Like the pygmies, team-based corporate cultures with authoritative, not authoritarian leadership, will thrive.

High-Performance Teams:
Lessons from the Pygmies

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Tell me the company you keep, and I'll tell you who you are.
— Miguel de Cervantes, Don Quixote

You don't lead people by hitting them over the head; that's assault, that's not leadership.
— Dwight Eisenhower

Pygmy society is a good example of what trust can do to simplify and expedite decision-making processes and offers a number of lessons for creating successful work teams.

Although life in a pygmy community may seem striking in its simplicity and apparent lack of organization to outsiders, it is undergirded by a complex though informal system based on trust; the informal rules that make up this system help the community function effectively. While an excess of rules and regulations is a good indicator of a trust disorder and paranoid thinking, a high degree of trust allows the informal organization to dominate the formal one. In other words, implicit rules become more important than explicit rules. Pygmy society provides corporate society with an example of a cohesive team structure combined with effective leadership. The one drawback—a lack of adaptability in the face of outside forces—should not deflect our attention from the many positive lessons we can draw from this society.

Most readers are probably familiar with the label pygmy, an anthropological term referring to various populations inhabiting central Africa, whose adult males average less than 1.5 meters. The word pygmy, in Greek, means the length between a person's elbow and knuckles, a measurement applied descriptively to this group of unusually small people. The pygmies are thought to be among the earliest inhabitants on the African continent and are probably the oldest human dwellers of the rainforest. The pygmy culture has existed since prehistoric times, and there is a great deal we can learn from it. It is a window on our past—a primary model of human behavior—giving us an idea of the way people behaved before the rise of agriculture some 10,000 years ago. Already in ancient Egyptian history, some twenty-three hundred years before Christ, the existence of the pygmies was noted in the record of an expedition looking for the source of the Nile. A message sent to Pharaoh Phiphs II of the 6th Dynasty by Prince Herkhuf of Elephantine, the commander of this expedition, described the discovery of "dancing dwarfs from the land of the spirits."

LIFE IN THE RAINFOREST

Starting with the explorers of the Congo at the turn of this century, a more realistic picture of the pygmies emerged. In 1870 the German
explorer George Schweinfurth rediscovered the pygmies about 4,000 years after Prince Herkhuf's first encounter. Shortly afterwards, Sir Henry Morton Stanley, the American journalist, reporting about his adventures in Central Africa, mentioned the existence of the forest pygmies. Gradually, through the writings of various explorers, more was learned about the pygmies' semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer existence; those who observed the pygmies reported accurately about their ability to survive in a harsh forest environment by hunting game, gathering honey, fruits, nuts, roots, plants, and certain insects, and trading with nearby villagers for vegetables, tobacco, metal, tools, and cloth.

Pygmies are now defined as a number of tribes scattered among the rainforests of central Africa in small, temporary settlements. Although the basic unit is the nuclear family (that is, mother, father, and their children), several extended families generally make up a camp numbering from 10 to 35 people. Each nuclear family builds its own dome-shaped hut; these are then placed in a circle around a common area.

Life in a pygmy camp is lived mostly outside. There is very little privacy in the camp; pygmies are rarely alone. Eating, drinking, bathing, and even sexual intercourse take place in close proximity, necessitating considerable sharing and tolerance. Empathy and cooperation are therefore important qualities of pygmy society.

Pygmies also possess a rather enlightened moral code—one that was in place long before missionaries tried to impose their world view on them. Included in that code are injunctions against killing, adultery, lying, theft, blasphemy, devil worship and sorcery, lack of love for children, disrespect for elders, and other forms of misbehavior. It is not surprising, then, that the pygmies, in contrast to many other tribes in their region, have never indulged in cannibalism, human sacrifice, mutilation, sorcery, ritual murder, intertribal war, debilitating initiation ordeals, and other cruel customs.

But the twentieth century has not been good to the pygmies. Encroaching civilization has taken its toll as other population groups have pushed them out of an ever-shrinking habitat. A low birth rate, high infant mortality rate, and extensive cross-breeding with invading non-pygmy tribes have added to their decline. Furthermore, missionaries and government officials have been settling the pygmies in permanent villages, forcing them to abandon the life that their people lived for thousands of years. Because the pygmies' entire upbringing and culture are geared toward a nomadic forest existence, becoming sedentary has often led to moral and physical disintegration. There are very few pygmies left who still live in their original state; and at the pace things are going, their world will soon be gone forever.

Recently, I spent some time among the pygmies in the rainforest of Cameroon. As my guides in the jungle, they taught me some of the basics of jungle lore. It was with considerable awe that I observed their knowledge of the forest, their ability to read the signs made by different animals, their expertise with respect to edible mushrooms, fruits, tobacco, and vegetables.

I was intrigued by the relationships I observed among the pygmies in a variety of contexts. I saw them operating as a hunting team; I watched their dances; I listened to their songs. I was struck by the degree of mutual respect and trust they showed toward each other. I also noted that they seemed to be a generally happy group of people. Their outlook toward the world appeared to be of a very positive nature, perhaps because trust is such a core characteristic.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BASIC TRUST

As we attempt to understand this positive outlook toward the world, we should remember that the anchor point for basic trust is the primal relationship with one's initial caregivers. As child development studies have shown, primary interaction patterns color all later experiences; one's original ways of dealing with caregivers remain the model for all future relationships. Thus the earliest social

experimentation of children toward the people close to them forms the lasting basis for trust (or mistrust) and creates a sense of a reciprocity that determines their later Weltanschauung. In consequence, if a child is brought up in a caring environment, it is to be expected that the adult he or she becomes will feel safe and secure.

Trustworthy parental figures who respond to the needs of children with warm and calming envelopment make for a positive world image. Pygmy society is full of this kind of adult. For instance, everyone in the same age group as one’s parents is called “mother” or “father,” while the older ones are called “grandparents.” As far as pygmy children are concerned, all adults are their parents and grandparents. Given the nature of pygmy society, there is always someone around to take care of children’s needs; they are rarely without physical contact. Fathers are actively involved in the direct care of their infants. They engage in more infant caregiving than fathers in any other known society. Pygmy fathers spend almost 50 percent of their day holding or within arm’s reach of their infants. Child neglect and abuse are almost unknown in pygmy society; cruelty to children is the most serious violation covered by pygmy laws and commandments. No wonder pygmies have such a positive, trusting way of relating to each other. Furthermore, it can also be argued that the pygmies’ deeply anchored sense of independence and autonomy may be a consequence of early exposure to an egalitarian family model.

This positive attitude toward the world, their feelings of independence, and this sense of basic trust are reflected in the attitude toward the forest mentioned earlier. The pygmies’ strong faith in the goodness of the forest is probably best expressed through their great molimo songs.

Molimo is the name given by the pygmies to a ritual embodied primarily in songs sung nightly by the men. In the molimo, often referred to as “the animal of the forest,” participants make believe that the sounds they produce are made by an animal dancing around the camp. The same name—molimo—
is given to the long, trumpet-like instrument that plays an important part in this ritual. The molimo is called out whenever things seem to be going wrong, especially in times of crisis: the hunting is bad, somebody is ill, or someone has died. By calling out the molimo, the pygmies initiate the process of making things good again.

PYGMY SOCIETY AS SEVEN LESSONS FOR EFFECTIVE TEAMWORK

Effective teamwork has been identified by researchers as one of the core values in high-performance organizations. Companies that continue to perform successfully have cultures where teamwork occupies a central position.

Labels such as "teamwork," "quality," "respect for the individual," and "customer orientation" can be overheard in most organizations, but they quickly turn into clichés. Expressing the wish to be a team-oriented company is both easy and popular; actually implementing that wish is difficult in the extreme. Many of the companies I have studied have a long way to go to reach a genuine team orientation. The pygmies, however, as described in the seminal work of Colin M. Turnbull, The Forest People: A Study of the Pygmies of the Congo, and other anthropologists, seem to make teamwork happen. Their approach to teamwork makes them less susceptible than most corporate teams to the processes that corrode group efforts. Many of their practices are a model for effective behavior.

Lesson 1: Members respect and trust each other.
Given the potential hardships of the forest, survival depends on interdependence. Food is not always plentiful, for example, and hunting can be dangerous. After all, the forest is inhabited by vicious red buffaloes, short-tempered forest elephants, swift-footed leopards, deadly snakes, and frightening army ants. These dangers have to be dealt with almost daily. To overcome such threats, trust and mutual dependency play an important role.

Without trust, the hazard of these existing dangers would be magnified. Each person needs to be counted on. When there is trust, whatever the forum—rainforest or Western workplace—many other things fall into place. It simplifies life, regardless of the organization of which a person is part. Trust is an antidote to a proliferation of rules and regulations.

Trust also implies respect for the other members of the group. In a trust-based community, differences are appreciated. And as students of high-performance teams understand, diversity can be a competitive advantage. Pygmies know how to harness the energy from the different parts of the small group into a well-functioning whole. They also exhibit great fluency in relationships and roles; rigidity in behavior is very much absent.

The mutual respect so essential to good teamwork also characterizes male-female relationships among the pygmies. Unlike other populations of Africa, women are not discriminated against in pygmy society. As mentioned before, male-female relationships are extremely egalitarian. Sex role flexibility is the norm. Pygmy language is genderless. Husbands and wives cooperate in a wide range of activities. They never force the other to do something against his or her will.

Apart from spear and bow-and-arrow hunting, there is very little specialization according to gender. Women are essential partners of the work team. They contribute substantially to the diet and are actively involved in the distribution and exchange of food. Both men and women net-hunt, usually together. A man collects mushrooms and nuts when he comes across them, gathers firewood, fetches water, cooks, washes up, and cleans a baby when needed. A woman participates in discussions with men and does heavy work when required.

The moral in all of this is that if we want teams to work, we need to build trust and mutual respect among team members. If such feelings are not present, other factors conducive to effective team behavior become irrelevant. When there is no sense of mutuality among the members of a team, the group soon becomes dysfunctional.
Trust does not occur instantaneously, however. It is like a delicate flower that takes time to blossom. Trust grows best if the basics were met for each team member in childhood—if a trusting attitude developed as one of the anchors of each individual's personality. Trust can also be nurtured in a corporation. Leaders who "walk the talk" and do not kill the messenger of bad news exhibit behavior patterns conducive to a culture of trust.

**Lesson 2: Members protect and support each other.**

One corollary to trust and respect is a system of mutual support and protection among the members of a team. Members of any work team should share the conviction that they can rely on each other. An important component of that mutual support equation is the maintenance of each person's self-esteem.

Let us again take the behavior in pygmy society as a point of departure. In spite of the mutually supportive nature of male-female relationships, marital conflicts do occur. Physical violence against women is almost nonexistent. Quarrels are usually resolved through dialogue, mediation, the use of jokes, by temporarily leaving the camp, or through the reframing of the conflict. In general, however, women are more outspoken than men in showing their displeasure. A common way for women to show their anger with their husbands is by tearing down the house. (As women tend to be better house builders, the huts in which the pygmies live are considered to be the woman's property).

Turnbull gives an example of a domestic quarrel that was getting out of hand—a matrimonial argument had come to an impasse. The wife, to express her displeasure, began to methodically pull all the leaves off the hut. Usually, the woman would be stopped halfway by the husband. In this case, however, the husband seemed to be a rather stubborn fellow and did not budge. Consequently, his wife saw no alternative but to keep going. Eventually, the hut was stripped of all its leaves. At that point, the husband commented that it was going to be awfully cold during the night. Because the woman felt that her husband still had not reacted in an appropriate way—a way that would settle the dispute—she saw no choice but to continue. Hesitantly, she began to pull out the sticks that formed the frame of the hut.

By this time the whole camp, party to the quarrel since the beginning, was upset. Clearly things were going too far; the boundaries of mutual care were being transgressed. The woman was in tears; the husband was equally miserable, because the last thing he wanted was to lose his wife. (If the hut were completely demolished, the woman would have no choice but to pack her belongings and return to the home of her parents.) The question became how to reverse the situation, how to stop the conflict while preserving each person's self-esteem and allowing each to save face.

In this instance, the husband had a flash of insight into how he might solve his predicament. He "reframed" the whole conflict. He mentioned to his wife that there was no need to pull out the sticks, as it was only the leaves that were dirty. Initially puzzled, she quickly understood what he was trying to do, and asked him to help her carry the leaves down to the stream. There they both pretended to make an effort to wash the leaves; then they brought them back. She cheerfully started putting the leaves back on the frame, while he went off with his bow and arrows to see if he could bring back some game for a special dinner. He had defused the argument by pretending that the leaves were taken off not because she was angry but because they were dirty. Everybody knew what had really been the matter, but people were happy that the quarrel was over. As a matter of fact, to show solidarity and support some women took a few leaves from their own huts to wash in the stream as if this were a common procedure.

This incident illustrates an important factor in effective work teams. Conflict is inevitable; indeed, it is part of the human condition. But while that may be the case, when push comes to shove in an organization, each team member must be willing to support, protect, and defend the others. In effective teams,
members go to great lengths to sort out differences between themselves while maintaining individual self-respect. Whenever possible, what can be interpreted as conflictual will be reframed as collaborative. It is part of the mind-set of team members that they all have a stake in a constructive outcome. Such an attitude of mutual support and protectiveness provides the glue that makes for teamwork and helps a team survive when times are tough.

Lesson 3: Members engage in open dialogue and communication.

In pygmy society, participation is an essential part of the group culture. Everyone can expect it; everyone can demand it; and everyone is supposed to give it. Obedience to authority figures is minimal among the pygmies. Nobody has the right to force someone to do something against his or her will. Nobody is afraid to speak his or her mind. There is not much of a power gulf between the various members of the group. Everyone can have a say in decisions that affect the group. There is interaction by and involvement of all members. Disputes are settled in an informal manner. Constructive conflict resolution is the norm. Although each individual has the personal responsibility to attempt dispute settlement, he or she also has the right, if this effort fails, to get others involved in the matter until it is resolved.

For example, if a pygmy male has an argument with his wife that disturbs him so that he cannot sleep, he simply has to raise his voice—remember, the huts of a particular community are in close proximity—and ask his friends and relatives to help him. His wife will do the same, getting the whole camp involved until the dispute is settled. Conflicts are not kept lingering among the pygmies. They are dealt with up front as they occur, to minimize bad feelings; problems are faced, not pushed underground.

Various techniques used to diffuse disputes among the pygmies work well with workplace teams also. Jokes and laughter are common methods of resolving problems between team members. Humor helps people overcome the stresses and strains that are an inevitable part of group togetherness. Diversions are also useful; they help people forget what the conflict was all about.

What we might call “emotional management” also plays an important role in conflict resolution. Pygmies are not at all self-conscious about showing emotions. Their willingness to express emotions makes conflict resolution much easier. In fact, a silent pygmy camp is a camp that has problems. As pygmy interaction patterns illustrate, it is better to err in the direction of “noise.” Furthermore, a willingness to show emotions by all members of the team helps reduce defensiveness and leads to more honest communication.

When there are pressing issues on the table, it helps to talk about them; open dialogue and communication are important ingredients in making teams work. As can be observed in the pygmy community, effective teams share their ideas freely and enthusiastically; team members feel comfortable expressing opinions both for and against any position. Teams that meet these criteria are the ideal vehicles for creative problem solving. Frankness and candidness are also key to team effectiveness. Shared, open, honest, and accurate information is the norm in well-functioning teams. Critical reviews are viewed as opportunities to learn and do not result in defensive reactions. Moreover, team participants learn to minimize ego damage by focusing critical comments on ideas, not people. Furthermore, members of high-performance teams avoid disruptive behavior, such as side conversations or inside jokes, as much as possible.

Lesson 4: Members share a strong common goal.

Pygmies have a strong sense of communal responsibility. Indeed, cooperation is the key to their society. Pygmies are “the people of the forest,” a forest that provides them with all the necessities of life. To benefit from the bounty the forest can provide, however, they need to share common goals.

Hunting for meat is one of the major survival tasks for this population. Of course, a pygmy can take his bow and arrows and try to shoot a bird or a monkey by himself, and
this is done regularly. The most effective way of obtaining meat, however, is through communal hunting—driving animals into nets. Net hunting cannot be done alone; it would be impossible for a single hunter to cover sufficient territory to drive the prey—an antelope, for example—into a net. A necessary cooperative affair, net hunting therefore implies shared interests and a common purpose among the men, women, and children of participating families. This shared purpose encourages teamwork. At the time of a hunt, the nets owned by each family in the group are joined together in a long semi-circle. Usually, the women and children drive the animals into the nets while the men stand behind the nets and kill the animals when they become entangled. Other times, the men play the role of beaters while the women do the killing. Afterward, the meat is shared among the various participants according to a set of very specific rules.

In organizations, as in pygmy society, teamwork is ineffective without mutually agreed upon goals. To give team members a sense of purpose and focus, team goals and methodologies need to be articulated clearly. If a goal is ambiguous or ill-defined, the group will lack motivation and commitment. Although goals have to be within realistic boundaries, organizations should also encourage team members to “stretch.” When met, stretch goals give a sense of pride; their execution creates a sense of achievement among the members of the team.

In conjunction with a clear sense of purpose, certain mutually agreed upon qualitative and quantitative targets need to be expressed. Such targets help team members determine the degree of their success in pursuing their given tasks. These targets serve as a road map, creating order out of chaos and generating excitement about future direction.

Lesson 5: Members have strong shared values and beliefs.

Closely related to a sense of purpose is the group’s culture—its shared values and beliefs. Because these values and beliefs define the attitudes and norms that guide behavior, they play the role of social control mechanism. They also provide another form of glue binding the members of a work team. Hence, the internalization of shared values and beliefs by team members is extremely important in the realization of the organization’s goals.

Although, for the uninitiated observer, forest life among the pygmies may seem to be happy-go-lucky, that appearance deceives. Beneath the apparent disorder of the community is a considerable amount of order. As mentioned earlier, we should not underestimate the importance of informal systems. All pygmies in the camp, from early childhood onward, internalize rules of behavior that are transferred orally from generation to generation. Cultural values and beliefs are at the base of these rules; they make this small society work.

To understand the making of culture we have to take a closer look at early socialization patterns. As indicated before, in pygmy society all adults participate in the upbringing of the children, contributing to their training and helping them understand the rules. They also help the children internalize strongly held social expectations about appropriate attitudes and behavior. What pygmy elders attempt to do is to make effective hunter-gatherers of their younger generation, teaching them the art of survival in the rainforest. They train them early to become autonomous and acquire subsistence skills. They provide them with the collective wisdom that has accumulated over thousands of years; they instill into them the lore of pygmy society.

Pygmy elders want their youngsters to share a common heritage. To reinforce the behaviors deemed appropriate by that heritage, rewards and punishments are handed out when needed. To make sure that the rules are adhered to, pygmy society imposes a number of deterrents. For the most terrible offenses, no action is taken by the other members of the group; indeed, none is needed, because it is expected that some form of supernatural retribution will follow. While the accused is given the opportunity to argue his or her case with the other members of the group in the case of minor infractions, serious
incidents become the affair of the molimo, which acts on behalf of the community. The molimo players may show their public disapproval of a violation of social standards by attacking the hut of the transgressor, for example, or by attacking the transgressor himself or herself during an early-morning rampage. The molimo is an important part of pygmy tradition, representing in this kind of situation the collective conscience of the group.

Sharing, cooperation, independence, and autonomy are among the basic values in pygmy society. Another strongly shared value is the maintenance of peace among group members. This desire for peace sometimes transcends even the rights and wrongs of a particular case. Turnbull describes an incident in which one of the younger pygmies had gone on an amorous expedition to the hut of his neighbor, who had an attractive daughter. Shortly after entering the hut, he was thrown out by a furious father, who was screaming and yelling and throwing sticks and stones at the intruder. Because of all the noise, the whole camp woke up. The father yelled that he was upset not because the young man had tried to sleep with his daughter but because he had had the nerve to crawl right over him and wake him in the process. This he felt was unacceptable. Any decent person would have made a date with the girl to meet her elsewhere.

In this particular incident, the argument was not quickly resolved; the commotion kept going, keeping everyone awake. Finally, one of the elders told the father, in a no-nonsense way, that he was making too much noise; the elder was getting a headache, he said, and wanted to sleep. When the father continued shouting, the elder commented that he was “killing the forest and he was killing the hunt.” Although the father was right—the behavior of the young man was inappropriate—he was causing a greater wrong by disturbing the whole camp, making so much noise that he was frightening the animals away and spoiling the hunt for the next day.

Although this may seem a rather far-fetched example, it does illustrate the application of norms of social behavior. In this instance, we can see how one norm supersedes the other; how everyone buys into what is viewed as suitable behavior. The lesson that can be learned from this relatively primitive society is that any organization or smaller work team needs to articulate its core values and beliefs and define appropriate attitudes and behavior for its members. The dos and don’ts of social behavior need to be first clarified and then reinforced through stories and traditions; the latter in turn reinforce the group’s identity. A specialized language may further add to the bonding of the group. To strengthen this bonding process, successful organizations go to great lengths to socialize their new members, helping them internalize the group’s core values and beliefs. Finally, these organizations clearly articulate sanctions for transgressions of the shared values and beliefs.

Lesson 6: Members subordinate their own objectives to those of the team.

One of the stories I heard while among the pygmies concerned the breaking of a major rule of proper behavior. During a hunt, one of the hunters, frustrated because of his poor luck (not having trapped a single animal all day), had slipped away and placed his own net in front of the others, catching the first of the animals fleeing from the noise of the beaters. He was not able to retreat in time and was caught committing the serious crime of placing his own needs before those of the community.

In a small hunting band, as I have noted, survival can be achieved only by close collaboration and a system of reciprocal obligations that ensures that everyone gets a share of the daily catch. This particular pygmy had clearly broken this unwritten rule. He had been selfish. Humiliation and ridicule were the punishment meted out by the group for his unacceptable behavior. He was laughed at by the women and children, and nobody would speak to him; he was ostracized. (This may
not sound like much in the way of punish-
ment, but what disturbs pygmies most is con-
tempt and ridicule. Ostracism in pygmy soci-
ety can be compared to solitary confinement
in ours.) The ostracism was only temporary,
however. Pygmies do not carry hard feelings
for a long period of time. In a very small com-

What this example from pygmy society
illustrates is that good team members operate
within the boundaries of team rules. They
understand personal and team roles. They do
not let their own needs take precedence over
those of the team. They control their egoistic
tendencies and subordinate their personal
agenda to the agenda of the group.

Teamwork is an interesting balancing act.
A form of participation that can flourish only
in an atmosphere that encourages individual
freedom and creative opportunity under the
umbrella of overall organizational goals,
teamwork represents an interdependent bal-
ance between the needs of the individual and
the needs of the organization. To make such a
balance work, however, each member of the
team needs to recognize the limitations on his
or her freedom.

Lesson 7: Members subscribe to "distributed"
leadership.
Pygmies are strong believers in the concept of
"distributed" leadership. As mentioned ear-
erlier, pygmy society is characterized by a dis-
arming informality. Among the pygmies, it is
difficult to talk about a single leader. Unlike
other African societies, pygmy groups have
no "big men" among them; leadership is not
the monopoly of one glorious leader. There is
no person that has ultimate authority. With
no real chiefs or formal councils, their behav-
ior is extremely egalitarian and participatory.
The pygmies are probably as egalitarian as
human societies can get. Among the pygmies
it is considered bad taste to draw attention to
one's activities. Many subtle means are used
to prevent this from happening. Bragging
about one's abilities is an invitation to become
the butt of rough jokes, a very effective level-
ing device.

Pygmies are not intimidated by rank,
seniority, or status. All members of the group
are empowered to make decisions. Respect
may be given to elders, but it is based not on
wealth or status but on knowledge and expert-
ise. Likewise, if certain people are listened to
more than others in the making of a decision,
it is because of their special ability or skill, be
it bow making, hunting, or playing an instru-
ment. Although some members' opinions
may be more valued than others—those
members having become somewhat more
"equal" than their peers—every member of
the pygmy community is prepared to chal-

The pygmies seem to have figured out
that the best form of leadership is a configu-
ration whereby leaders are distributed
throughout the community and everyone can
be involved in decision-making. However,
individuals who are accorded exceptional
respect are expected to subscribe to a number
of leadership practices that foster effective
teamwork. If they fail to do so, they are
reminded of their obligation by the group.

Look behind the scenes at a high-perfor-
mance organization, and you will find a simi-
lar attitude toward leadership. Among the
practices successful team leaders use to
encourage full participation is a willingness to
share goals with the other members of the
team. Effective team leaders avoid secrecy of
any kind at all costs. They treat members of
the team with respect, listen to feedback and
ask questions, address problems, and display
tolerance and flexibility. They offer guidance
and structure, facilitating task accomplish-
ment, and they provide a focus for action. They
courage dialogue and interaction
among the participants, balancing appro-

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and recognition for individual and group efforts, and they celebrate successes. They accept ownership for the decisions of the team and keep their focus sharp through follow-up. By acting in these ways, they create an atmosphere of growth and learning. In the process, they encourage group members to evaluate their own progress and development.

AUTHORITATIVE (NOT AUTHORITARIAN) LEADERSHIP

In discussing these "lessons from the pygmies," team leaders would seem to have clearly emerged as the catalysts of successful teamwork. Team leaders—and their own leaders in the corporate hierarchy—have to set up the matrix within which teamwork can be most effective. They have to create the right ambience and lead by example. The old paradigm of command, control, and compartmentalize has to be discarded. In fact, rules and regulations should be minimized.

THE NEED FOR TRANSITIONAL SPACE

In the context of team leadership in the workplace, a few more caveats are needed. First, however participatory one likes to be, there is a need for both direction from the top and clear communication about the organization's priorities. Second, executives and team leaders must create an atmosphere that encourages people's natural exploratory capabilities. People need room to play—and they need to see top management's commitment to that endeavor—because with play come creativity and innovation. Without innovation, an organization stagnates and dies. Thus senior executives must not only encourage people to take risks but also accept occasional failure, protecting those who stick their necks out in a good cause.

While strong, committed leadership is necessary to foster innovation, that leadership need not—should not—be authoritarian. On the contrary, authoritative leadership is a prerequisite of the supportive climate. What organizations need are leaders who are respected because of what they can contribute; who "walk the talk"; who get pleasure out of developing their people; who are willing to play the role of mentor, coach, and cheerleader; and who know how to stretch others. Authoritative leaders accept contrarian thinking and encourage people to speak their mind. They know how to celebrate a job well done, how to recognize achievements, and how to put the appropriate reward systems into place to align behavior with desired outcomes.

In our time of transformation and change, conflict in organizations is a fact of life, a given. The ability to solve conflict is therefore an important competency for people in team leadership positions. Those who are effective at leadership in the years to come will be masters of clarity and candor—skills that are important enablers in diffusing conflict. They will communicate what has to be done in clear, unambiguous terms that leave little room for misinterpretation. They will deal with conflict in such a way that it is transformed from an obstacle into an instrument for creative problem solving and increased performance.

Teamwork remains, above all else, a balancing act. On the one hand, every member of the team deserves to have his or her place in the sun, to have his or her achievements recognized. On the other hand, team members need to recognize the value of collaboration, subordinating their own needs to those of the group. Yet collaboration is rarely easy. An atmosphere of constructive give-and-take goes a long way toward making it happen.

A community like the pygmies, operating in a harsh environment like the rainforest, is acutely aware of this need for collaboration. All the problems associated with teams notwithstanding, the pygmies realize that it is harder to operate without teams than with them. Indeed, without teamwork they have little chance of survival, given the challenges of their environment. Members of business organizations would do well to heed these lessons from the pygmies.
CLOSED VERSUS OPEN SYSTEMS

Perhaps the most telling lesson of the pygmies is a negative one. Recent times have threatened their way of life because the rainforest—the epicenter of their whole being—is in danger. This dominant ecological fact has determined their socialization and training practices over centuries; it created their unique culture and continues to color their outlook on life. As long as there is a rainforest, their world will be aligned; everything will fall into place, and their life will have real meaning. Unfortunately, the building of new roads—allowing large-scale plantation farming to gain a foothold in the forest—and the migration of people from other parts of Africa to the rainforest in search of farmland—have led to massive deforestation. The world of the pygmies is disappearing at an alarming rate, creating a sense of dislocation. Of those who have been forced to leave the rainforest, many have been unable to find a new focus. In the agricultural and industrial society that surrounds their old world, their particular expertise has become less relevant. Very few pygmies have been able to adjust; very few have been able to make the transition into "our" world. The consequences for their various communities have been dire.

Thus, as a final lesson from the pygmies, we learn that survival requires not only an inward but also an outward focus; changes in the external environment have to be accounted for. Boundary management is important; building bridges with key outside stakeholders becomes an essential task. Members of effective teams recognize the need for external relations. In the case of the pygmies, making this external adjustment may simply not be possible. Conforming to the larger society would require a complete reinvention, a draconian transformation of their culture that would mean the end of the world as they know it.

The world of business organizations is not as closed a system as that of the pygmies. There are many other differences as well, but still the parallels are striking. Like the pygmies, business organizations have no choice but to look beyond their boundaries; they have to look out for emerging discontinuities to ensure at least a chance at survival and success. If they do not look beyond their borders in this fast-moving, competitive, and globally interdependent world, they too will face dire consequences: an inexorable winding down of their life cycle, culminating in death.

One way of managing for continuity, one way of creating companies that last, is through teamwork. Companies that gain the tools of effective teamwork have a distinct competitive advantage, a leg up toward organizational success. To master those tools takes considerable psychological work, however. The French statesman and novelist François-René Chateaubriand once said, "One does not learn how to die by killing others." The pygmies have taken this statement to heart. Members of teams in our postindustrial society would do well to gain that same knowledge.

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The literature on team work and group behavior is quite elaborate. An interesting, scholarly contribution is made by Susan G. Cohen and Diane E. Bailey, “What Makes Team Work: Group Effectiveness Research from the Executive Suite,” Journal of Management, Vol. 23, No. 3 (1997), pp. 239-290. In this article these two authors review 54 studies on teams and groups in organization settings published from 1990 to 1996 and provide valuable information for understanding team effectiveness. Another useful article (and book published under the same title by Harvard Business School Press in 1993) is Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith’s “The Wisdom of Teams,” Harvard Business Review, March-April, 1993, pp. 110-120. They distinguish between teams and working groups and argue that there is a basic discipline that makes teams work. They present a number of approaches shared by successful teams. In their book, Teams at the Top (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1998), they offer practical guidelines for increasing leadership capabilities at the highest executive levels.

Another informative book by Glenn M. Parker, Cross-Functional Teams (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), gives examples from many of the world’s best organizations and shows why these teams are so successful. For a detailed description and insight into the factors that improve group effectiveness in a number of highly diverse work groups, J. Richard Hackman’s edited book, Groups That Work (and Those That Don’t) (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989), may prove to be useful. For more information about the phenomenon of “group think”—the emergence of dysfunctional processes in groups, see the seminal work by Irvin L. Janis, Victims of Groupthink (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972).