SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS
of TEAM

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SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS
of TEAM

ALAN N. WRIGHT

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Editor's Foreword

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We welcome your comments on these books, and we welcome your suggestions for new subject areas and authors we ought to consider.

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Acknowledgments

I am grateful for all those experiences with teams, which have taught me so well—as a team member, leader, trainer, and coach. One of the great characteristics of those who work with groups and teams is open sharing of tips and tricks with colleagues. Most of what exists in your personal coach's toolbox of techniques or insights was handed down multiple times before you discovered it. Even when you seem to have created something new, upon reflection you can see the threads that tie it back to something else. The unfortunate part of this rich history in experiential learning is that it is hard to give credit to the originators because many times they remain anonymous. Every team I've been with has taught me something new—thank you.

Writing is a long process, and I would like to specifically thank several readers, coaches, or editors who helped me along the journey. Gloria Wright, Bruce McAllistar, and Elayne Vanasse all helped improve early versions. I would also like to thank George Bullard, the senior editor for The Columbia Partnership Leadership Series, for encouragement and support with the book proposal. California State University at Northridge should also be acknowledged, as the key project in my sabbatical semester was the completion of this manuscript. I also thank Pablo Jiménez and the staff at Chalice Press for bringing this book to completion.

Finally, my wife Shannon and our three youngest children—Megan, Tyler, and Kylie—are all due extra kudos for enduring the process of "the book" and the author's crazy antics while working at home. To the three oldest children already out of the house—Jessica, Joshua, and Benjamin—thanks for life lessons represented in the book.

Preface

The visionary hope for this book is to contribute to a movement that develops truly effective ministry teams in churches and parachurch organizations. Teams are a means to an end: that churches would become effective team-based organizations that will *do justice, show mercy, and invite all to walk humbly with their God* (Mic. 6:8, paraphrased).

The years of fun, rewards, and frustration I've experienced as a team coach and group facilitator are behind this book. These years have shown me both what makes teams work and the spiritual elements that ultimately cause teams to thrive or dive. Through a series of parables, models, and discussions, the book helps readers understand the complexity of teams, highlighting manageable "team principles" and the underlying "spiritual dimensions" that enable team performance.

"Team" has become such a buzzword that yet another book on teams may not seem necessary. But teams are essential for ministry organizations in today's world. To create a team-based church or parachurch organization requires training and coaching, not mere theory. What we do not need is another book merely extolling the values of "team." The unique contribution of this book is that it brings together in one message (l) a behavioral understanding of team effectiveness, (2) specific spiritual and biblical principles combined with those practices, and (3) powerful learning tools for coaches to move teams from theory to life practice. Creating spiritually healthy teams will have a tremendous impact on the church's mission in the world.

This book will help you in at least three ways. First, it will provide you a framework to develop a team-based organization by introducing a model that can be replicated with training. Second, the book will challenge you at a personal level to explore how to become a better team member and leader. The great teams are made from members who are spiritually healthy. Yes, the great team has good process and skills, but process alone is insufficient.

Effective teams are spiritually sound. Third, given that as a team coach and trainer I've become more and more concerned about how to bridge the gaps between knowing and doing, the book offers learning methods and coaching strategies to help individuals and teams close the gaps as they move from awareness to practice to integration.

Al Wright—December 2010

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The Power of Self-directed Teams

Michael Phelps became a media hero at the Beijing Olympics in his quest to be the first swimmer to win eight gold medals at a single Olympic games. However, only five of those eight medals were in individual events, while three came from team relay events. The 4 by 100 team relay event will stand out as a sports classic for years to come. Phelps, Garrett Weber-Gale, Cullen Jones, and Jason Lezak collectively set a new world record for the event. Each American swimmer was within fractions of a second ahead or behind their competitors in their respective legs. But, with the USA trailing France in the final leg, Jason Lezak swam the fastest 100-meter leg ever for a come-from-behind victory by 8/100ths of a second. The U.S. team beat the previous world record by four seconds. The team excelled and achieved a remarkable outcome. Every swimmer had turned in a world-class performance and, in the words of Jason Lezak, cited at the NBC Olympics Web site, "You know, this isn't a 4 by 100, this is a 400. We're a team."

Teams accomplish great things by the combined efforts of their members. Each member contributes, but in different ways. Centuries ago the apostle Paul created the best team metaphor to describe the work of the church—"the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12–31). Different members of a team have different functions and that allows for the collective work to get done. "If they were

all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body" (1 Cor. 12:19–20). Teams accomplish visions by the contributions of their members. What distinguishes a team from a group is a pragmatic principle—getting something done. Implement visions. Achieve results. Change the world.

The Western church today faces a tremendous challenge. The number of committed followers of Christ in the U.S. is in decline, as measured by regular church attendance.[1] Almost every mainline denomination is in decline.[2] American clergy are aging and the younger replacement leadership is not there.[3]

A reversal in this trend is possible if churches and parachurch ministries shift to team-based organizations. If the Western church continues with its current approach to ministry, then growth, outreach, and impact on culture will continue to diminish.

Traditional Church Organizations

The vast majority of churches are not organized as team-based organizations (TBO) with a visionary agenda. The common church organizational model is staff-driven rather than team-driven with an outreach orientation. The average church in America is small. Seventy percent have a worship attendance of 125 or less.[4] A church this size usually supports a professional staff (pastor) of one. Larger congregations add staff at a ratio of staff to membership of 1 to 59 according to an unpublished survey in 2006 by the Leadership Network. Pastors work extremely hard and the demand of providing "services" to the church membership is overwhelming. Clergy are working hard: giving of themselves, preaching, visiting the sick, and attending meetings. Today's pastors entering church ministry after seminary are leaving in increasing numbers due in part to the excessive demands and burnout.[5]

Pastors are not laboring completely alone. Volunteers are present at the core of church life. Small groups of volunteers give extraordinary amounts of time to the church's activities. While professional church staff still manage or supervise the bulk of church activities, and the additional management of these volunteers as part-time workers becomes a major time commitment for the full-time staff, these dedicated volunteers are vital to the success of congregations. No one has calculated the real numbers, but if "core volunteers" time was added up into full-time staff equivalents (40 hours per week), then the ratio of full-time staff to church attendees would rise. Still, the majority of attendees

still remain on the edges as religious consumers, not passionately involved in the work of ministry.

Church organizations reflect the culture in which they live—less a generation or so. The church today represents an organizational pattern that came with the rise of modern industry. Though we think of churches as spiritual places with unique organizations, much of their look and function reflects the cultural context. I beg you to suspend traditional church language and theology for the moment and follow the parallel. Small business organizations (small churches) would have an owner (pastor) and a number of workers (church members). Larger business organizations (medium and larger churches) would have an executive leader (senior pastor) and multiple staff (managers) to supervise the key functional parts of the organization and its workers (church members).

Churches that operate with this traditional organizational pattern (with variable degrees of hierarchy and bureaucracy) will fall into one of two categories. Mission and vision will be *inward focused* or *outward focused*. Writers critical of the declining church point to the predominance of inward-focused versus outward-focuses churches.[6] The difference is critical from a missional perspective, but not from an organizational one. The organizational pattern is the same—staff-driven, linear, and hierarchical. A traditional inward-focused church will have pastors supervising how to meet the needs of the *current members* of the congregation. A traditional outward-focused church will simply have key pastors supervising volunteers to meet the needs of the *external community* who are not currently members.

The distinction between an outward-focused versus the inward-focused church *is* an important one from theological and missional perspectives. Theological arguments could be made on either side of the divide. In one sense, the dichotomy is a false choice, as a church should have both an inward and outward focus. But genuine balance is impossible. The church will tip one way or the other—usually a significant tilt. My clear bias is that the primary missional DNA should be outward focused (with an ongoing scramble to address inward issues). I raise this debate because it is important for reversing the current decline. However, I fear that even if magically all the churches became outward focused, the traditional organizational patterns would limit the impact.

The point of this chapter is to determine whether or not the church is a team-based organization. Change in how the

church does ministry is imperative. My point is that team-based organizations offer a healthier, more effective way to accomplish the mission of the church.

The Team-based Organization (TBO)

What would happen if the church were a team-based organization (TBO) rather than a staff-supervisor style of organization? A TBO empowers teams to accomplish the mission rather than directing individual staff and volunteers to carry out that mission. There is a debate in organizational circles about who creates better vision and mission, the key leader or a visionary team. But let's avoid that debate and assume that the church embraces a compelling vision of a preferred future (whoever puts it together). The TBO creates a network of teams who are given the authority to accomplish all or parts of that compelling vision. TBOs have higher involvement, less turnover, faster implementation, and greater outcomes or results. TBOs also have less rigidity and more chaos, while gaining more creativity.

This is the bottom line for the church—teams have a multiplying effect. More people will accomplish more. Imagine if the team model replaced the traditional model of the church. Instead of an inner core of 10 percent of church members volunteering what they can do while pastors are doing *all* they can do, imagine 80 percent of church members volunteering what they can do. The role of the pastor changes tremendously in the TBO. The role of the volunteers (members) changes drastically as well. The missional results of the church are multiplied.

Teams bring more to churches and parachurch organizations than just productivity. Spiritually healthy teams also provide a secondary benefit of a vibrant sense of community. Effective teams create positive relationships, and people appreciate one another more. Teams also provide a key place for spiritual formation. The potential for significant growth in faith occurs in all organizational contexts. Spiritual issues are foundational to effective teams, so the potential for growth and discipleship is heightened.

Four Keys to Teams Working in Ministry Organizations

Key Leaders Need to Believe in Teams

The primary reason team-based organization fails in churches (or in business) is the lack of belief in teams. If the executive

leadership (senior pastor or parachurch executive director) does not have a deep commitment to a team philosophy, the organization will not become a TBO. If the pastor is not fully committed to a team philosophy, teams won't work.

When I began working as a team consultant and coach, I would respond to any organization that wanted to do team development or team training programs. I no longer provide services just based on request. My new guideline is that assessment of executive leadership in the organization must occur before proceeding with team development strategies. There must be support for a TBO.

Leaders need to overcome the "everybody believes in teams" myth. Everybody wants the camaraderie and feel-good side of teams. Leaders and pastors want to have a team reputation. But team empowerment and a team-based organization is often not a core value. Many people believe they already have a teams philosophy in their organization. So what happens is that the consultant comes in, creates a great training program, staff get excited about new skills and new possibilities, and then executive leadership strips the team of genuine power and morale takes a nosedive. Middle managers or team leaders call the consultant and say: "I guess we weren't serious here about doing team." Meanwhile, executive leadership continues to live in the delusion that they support teams. Or executives develop a *been-there-done-that* belief and teams are relegated to a passing trend.

TBOs can have great variability in the format and structure of teams. Teams require certain values and the key leaders or the board need to see these values as central to who they are. Here are a few expressions of team values (not in order of priority).

- Power in the organization is shared (decentralized versus centralized).
- How things get done must enable teams to function (i.e., form must follow function—procedures, rules and regulations, etc.).
- Teams require effective leadership.
- A level of chaos is okay.
- Good function in teams is essential to avoid chaos.
- Spiritual development is central to teams.
- Creativity is good.
- Critical thinking is good.
- Results are important.
- Teaming requires training.

So let's assume for the moment that organizational assessment has taken place. The organization and its key leaders have a genuine commitment to embrace the values of a team organization. A commitment exists to empower teams to make key decisions and to implement their plans. Executive leadership will support and embrace these new ventures with the risk that some will be wildly successful and some will be significant failures. Bring on the training program. Let the teamwork begin.

Don't Confuse Team Development with Conflict Resolution

Key leaders must not confuse team training with conflict resolution. Organizations cannot expect team building and movement toward a TBO to resolve group conflict. Many believe that creating team building or team spirit will resolve interpersonal or organizational conflicts. Leadership mistakenly believes that a team program that makes people feel more connected will solve this unrelated organizational problem. That won't work. Conflicts in the church are probably anchored in issues that have little to do with organizational structure.

However, although TBOs are not the ultimate solution to conflicts, they can help an organization to work more effectively with conflict. Therefore, resolve the conflict issues first and then launch your program to transition to teams.

Overcoming the Attitude That Teams Don't Work

Churches can fail to develop team-based organizations because of a growing attitude that teams simply don't work. Many staff or volunteers in your organization will have been previously immersed in some kind of a team environment. At least, they went through something that was *labeled* a team. As the "team" buzzword has grown, more and more people have had a bad experience with a team process. Selling genuine teams is getting harder due to a negative stereotype in certain settings. Staff needs to be convinced that being team based will really make a positive difference.

One experience that gives teams a bad rap is the committee structure of many church organizations. Most committees are not teams. A committee can function as a very powerful team, but that is usually not the case. Some churches have renamed all their committees as teams, but then are surprised by the lack of results. What would be the difference between a traditional committee and a traditional team?

Committees classically manage predictable routine, whereas a team is focused on change. If the project is repetitive, such as an annual task within the organization, a team approach is focused on how that task can improve. Improved results are specific and clear. A team will keep the best of what has been done or perhaps reinvent the entire process. The results orientation is the key characteristic that separates teams from committees. Committees rarely measure results and cannot clearly define success or failure. Teams know their results.

Perhaps the most significant distinction between committee and team is how decisions are made. A team's results are tied to effective decision-making at meetings. Committees have a reputation for prolonged decision-making and endless meetings: "I can't believe how long last night's meeting went!" "Can you believe what people said at that meeting? I'm thinking of resigning from the committee." Effective teams do not have painful meetings. Death by committee (or ineffective team) is a terrible fate. Effective teams replace bad processes with healthy process.

Positive team meetings are an issue of both skill and spiritual maturity. Team meetings are discussed later on in chapters 7–8 and 13–14. Meetings can be stimulating and enjoyable. The real issue is convincing people that there is hope when we speak about team. As the old car ad says, "This isn't your father's [car]." Communicate that this is a new experience in team development and not a new name for that old committee process.

Team-based Organizations Require Training

Another reason churches fail to develop TBO is the presumption that training is not necessary. Ministry teams don't just happen any more than great music just happens. If you want a championship women's basketball team, the coach must do more than assemble five young women and throw them a basketball. Ministry teams or board teams need to develop skills and nurture their spiritual character so that effectiveness can flourish. Any good outcome stems in part from good training and design. Good intentions are not enough. Most volunteer organizations have a great example at their facility that symbolizes intention over competence. Not everyone can paint well, like a professional painter. Not everyone can install sheetrock like a professional tradesman. Teams need training to be effective. A TBO will have a program for training and maintaining teams.

Powerful Team Ministry

One of the best ministry experiences of my life was working with a highly effective team to train church leaders and impact their ministry organizations. That team experience reinforced an important insight about great teams: teamwork is about functionality. Hands and feet enable a body to move toward its goal. Skills in decision-making and creativity move a ministry team toward its goal. But functionality is tied to spirituality. Great teams are more about spiritual dimensions than functional dimensions. Failure to perform as a team is often due to issues of the human soul rather than a lack of skill and performance.

I sat with those ministry teammates reflecting and celebrating seven years of working together. The celebration setting was idyllic, looking out on the slopes of Mt. Hood from the comfort of the historic Timberline Lodge. The project team had been idyllic as well: working and laughing together, creating great friendships and great achievements. The conversation identified several important principles for team effectiveness.

The team had come together to develop an intervention and training program for a diverse set of parachurch organizations that shared a common vision to impact youth in their communities. The task was challenging, the initial funding meager, but positive results were unmistakable. As with all projects, there was a combination of some painful failures mixed with the rosy successes, but overall the project outcomes were decisively positive and measurable. The ministry organizations had gathered new visions, strengthened their boards, created innovative new programs, and raised their level of excellence. The team had made a difference for Christ and his kingdom.

Functional Dimensions of Team

How can teams make a difference? Team members can follow several key principles for teams. Part of this book describes those functional principles. Keeping four key team dimensions in rhythm creates positive team results. The functional dimensions are represented in the model below and include:

- *Share the power,* symbolized by balancing a stick
- *Achieve results,* symbolized by moving a rock
- *Tend to the emotional climate,* which is symbolized by a heart
- *Restore the energy and vitality,* symbolized by water

Effective Team Dimensions
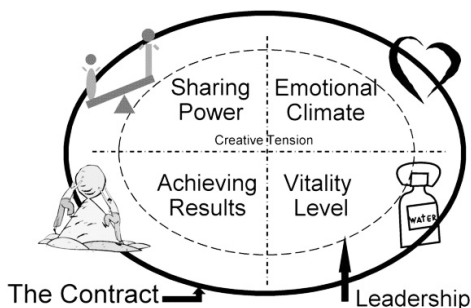
The four dimensions in the model can be evaluated and monitored separately. As with any complex model, overlap and significant interaction of the four dimensions exist. Leadership is defined primarily as an influence rather than a role in this model. This leadership influence directs the four key dimensions to sustain effectiveness. A team contract is the single most important tool a team has at its disposal. The contract is a key statement of the agreements that define who the team wants to be, becoming a tool to help the members achieve their vision. The use of the contract is more fully discussed in chapter 15. Creative tension stems from the team's problem-solving process. Tension is a good thing and contributes to great team results. Tension and its challenges are discussed in chapter 10.

Spiritual Dimensions of Team

Sharing power, moving the rock, monitoring climate, and managing vitality are all functions of leadership expressed by team members. Each dimension can be described at a behavioral or functional level. Skills related to those behaviors can be identified and practiced. But each functional area is tied to issues of the human spirit. Spiritual issues are foundational to the functional dimensions of teams, which frequently fail, not from a lack of skill or knowledge, but from spiritual immaturity. Team success is dependent on spiritual health. Team functionality is necessary but insufficient.

The project team described earlier had this self-reflection on the success of their team. The spiritual dimension of this team was unmistakably the key factor to the team's success. The superb

problem-solving skills of the team were based on the members' years of experience in the field, but the most important key to success had been the "lack of egos in the room." This was a talented team with great skills, but everyone was able to let go of personal power needs and allow vision and ideas to rule the team rather than personal agenda. Without the ability to truly share power, a team never realizes its full potential. I do not want to minimize the importance of competence, but there is a *spiritual* competence that is even more foundational to team success.

This team had maintained a positive climate with one another through the years. High levels of respect and trust characterized its emotional climate. The team members showed fundamental care and concern for fellow team members. However, don't misunderstand and equate a positive climate with a lack of conflict. There was no absence of conflict and pressure. The care and support helped keep the tension positive rather than debilitating.

Beyond the results achieved, the sharing of power, and the positive climate, the team was known for its laughter and energy. Team meetings were not times of dread, but rather times of vitality. The team members had all been part of plenty of other work teams. What was it that made the difference? Playful banter was part of the fabric of the group and became both a symbol and a cause of the consistently high vitality level the team experienced at team meetings. Whether it was a multi-day planning retreat or a short conference call, the team remained engaged. Laughter at the serious and the mundane reflected people's total presence and ability to enjoy the moment. Play and refreshment became integrated into the hard work agenda. The ability to play well is a gift from God based in the theology of redemption and creation.

One way to look at the interrelated team dimensions is to imagine two pairs of glasses, each with a very different type of lens. One set of glasses is designed to reveal the functional dimensions of team. What are the fundamental team processes that must work well in order for the team to function at a high level? The high performance team becomes very skilled in using the functional lenses and is able to assess and intervene to maximize effectiveness. The second set of lenses looks at the same team and sees a different factor—much like night vision goggles that "see" infrared emission (heat) rather than visible light. Both lenses capture the same movement, but the assessment is different.

Individual team members contribute to the overall success of the team because of their spiritual health. In the subsequent chapters, the connection between the functional and spiritual dimensions will be unpacked. The spiritual beliefs team members hold and the consistency with which these beliefs are practiced is the background for all effective teamwork.

Disclaimers and Definitions

What Is a Team?

Most readers of this book already have some innate belief in teams. It is part of our cultural ethos that teamwork is a good thing. To be against team is like being against American icons such as motherhood, the Fourth of July, and baseball. But, what exactly is a team?

Team as used in this book is a *small group of people who share a common goal to achieve a specific result.* The team may be completely voluntary, such as a church outreach task force, or involuntary, such as an assigned task force at work. What differentiates a team from a group is that the team has a stake in a specific outcome or result. Groups may have no achievable external goal. Many groups are not teams, but *are* important groups—such as a Bible study group or a recovery group. Teams have a specific outcome that extends beyond creating community. The outcome may be a product or program, or perhaps gaining important new information, as in the case of a learning team.

The results orientation is the key factor that separates a team from a group, but there are other key pieces that make up a team as well. Teams have *real time interactions* between members (as do groups). I was once a member of a team that never met. The organization had labeled us a team, but we were not a team, and of course there was no tangible outcome. Team meetings can be virtual or face-to-face. Teams have a beginning and an end; this cycle of life is an important part of the team process.

A team must have some level of *self-determination*. There are a variety of teams in the lives of organizations: vision teams, functional teams, cross-functional teams, design teams, and executive teams. Almost all of them could be grouped into three categories: (1) pseudo (or fake) teams, (2) implementation or functional teams (aligned along functions in the organization), and (3) vision teams. The distinction is based on the scope or

level of self-determination. Vision teams set overall direction for the organization. The self-determination is extensive because of the overarching role of vision in organizations. Functional teams work with the traditional operational areas in the organization. A parachurch organization might have a marketing team, a fund development team, or a program team. In a local church the functional teams might be organized around traditional ministries, such as youth, hospital care, or outreach. The most important team to describe at this juncture is the pseudo team.

The *fake team* lacks self-determination. Just because you call something a dog does not make it a dog. If it walks like a dog, looks like a dog, and smells everything in its world, then we've got ourselves a dog. As "team" became more of a buzzword in the last two decades, there have been an extraordinary number of mistaken identifications. A team must have at least three characteristics: an identifiable outcome, a group of people who interact to produce that result, and the power to create the desired result.

Many so-called teams in organizations are pseudo teams because they do not control their destiny. Executive teams in ministry organization are rarely teams because the organization's power structure is too hierarchical. Many churches *name* teams, but the power to implement plans is so compromised by the trustee board or elder board that team cannot really happen. Organizational cultures that value centralized control and autocratic leadership will end up with a number of fake teams. Money is a great marker for decision-making authority, and, if money is not distributed within the organization, then the power is usually not distributed and real teams won't be present.

Self-directed Teams

True teams can be organized along a leadership continuum identifying who holds responsibility for team process and effectiveness. A true team always shares responsibility for attaining final results. The leadership role directing the team process can belong to several different entities. A self-directed team names everyone responsible for effective team process as well as outcomes—meaning the members of the team share that leadership responsibility. Teams can shift the responsibility for process to a specific role, such as an internal team leader or external team coach. A specific team leader role may come from a team vote or it might be a role assigned by the organization.

This book has a strong bias for the self-directed team who can learn the team functions and develop the strategies to monitor their team function. This shared leadership function replaces an internal leadership role or an external team coach or consultant. As the team members learn the process and some of the tools, the self-directed team becomes a reality. The self-directed team has three great advantages. First, ownership of process as well as results helps motivate the team. Second, the cost savings across a church organization is significant as the need for external coaching expertise is reduced. Third, a learned culture of doing team eventually permeates the organization so that the team-based ministry organization truly exists.