodtke

High Performing Teams

Presentation: The Formula for High Performing Teams

About the lecturer:

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Introduction:

What do we know about teams and teamwork? We do know that diverse teams are more successful. Beyond that there are some cultural and other issues that are related to team effectiveness. As an example, if we look at the importance of context, and in specific the level of context that works, as related to regional or cultural norms, and the variability, we see some interesting trends:

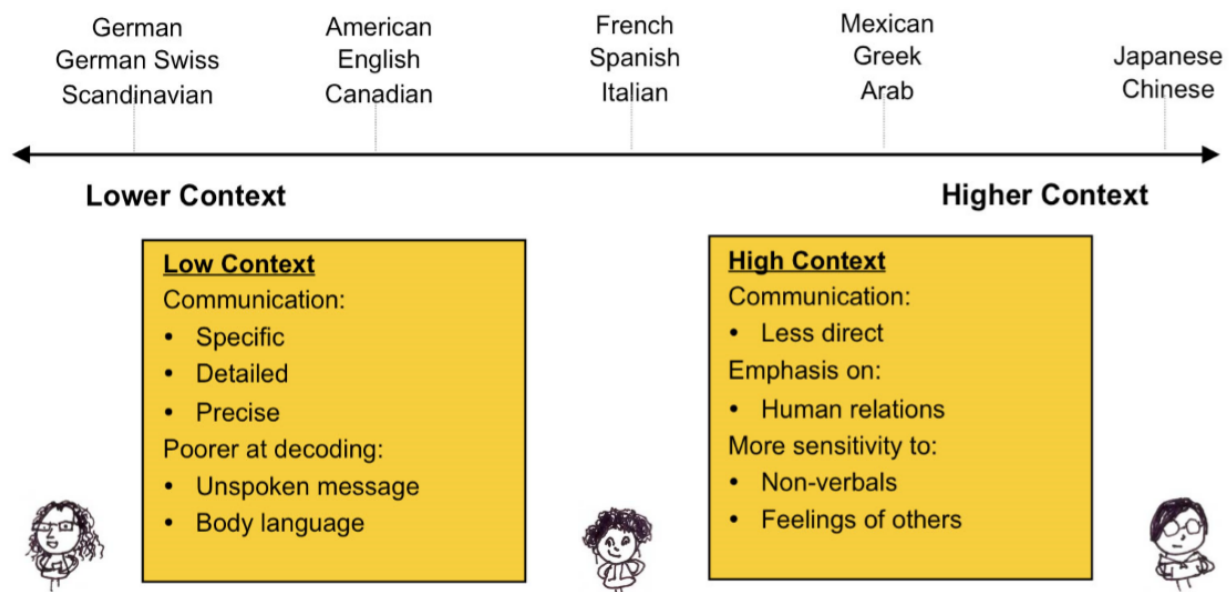


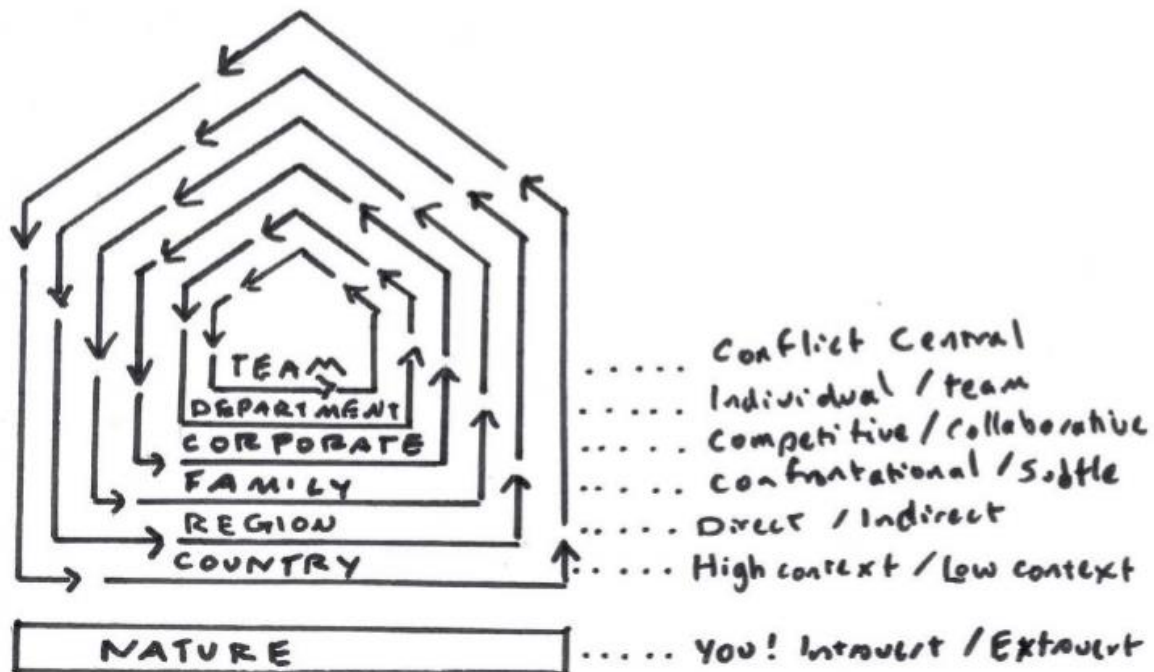
Figure 1- Context Map

Looking at the traits in low context vs high context, and how they map to nationalities and ethnicities, it is clear that there are differences. Having awareness of cultural and ethnic contextual sensitivities, is one of the attributes of a diverse team.

The power of diverse teams that mix different cultural and ethnic members is that it forces us to think beyond our own personal universe, and to take into account the dynamics and team makeup. Particularly, as the trend towards geographically remote teams the blending of the context increases.

The concept of context comes from [Erin Meyer's](#) Culture map, and context (how communication is ranked) is but one axis of the map.

Much of this is also part of the Cultural Shearing Layers, or how you build up a structure on top of the team members "layers". At a person's base is their nature. Introvert, Extrovert, etc. are attributes that are part of your core being. On top of that are layered various things that are either added by your circumstances, or your work style. All the way up to the team that you may or may not be a part of.



@cwodtke

Figure 2 - The Cultural Shearing Layers

As you progress up the layers, a person's attributes, and what they can and do bring to a team become more focused.

An important take-away is that our framing, in this context, is a subjective map, not an absolute truth. Once you recognize that your frame isn't "Truth", you realize the strength of diversity in the team context.

This leads us to a fundamental question ...

Are all groups teams?

We naturally tend to think that any “group” is a team, but that is clearly not true. Christina at this time began with an illustration of team evolution, with five discrete levels, starting with a loosely associated workgroup, where you just have people together, all the way to a “Mindful Team”.

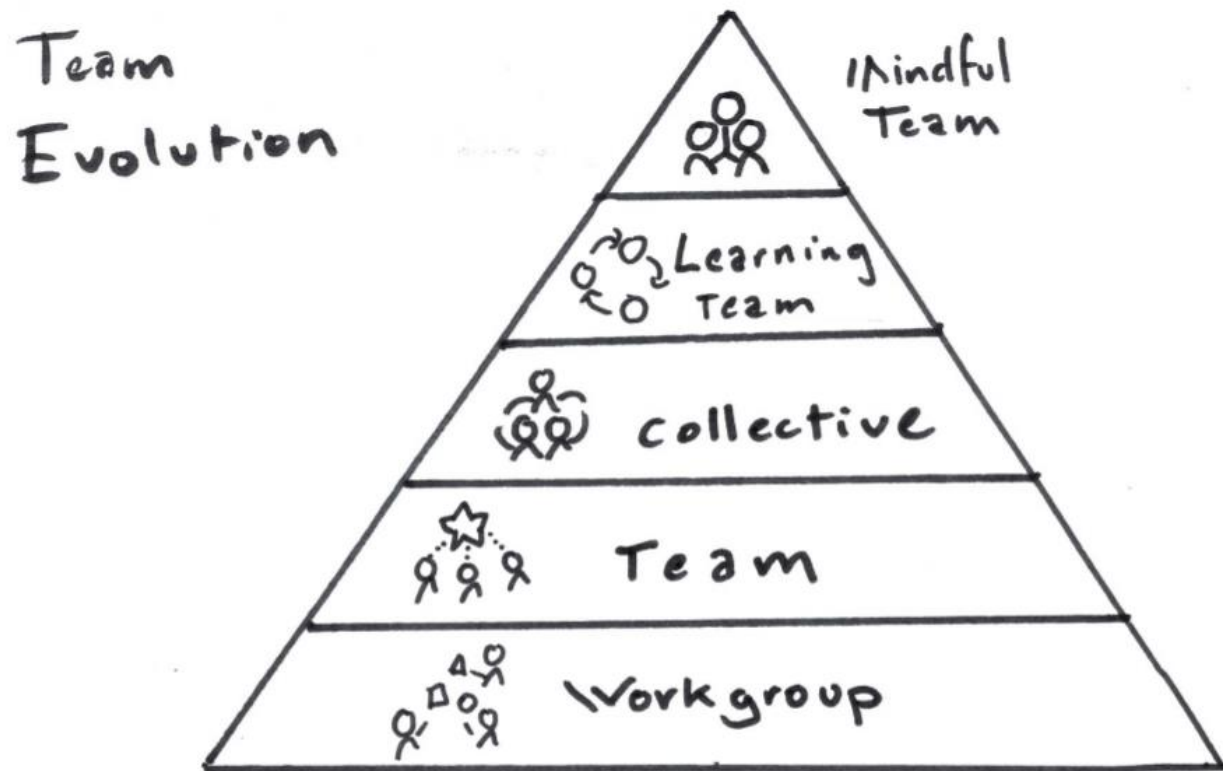


Figure 3 - Team Evolution

One example of a workgroup that Christina brought up would be a department (say a call center) where you had many individuals doing a task. Some key attributes of a workgroup:

- Strong, clearly focused leader
- Individual accountability
- Individual work products
- Indirect measurement of effectiveness
- Discusses, decides, delegates

There are plenty of groups that do not justify being called a team.

A Team, by comparison, has common purpose, performance goals (measureable), complimentary skills, and mutual accountability. In short, instead of a collection of individuals with individual accountability (calls per hour), the work output of the team is a coordinated effort.

If the two phrases above – Common Purpose and Performance Goals – didn’t ring any bells, Christine reinforced this by the concepts of objectives and key results (or OKR). Teams are measured by

Objectives – a qualitative goal, and then by specific Key Results – success criteria. Together, these are the differentiator between a group and a team.

Complimentary Skills

A team is more than a collective of individuals, with individual metrics. A team is made of people with Complimentary Skills. The old adage, the collective is more than the sum of its parts rings true to describe this.

If you think of a business, and their business model, there are really three legs to that stool. The product, or what is offered and bought by customers, the business side that knows the market, how to sell to it, and that the product is viable, and the tech (or operations side) that knows the implementation, and can ensure that the product is matched to the customer needs.

There is also a differential between how connected a team is and the connections of a workgroup. This illustration captures it quite well:

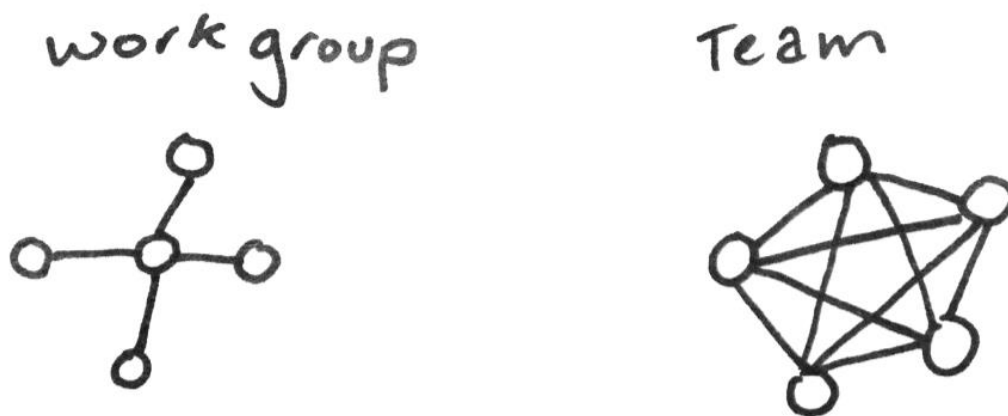


Figure 4 - Workgroup vs team connections

In the workgroup, there is one person (the “Strong Leader”) who is the focal point. In the team, all the nodes are interconnected, and their individual skills and strengths are at play, balancing skills with the team output.

Learning Teams

The next step on the teams pyramid is the concept of learning teams. Sometimes these are called “Lean Teams,” and are characterized by improving over time. As product managers, we instantly make the connection to the build-test-learn cycle of Lean Startup (c.f. Eric Ries), but the concept is indeed much older.

In fact, the concepts that this is based upon are much older (the reviewer first heard these concepts in the early 1990’s while at a wafer fab). The way learning teams function is that the team’s life is broken

into specific epochs, Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing and Adjourning. At each epoch, differing attributes and behaviors are exhibited.

Forming:

- Little Agreement
- Unclear Purpose
- Guidance and direction (often from the outside)

Storming:

- Conflict
- Increased Clarity of Purpose
- Power Struggles
- Coaching

Norming:

- Agreement and consensus
- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Facilitation

Performing:

- Clear vision and purpose
- Focus on goal achievement
- Delegation

Adjourning:

- Task completion
- Good feeling about achievements
- Recognition

One thing that is clear by this framework is that the team begins, completes a task, and is disbanded, the members then moving on to other projects and programs. However, a Learning Team is around for a lot longer, and the linear progression becomes more of a cycle. Over time, a team may lose members (who leave), and may add members (new hires, or newly inducted members), and Learning teams develop some coping vehicles – like onboarding processes – to accommodate these evolutions.

Christine drew the process like this:

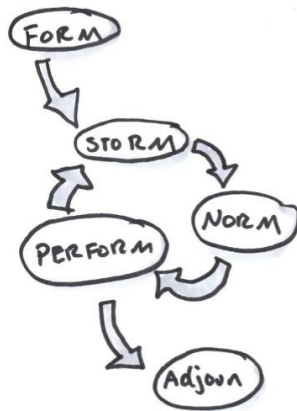


Figure 5 - Learning Team Cycle

From this, you can build a matrix to lay out the various nodes on this cycle that looks like this:

| | GOALS | ROLES | NORMS |
|---------|------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Form | set OKRs | set responsibility | set norms |
| Perform | confidence & PIs | FEEDBACK | Adjust norms |
| Adjoin | Grade | Promote / Fire | Question Evolve codify |

Figure 6 - Learning Team Matrix

Recognizing that the critical gates/checkpoints in the cycle are the Forming, Performing, and Adjourning nodes (noting that the adjourning isn't disbandment, but the entry into the next cycle) that the goals, roles and norms in each gate are distinct.

Forming a Learning Team

Christine did lay out some key steps in the forming of a Learning Team. First you need to identify and then recruit/set roles that are tied to the expertise of the team members, and the needs of the team. This is the getting people in seats aspect of team formation.

Is there an engineer or a technical asset? How about marketing or communication? Here is where the definition of the team is crucial.

As important as setting the formal roles, do not forget about the informal roles. Facilitator, note taker, tie-breaker, spokesperson, schedule keeper, and housekeeper are important, yet too often then are not explicitly discussed, and thus fall on people implicitly. Make it explicit, share the roles if desired, and recognize that they are all important contributions to the team output.

Once a team is formed, it moves into a different phase, the ...

How a Learning team Performs

The key to the performing step is the concept of feedback. This can be individual feedback, as well as team feedback. Both are important, and both are structural components of the feedback mechanism.

Christine did spend time on this, and the velocity of feedback. Clearly, annual review cycles are suboptimal, and weekly is exhausting, but what “feels” good is roughly quarterly. The idea is to have the feedback be close enough to the activity that spawned it, but not so near in time that there aren’t emotional drivers.

It is important that feedback be Actionable, Measureable, and Iterative. Christine again had a graphic that illustrates her point on feedback:

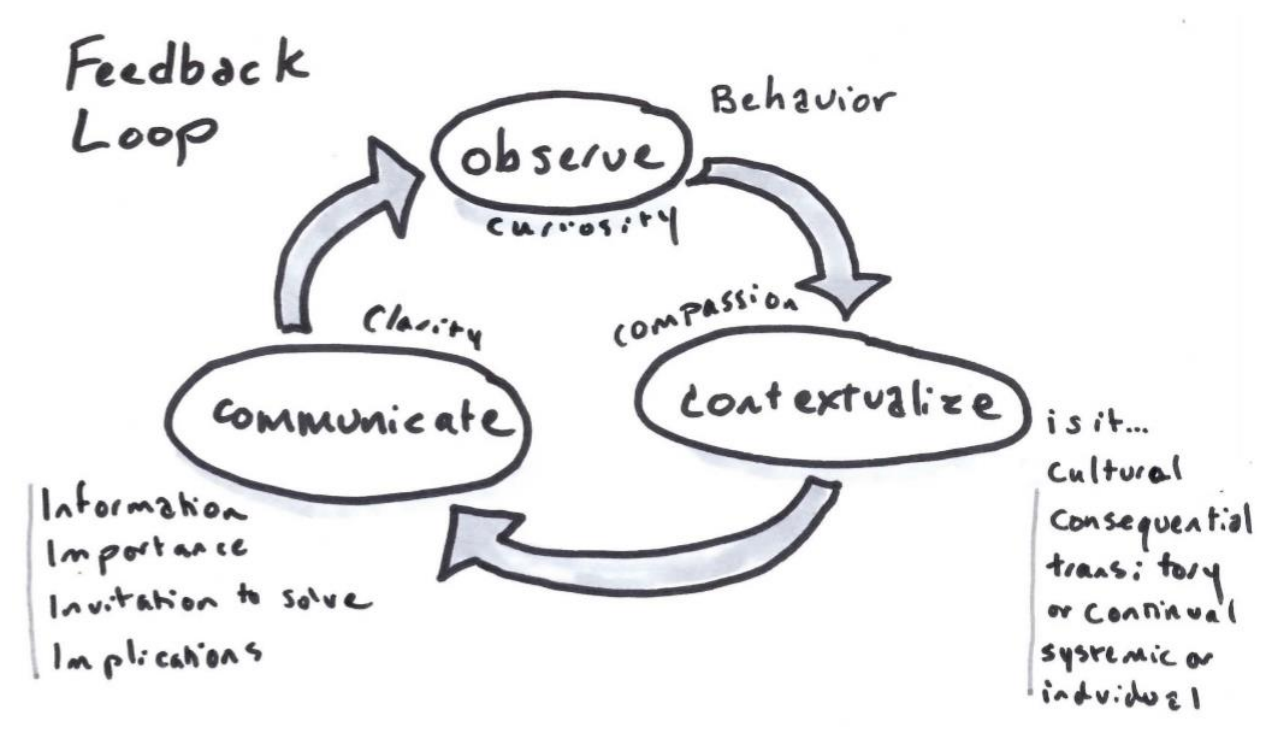


Figure 7 - The Feedback Loop w/helpers

From this, she clearly articulated the importance of the feedback, and we had a lengthy dialog about frequency, and models, from the idea of a retrospective (as in Scrum based Agile), to the failure of the typical corporate arc (as she described the review process from her time at Yahoo!)

Some other ideas was to use the [Carbon Five Dartboard](#), or the [Spotify Health Check Model](#). She was insistent that the team dynamics and what works for them should be the deciding factor.

Summary

The session was lively, Christine was an engaging, and enthusiastic speaker on the topic. At the end, she did mention that this was prepared from her books (Radical Focus), and her work on team dynamics.

It did feel a bit rushed, as she had 60+ slides, but Christine's style and delivery kept the audience engaged, and she did reserve about 15 minutes for Q&A at the end.

Geoff Anderson – a practicing product manager with over 20 years of experience, in a variety of industries from semiconductor manufacturing equipment, networking technology, industrial measurement and test, enterprise communications software, nanotechnology, and educational services. He has a degree in Physics from SJSU, volunteers in the rescue of retired racing greyhounds, mentors high school kids interested in science and physics, and loves to read science fiction novels.