By David Stewart, RYP International October 2024

The Importance of Team Cadence

How Teams Team!

Habits – Routines – Rituals

There is no such thing as just doing "teamwork!" It is an outcome of many inputs such as communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and connection. To do this, you need a mechanism and methodology to team – This is Team Cadence. Without a team cadence, there can be no "teamwork." A Team Cadence requires deliberate intent by a leader.

In every workplace I visit the one thing I quickly pick up on is how the team teams! Team cadence reflects how effectively the team unites, aligns, adapts, and problem-solves together. There are always formal and informal mechanisms for a team to work together. This is much more than a meeting schedule.

The Myth of Team Meetings:

Often managers are under the misapprehension that their team meeting is the way they engage with and motivate their team. There is an overreliance and dependence on team meetings in the workplace. They have a role but need to form part of a broader suite of team engagement mechanisms.

The inconvenient truth is that over 70% of meetings are deemed unproductive or ineffective. This was research undertaken by Havard Business in their 2017 research "Stop the Meeting Madness." Their research also highlighted that 64% of senior managers said that meetings came at the expense of deep thinking, and 62% said that meetings missed an opportunity to bring the team closer together.

Too Many Meetings are a Symptom of a Bad Organisation – *Peter Drucker*

Team Cadence Defined:

Team cadence is much more than meetings. It refers to the regular rhythm and pace at which a team conducts its work. It establishes a predictable set of disciplines, behaviours, and mechanisms for teams to communicate, collaborate, and update each other. These can be both formal and informal, which are owned and enforced by a leader.

Team cadence can be broken into: Habits, Routines, and Rituals

Habits: Habits are automatic behaviours or actions that teams perform with little conscious thought, often triggered by specific cues. For example, on arrival, all staff grab a coffee and stand together to check in and chat as a team. Habits are also personal. For example, on arrival, a manager may walk around the workplace and informally check in and say hello to all staff before they begin their day. Habits often have no work purpose but are important to help with staff socialisation and team chemistry. They are repetitive and linked to human connection and personal well-being.

Rituals: Rituals are meaningful, deliberate practices that carry a sense of purpose, intention and significance to the team. For example, starting a team meeting with a "win for the week" highlights a sense of progress and achievement. Rituals are important to help reinforce and symbolise the desired team culture. For instance, sitting down regularly as a team for lunch symbolises a "one team" culture. Rituals require deliberate intent by a leader and should be symbolically relevant to the team. Rituals help generate an emotional response and connection within the team.

Routines: Routines are sets of structured repeated actions that follow a predictable pattern. Unlike rituals, they are more focused on team performance and team discipline. For example, setting goals for the month and team priorities for the week forms part of the routine of a team. Routines provide stability and help anchor and consolidate the weekly, monthly, and quarterly flow of the team. The key is consistency, not ad hoc, and forms part of the team task-setting process.

Habits	Are Informal unwritten rules. More social by nature
Rituals	Focused on team alignment and motivation
Routines	Are a conscious set of disciplines and methodologies that bring order to team dynamics

Symptoms of a Team with Poor or No Team Cadence:

Teams with a poor team cadence are always underperforming teams! The classic symptoms of a team that has a poor team cadence include:

×   The team is not aligned and do not know what each other is doing
×   There are always higher levels of errors, omissions and poor-quality standards
×   Staff are well intended but have no sense of how they define and measure acceptable performance. Team members try to "do their best."
×   The team is unaware of how the organisation or team is currently performing
×   Staff members feel underappreciated and isolated
×   Team members have their formula for how they "survive the week"
×   There is no sense of unity, belonging, or accountability
×   Often the team leader is deemed not credible or seen as effective
×   There is no mechanism for the team to come together to innovate or solve problems

× Meetings are focused on being told what to do. It is about compliance

× Morale is low and there is no sense of achievement or progress

No Team Cadence Means there is no Mechanism for Teams to Team. This ensures "Teamwork" can never be Optimised

Symptoms of a Team with Good Team Cadence:

Teams with good team cadence have a much better chance of performing at optimal levels. Symptoms of a team with good team cadence include:

✔ Team members report a sense of belonging and inclusion

✔ There are high levels of trust and communication

✔ There is good team alignment and a sense of unity

✔ The team feels a sense of fun and familiarity with each other

✔ The team culture is known, and behavioural expectations are understood

✔ Team disciplines are adhered to

✔ The team believes they have good mechanisms to problem solve and be creative

✔ Team members feel they can adapt and be agile to the changing environment

✔ There is a higher likelihood of team members having a sense of empowerment

✔ Current performance is known

✔ Morale and motivation levels are high

Put simply, teams that feel they have excellent teamwork – have a deliberate and disciplined team cadence

Symbolism is the Secret Sauce:

The local manager owns the team cadence. What they endorse and enforce, and what they ignore is what drives an authentic team cadence. The leader must role model and support the local team habits, enforce the important rituals that link the team, and formalise the routines that drive the team. These are the responsibility of local managers and are brought to life through symbolism (what a manager ignores or does not do, versus, what they do recognise, role model and enforce).

Common Symbolic Team Cadence Pitfalls by Managers:

● **Nothing:** The most common pitfall is no or very little team cadence. There is no formal daily or weekly team pulse. Team members just front up to work and do their best. A nothing manager may hold the odd team meeting or toolbox talk, but there is little or no substance or passion. The team climate is soulless. Often the manager says they do not want to micromanage their staff, so abrogate their responsibility by having no team cadence. Where there is little team cadence, there will be very little effective coaching taking place by the manager. The dynamic will be more about issuing instructions.

● **Ad hoc:** The manager does things from time to time, but it is not consistent, nor is it linked to team performance. The occasional team BBQ or morning tea without substance

will be treated with scepticism by the staff, and often informally boycotted by team members by not showing up. Often the manager feels they are too busy to plan a structured team cadence. They will host team meetings, toolbox talks or the like when they feel there is something to say.

- **Lacks Authenticity:** The team cadence lacks structure and substance. There is no clear delineation between the Habits, Rituals, or Routines being led by the manager, thus leading to a sense of confusion, disorientation and scepticism. Reward and recognition of achievements are few and far between, and when done are considered disingenuous. Often the manager treats any team cadence opportunity as a time to lecture staff or deliver a "sermon from the mount!" Any team engagement mechanism does not encourage a two-way discussion, it is a directive from the manager to the team.

- **Deferment:** The manager defers the responsibility for team cadence to their front-line leaders. Often, they have a false expectation that team leaders should be conducting their own team cadence without direction and guidance. Things like start of week meetings, communication forums, team engagement sessions, tool-box talks are left to the discretion of local line managers.

The symbolism of Team Cadence Needs Discipline and Structure:

There is no perfect team cadence that works all the time. It must reflect the leader's style, the type of business, and the role and function of the team. Some examples of a Leader's Symbolism that helps drive team cadence can include practices such as:

- **A twenty-minute start of week "town hall catch up" with the team** to check in with all team members, 'switch on' the team for the week ahead, and go through the priorities for the week both as a team and individually. As the name suggests. It is a stand-up meeting, informal, and lasts around 20 minutes. It is designed to engage and align the team and switch them back on to 'work mode' after a weekend.

- **Regular Team Morning Tea's / Lunches** where the team checks in to reward and recognise key milestones and achievements, socialise with each other, and share observations and learnings. Regular team socialisation is an important team dynamic.

- **MBWA / MBPA (Manage by Walking Around / Manage by Phoning Around).** This is an important and symbolically important methodology for any leader to have some quality 1:1 time with a staff member, to check in with them meaningfully, provide coaching, and receive the gift of their feedback. If done regularly they are a powerful way of engaging and connecting more meaningfully with team members.

- **Catch People Doing Things Right.** This is way for any leader to shape the desired behaviours and mindsets into team members. What is rewarded and recognised is what gets done, and if acknowledged by a leader, it will reinforce what is expected of team

members. Any desired team culture is shaped by a leader, but requires time, effort and frequent repetition.

- **Have a simple and public dashboard of performance.** This should measure the lead and lag measures of the team, be regularly debriefed, and form part of how the team reflects on performance and makes plans going forward. Key is to keep it meaningful and simple. A common set of measures is what binds and unites a team.

- **A Continuous Improvement mindset** forms the basis for how a team works together. Team meetings allow for critiquing performance, sharing ideas for improvement, discussing and debating improvement actions, co-designing solutions to problems, and sharing the gift of feedback from colleagues, customers, and friends. The weekly dynamic of routines and rituals enables and facilitates the continuous improvement cycle. Without a cadence mechanism, continuous improvement cannot occur.

- **Honouring and Recognising Team Members Important Milestones**, not just at work, but also at home. Birthdays, anniversaries and key family events are just as important to recognise as work milestones and achievements. This reinforces the importance of the work-life balancing act we all juggle, but importantly free of guilt. Having a staff family calendar of important family dates ensures the team cadence can support their colleagues to not miss personal family events they cannot get back

- **Have a Gazetted Team Pulse** so it is clear how the team starts and ends each day/starts and ends each month/starts and ends each quarter/starts and ends each year. These are important mechanisms to critically reflect, recognise good practice, and set goals and priorities as a team. If scheduled, there is a higher likelihood the pulse will be adopted and cascaded to all teams.

- **Sharing and recognising "wins" and 'learnings"** where the leader facilitates a discussion within the team on what the wins and learnings for the week or month have been and drives a sense of progress and achievement. It is always a trap to focus on what is wrong and what the problems are. If this is all that the leader focuses on, it will always drive a sense of fatigue and a climate of pessimism.

- **Debrief "moments of truth" as a team. How to turn lemon into lemonade mindset!** When things do not go quite to plan, or problems occur it is a good opportunity to debrief as a team what went wrong, how it could be averted in the future and what the next actions are. This needs to be free of finger pointing or laying of blame, but a way to demonstrate that the team operates in a safe environment to share views and ideas for improvement without fear of retribution.

- **Indoctrinate an element of fun into the team.** This can be simple things using key events, times of the year, cultural holidays, or significant moments to bring the team together via a fun social activity. Never underestimate the importance of team

socialisation. Three or four times a year will be impactful. Ensure it reflects the style of the team, and what is done is appreciated. Nothing is worse than "forced fun!"

- **Encourage Team Members to "take five"** away from their desks or work tasks. Take five minutes, have a break, talk to colleagues, check in with each other, or just have a rest and some time out! This should be role-modelled by the leader and encouraged so it occurs several times a day. No one can work 100% effectively 100% of the time.

- **Smile and Check in Regularly.** It is the simple things done day in and day out that builds the credibility of a leader. It costs nothing, but its impact can be huge. Creating a warm, friendly, safe, and engaging climate for staff to work in starts with the demeanour, habits, and rituals of the leader.

Whatever the team cadence is, it must be linked, aligned, and consistently endorsed and enforced by the leader, so it becomes a cultural custom within the team. Teamwork begins by socialising the team to build a climate of trust and familiarity. Without knowing each other, effective teamwork cannot exist. Without authentic team relationships, trust cannot be formed.

Leaders who state they do not have the time or are too busy to oversee an effective team cadence are simply not doing their job!

Finally:

Team Cadence applies both to individual employees and the entire team. Any cadence to be deemed credible by staff must be frequent, consistent, and enforced by the leader. **Local team cadence needs to synch** with the overall cadence of the organisation.

High performing teams do not happen by chance. It takes hard work and a commitment by all team members. It starts with the climate the leader creates for the team. A healthy team climate requires a mechanism and methodology to achieve "teamwork" – this is team cadence.

Leadership Lesson

Team Cadence requires deliberate leadership intent. It forms the fabric of how any team comes together to communicate, solve problems, innovate, and support each other. Without a cadence people simply front up to work and "exist" as best they can.

Facta Non-Verba – Deeds Not Words

David Stewart (B Ed, Grad Dip Sports Science, Master's Business Leadership) David is the Founder & Principal of RYP International – A Team Development Advisory Practice. He has worked globally with organisations, their leaders, and teams to develop their capability and culture to maximise performance.