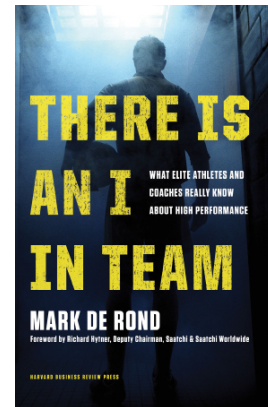# There is an I in Team, A Book Excerpt

by Mark de Rond

Love them or loathe them, individuals matter. So much then for that old devil. While grammatically correct, as a guiding principle, it is flawed and impractical. It downplays the extent to which high-performance teams benefit from variations in talent, in personality, and even in pay. And it diminishes the value of competition between team members. Even those blissful moments of team flow, when mind and matter fuse effortlessly as all are absorbed in the task at hand are more often than not the consequence of individual differences cleverly brought into play by good leadership. The choice of who is in and who is not will have been decided based on the relevance of particularized attributes to an available set of competencies. In sports as in business, it is the combination that matters. Even in teams that are greatly interdependent and prize uniformity—think of synchronized swimming or team sprints in cycling—individuality can be a positive differentiator.

Team decisions require individuals to commit to those around them and to be accountable for their own performance to the team. Should they choose to commit, they will only ever do so for their own reasons. As one of Britain's most distinguished coaches, David Whitaker, put it: "If you want an exceptional team, keep your eye on the individual . . .Teams thrive on individual choice and commitment . . . the most powerful teams are made up of individuals who have chosen to work as a team." Having coached hockey teams to Olympic gold and bronze, World and European silver, he deserves to be taken seriously.

Thus, teams begin and end with individuals. This is not an ideological statement. Nor is it a normative one. This book has no intention of lionizing individuals at the expense of teams or of, God forbid, sanctioning egotism. It does not prioritize individual over collective effort (even if some tasks—particularly those that require logical problem solving—are often better done by individuals than teams). It doesn't even go as far as Jordan's gibe. Its perspective is far subtler. To focus on the I in teams is to pursue a very specific level of granularity. It is to see the trees for the forest by granting individuals that degree of choice missing in much popular writing on teams. To keep in mind the individual is to emphasize precisely the sorts of issues that are easily lost when considering teams as the primary unit of analysis.

The *I* in team also suggests that the key to managing teams lies not just in advanced statistical techniques, skill complementarities, or team bonding but in an appreciation of their humanity. When teams work well, it is because, and not in spite, of individual differences. These differences are at once a source of brilliance and tension, leaving teams poised between entropy and synergy, tension and collective genius.

What may appear like picture-perfect teams are then in reality often quite intricate tapestries of distinct characters united by a common goal but forced into a sanctum where trade-off choices must be made be-tween likability and competence; where powerful but conflicting pressures coexist; where one's success hinges on being able to reconcile camaraderie and rivalry, trust and vigilance, the sacred and the profane; and where they end up getting it wrong as often as right.

These teams can feel fragile to those on the inside, even if perfectly functional on the outside. In contrast to popular belief, teams of high performers are not easy places to be. At times, they are anything but harmonious, but then harmony may well be the result, not cause, of superior performance. Workplace teams are even more complex. Businesses rarely have the luxury of focusing on a single team with one clear objective. The composition of the I's in charge of production will invariably be different to the composition of the I's in charge of sales or R&D. Adding to this complexity, sitting on top of these various teams is typically a small team (the executives) charged with understanding, leading, and managing the multiplicity of teams in their business. And the I's inside them.

Perfectionism: While it may help raise team performance, the desire to identify scope for improvement can also contribute to a joyless, souldestroying environment. This is particularly true when perfectionism is triggered by worries about getting it wrong, instead of the desire to make sure every next thing is better than the one before it. The difference is

subtle but important. Recent research in psychology suggests that the latter is generally associated with positive experience, whereas the mistake-avoidance variety is associated with anxiety and, paradoxically but importantly, suboptimal performance. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the two are highly correlated, meaning that most of those people who aim for perfection also tend to worry a great deal about making mistakes, even if the latter tends to hamper performance and renders the overall experience much less enjoyable. It creates fatigue and resistance. Perfectionism risks creating not just an excessively critical environment but one that, perversely, places a premium on cynicism. Cynicism is often perceived as indicative of smarts and cunning, even if it is rarely helpful. It is one of the curiosities of team life in some societies that we find the contemptuous also the more capable, even if useless for all practical purposes.

Paranoia: The smartest of team members can be surprisingly intuitive when making choices, presumably as a result of having been right so often in the past. As with perfectionism, this is a generalization and, as with any generalization, there are plenty of exceptions. In the workplace, high performers are often keenly aware of their worth to the team but also to the market for talent and might expect instant access to resources and the executive suite. To combine intelligence with the sort of deep-seated insecurities that fuel high performance, particularly within a highly competitive milieu, can breed paranoia. Intel's Andy Grove's autobiography likewise leaves little to the imagination. Success, he thought, breeds complacency, and complacency failure. As the title of his book suggests, only the paranoid survive.

Self-Confidence Despite often deep-seated insecurities, high performers are prone to overestimate the extent to which they are unique and contribute to team performance. These well-documented human traits are exacerbated in many of them. So, for example, most high school students see themselves as above average in intelligence; most business managers see themselves as more competent than average; 90 percent of motorists think themselves safer than average drivers, whereas 94 percent of university professors think themselves better than average teachers. And paradoxically, the bias of seeing ourselves as better than average causes us to see ourselves as less biased than average, too. As psychologist Daniel Gilbert points out, the tendency is not merely for us to see ourselves as more competent but as different from others, too. For example, while people may see themselves as more generous than average, they also tend to see themselves as more selfish than average.

That too much self-confidence risks reducing a team to less than the sum of its individual parts is also evident in American football. As former San Francisco 49ers Head Coach Bill Walsh explains: There is another side [to ego] that can wreck a team or an organization. That is being distracted by your own importance. It can come from your insecurity in working with others. It can be the need to draw attention to yourself in the public arena. It can be a feeling that others are a threat to your own territory. These are all negative manifestations of ego, and if you are not alert to them, you get diverted and your work becomes diffused. Ego in these cases makes people insensitive to how they work with others and ends up interfering with the real goal

of any group efforts. What few seem to realize is that those we work with are often far more perceptive of being underestimated than we think they are .And, as a general rule, people resent being underestimated, particularly by those they work with every day. Equally, our relative lack of ability in many areas of life also makes us less likely to recognize when we are incompetent.

Team Dynamics Are teams really more than the sum of their parts? The sobering evidence suggests that teams rarely produce synergies, with a string of academic studies finding that individuals clearly outperform teams. How then can teams create value? Theoretically, of course, much like any form of human organization: by reducing the costs of coordinating between individuals and by combining resources or skill sets. Teams do not usually create value by getting the best resources their money can buy but, rather, by combining resources into something of which the value exceeds the economic cost.

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So, how do you get the best from star performers? Or, if not the best, then how can you mitigate any negative impact they have on the teams they join? Rather than treating the Bobby Fischers of this world as solo performers, you should surround them with high-quality colleagues. The point is to create a so-called "Matthew effect," a term from sociology meaning, essentially, the rich get richer, while the poor get poorer: stars will attract other stars or help create future stars.

The ability to gel a group of individual high performers into something greater than the sum of its parts may need to come from within. If so, this raises an interesting conundrum: are there competencies beyond individual technical qualities that can significantly enhance the performance of a team? For instance, can social or emotional intelligence (despite difficulties of measurement) help raise performance levels in even technically the most demanding environments?

So how did those who are technically passable and also likable stack up against colleagues who are far more competent but unpleasant to be around? The analysis suggests that if someone is strongly disliked, it is almost irrelevant whether or not he is competent. By contrast, if someone is liked, her colleagues will seek out every bit of competence she has to offer, meaning that a little likability has far more mileage than competence in making someone a desirable team member. Even if someone is competent, those around him may feel reluctant to reveal their vulnerabilities if he intimidates, belittles their contributions, or never pays any attention to them. Add to this the suggestion that corporate clients are by and large unable to identify slight differences in ability (in that they are unlikely to tell the difference between an employment lawyer being 94 percent or 98 percent competent), social competence would appear to win out over its technical counterpart.

We could argue that the more important the task, the more weight is placed on competence. If, God forbid, you suffer from a heart condition, chances are that you'd much prefer to be seen by the country's best cardiologist than by a socially more gifted but technically less competent colleague. If so, you might be surprised to learn that physicians are more likely to persist with a difficult diagnosis (including yours) when they like their patients. Conversely, they will likely settle for a standard diagnosis when they do not. And they make up their minds about us as quickly as we do about them. ◼

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In Aikido we say that the solution may lie at the heart of the problem or the energy of the attack may be its own resolution. We say this because there is an aikido movement that epitomizes this quality of turning towards and facing. It's called irimi and translates as "centering". When an irimi technique is called for we train ourselves to move directly into the heart of the attack or situation.... We move towards this incoming energy, whether it be a physical attacker or a verbal tirade in order to experience it at its most essential place and from there work with it freshly and creatively..... First we observe ourselves, then we look at our fear and resistance, and from there we begin to work directly with the situation as it is. This is not a process of overexciting ourselves or creating a needless problem, but a way of being with ourselves in an open and intelligent way..... When we no longer run from what we fear there becomes the possibility of being responsible for our projections of aggression, ignorance and fear. This is not an indulgence in our psychology but a practical way of recognizing how fear shows up in our bodies and our thinking and not having to be victim of it.

– Richard Strozzi Heckler,

Holding the Center: Sanctuary in a Time of Confusion: Writings on Place, Community and Body