

# TEAM BETTER TOGETHER

5 disciplines of  
high performing teams



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# Introduction

I emigrated from South Africa in January 2000 with my life partner, Kim, and our two young children, Lee and Guy. Neither of us had a job but we had committed to restarting our lives. We estimated we had enough money to survive for six months once we converted our total wealth from South African rand to Australian dollars.

After three months, I secured an executive role with an IT and telecommunications distributor – part of a wholly owned subsidiary of a global organisation. In the early 2000s, the distribution sector was going through a radical technological evolution. Amazon was five years old and its presence and power were felt. Remaining viable, given the high volume / low margin nature of the distribution sector, meant investing in the automation of the ‘picking and packing’ components of the distribution process. Distributors had to find ways to reduce their cost of sales—the sector had to automate to not only reduce costs but increase efficiencies.

System failures, process breakdowns and industrial action had a significant impact on distributors’ ability to meet service level agreements and provide the guarantees manufacturers required to deliver their products into the market.

This was my first role working in Australia and as a member of the executive team, I had much to unlearn to adapt and assimilate to the ‘Australian way’. I found much of it confusing.

For one, I did not understand why everyone called each other ‘mate’ when it was clear that some were far from being mates. It took time to understand that the context in which others called one another mate mattered most. Mate could mean anything from friend to foe.

However, I found it most difficult to deal with how my colleagues chose to avoid talking about the ‘elephant in the room’ but rather would talk about the ‘elephant outside of the room’.

It soon became apparent that the executive team was a group of stars but far from being a star team. Much of the team members’ energy and focus was on competing among themselves for a share of voice, value and vanity. On the surface it appeared to be a functional team; in reality, it was floundering.

It was floundering because of the varied and misaligned perspectives among team members of what we thought our stakeholders expected of us. At the time, our parent company was looking to divest of its global interests in IT&T distribution, while our customers were looking to us to invest in more efficient systems and processes, and lower the distribution costs to protect their eroding profit margins due to competitive pressures.

The team floundered because it lacked a common purpose—it was a group of individuals rather than a cohesive and unified team. Upon inviting the team to reflect on its purpose, the default response was ‘to meet our stakeholders’ expectations’. Despite not knowing our stakeholders’ expectations, the default response had more to do with *what* we did, rather than *why* we existed as a team.

Most concerning were the dysfunctional relationships born out of levels of distrust and disrespect of others' differing views and opinions. More was unsaid for fear of disagreeing with the predominant view. Team members wouldn't express their concerns with the person involved. Decisions were made without prior consultations which meant meetings were futile.

While I was part of this team, I found myself looking to others as the cause and reason for the dysfunctionality. This was easy to do until one day I asked myself, 'How am I contributing to the dysfunctionality in ways I am not seeing?' I had not realised that I was behaving no differently to my colleagues. How I experienced them was how they experienced me.

By acknowledging this truth, I had only one question to ask myself, 'What responsibility do I have to myself and each team member to address the situation?'

At the next monthly executive team meeting, I was committed to raising the 'elephant in the room'. I felt an overwhelming force come over me and I thumped my fists on the table out of frustration and irritation. It was too late. *What had I done, I thought? How could I be so unprofessional?* The meeting room turned silent and all eyes focused on me. But I knew they understood what made me act that way—as a team, we all knew: what we think is not what we say, what we feel is not what we name and what we say is not what we mean.

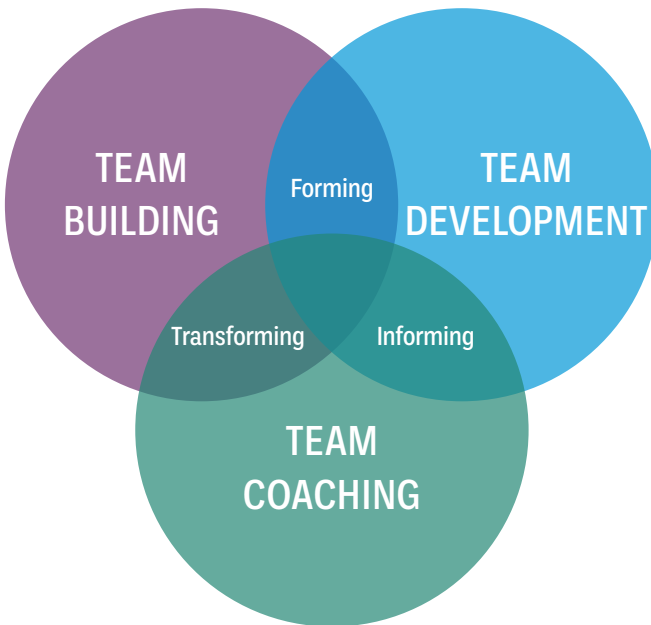
The CEO turned to me and said, 'so, Bernard, where do we go from here?' A month later we engaged the help of an executive team coach ...

... and that is where my story began.

## WHAT'S COMING UP IN *TEAM BETTER TOGETHER*

Achieving lasting and transformational behavioural change requires three modes of learning:

1. **Team building** to enable team members to get to know and understand each other so they can **form** together.
2. **Team development** to **inform** the team about the processes, systems and practices that are essential for working efficiently and effectively together.



3. **Team coaching** to enable teams to **transform** by seeing things differently and accessing new possibilities to access and leverage the team's collective capacity

and capability. In our complex and interdependent world with its increasing pace and volatility of change, leadership goes beyond individuals and requires more effective collective leadership. This requires leadership teams to learn, to see things differently, and to adapt and adjust. This book focuses on how teams can transform themselves and how organisations can succeed by creating a culture of teamwork to secure their most competitive advantage.

At its essence, this book highlights subtle distinctions with a significant impact on accessing the power within teams. What is sometimes obvious to do can be difficult to accomplish. This book is about making the obvious more accessible, applicable and achievable.

Above all else, this book helps leaders create high performing teams by answering these questions:

1. Is the team a group of leaders or a leadership team? What should it be?
2. Why does the team exist and how aligned is the team to a common purpose?
3. What needs to change in how the team members engage and relate together? What ways of working will enable the team to flourish?
4. What collective goals is the team accountable for and which can only be achieved by working interdependently?
5. How effectively do members learn with and from each other? How effectively do members grow and evolve as a team?

6. What would it take to transition a team to become a flourishing, high performing team? What does a coaching experience need to involve to help achieve this?

As a team member (and a team), we cannot change what we cannot see. Only when we see things differently, do new possibilities arise. To learn requires us to observe. Our capacity as leaders and teams to adapt and adjust and bring about new ways of thinking and doing are the most important competencies of our times.

To get the greatest value from this book, I invite you individually and collectively to be observers of the assessments, beliefs and perspectives you hold that may not serve you and that prevent you from seeing things differently. Reflect deeply on the questions posed throughout this book. Rather than rushing to an answer, stay in the question to allow more time for richer and deeper insights to emerge.

Learning is a social process that involves reflection and dialogue. Bring new insights to your team and work through them as a collective. Be open to what possibilities may arise.

Much of the power within teams lies in the disciplined application of what we hold as common sense about teams. This is explained further in each part of the book:

**Part One: Why teams matter** explores the distinctions between a group and a team and the attributes that make teams the predominant unit of organisational performance. We also explore the inherent paradoxes of teams—why high performing teams are so powerful but so rare. Finally, we discuss how teams

have access to infinite potential once they unlock the collective capacity and capability to achieve the greatest things possible.

**Part Two: How we team** explores how pairing relationships and results distinguishes four types of teams: Combative, Competitive, Cohesive and Collaborative. Part Two introduces the 5 Disciplines of a High Performing Team that serve as the framework to enable teams to become high performing, collaborative and flourishing.

**Part Three: What it takes to be an effective team** elaborates on each of the 5 Disciplines: what they mean, why they are important and the results of 10 years of research on how teams perform against the 5 Disciplines. Finally, we explore what teams can do differently to embed the 5 Disciplines to become a high performing team.

**Part Four: What is happening** provides insight into the current reality for the many teams assessed through the 5 Disciplines and the possibilities for floundering teams to transition to flourish and operate at more than the sum of their parts for more of the time.

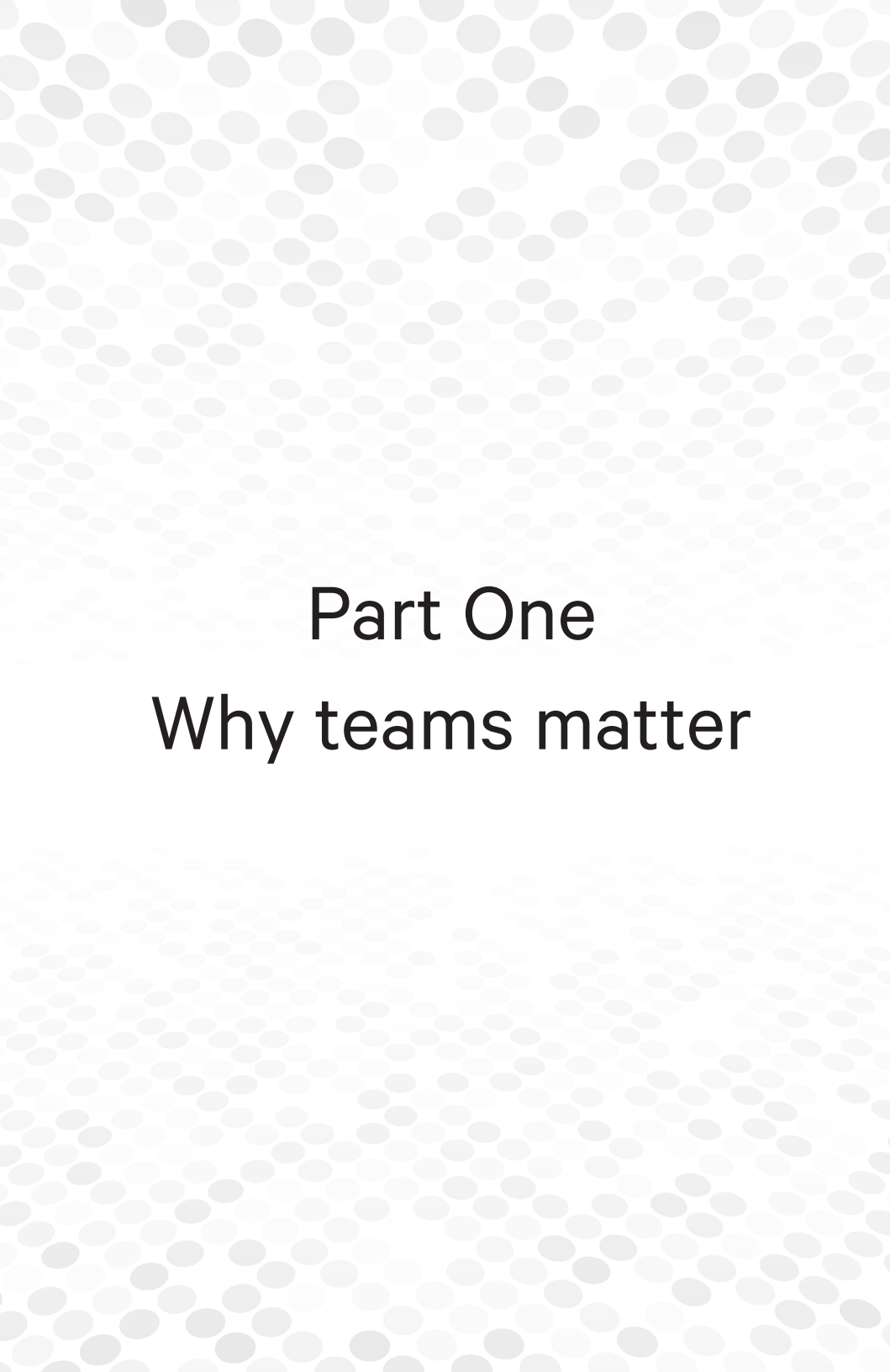
**Part Five: Making it happen** discusses how teams rise and fall based on the quality of their working relationships. Relationships happen in conversation. High performing teams distinguish themselves based on the quality of their conversations, in which nothing is 'undiscussable'.

**Part Six: Team coaching** is a learning journey that provides insight into what it takes for teams to transition to become collaborative, high performing teams—the design, the structure and the approach required to unlock the power in teams. The



following table is an overview of my Team Coaching Program for High Performing Teams.

LEARNING ACTIVITY	TIMELINE
1. Discovery Phase (1:1 Discovery Conversations / Online Assessment / Debrief)	Conduct a 1:1 discovery conversation with each team member to assess the strengths and learning priorities of the team. Each team member will complete the <i>5 Disciplines of High Performing Teams Assessment</i> and results will be shared at the first team workshop. The discovery phase takes place 3–4 weeks before the first team workshop.
2. Leadership Team Workshops (Offsite)	Five, 1-day workshops facilitated over 6–8 months.
3. Peer Action-Learning Groups	Peer group coaching sessions to take place after each group workshop to support and enable team members to apply and embed their learning.
4. Executive Coaching: Team Leader	Concurrent with the Team Coaching Program, the CEO or MD engages in a 1:1 executive coaching program for a 12-month period. An executive coaching program may also be extended to other leadership team members, dependent on their respective learning priorities.
5. In-team Coaching: Leadership Team	Opportunity is provided for the facilitator to attend leadership team meetings to observe and provide feedback on the demonstrated application of the learning. This ensures the learning momentum is maintained and the return on the learning experience is realised.
6. Return on Learning	One, 1-day workshop to be held 3–4 months after the Team Coaching Program to assess the return on the learning experience (R.O.L.E.). Opportunity will be provided to reassess the <i>5 Disciplines of High Performing Teams Assessment</i> and compare scores with the initial assessment results.



Part One

Why teams matter



# Three paradoxes of a team

Most leaders know what distinguishes an effective team but their reality seldom represents the obvious. The obvious about teams is often mistaken to be easy.

Discipline is the antidote. Discipline does not make teaming easier but it does make it more possible. High performing teams have an uncompromising and relentless discipline in applying the essential elements that distinguish effective teams. Ignoring the essentials prevents teams from accessing their potential. For example, a shared purpose is essential to a team's success, yet many teams are unclear about their purpose. High performing teams are deliberate—their collective ways of being and doing are intentional. They accept there are no shortcuts to becoming a high performing team.

High performing teams happen by design. Good intentions and espoused commitment are no guarantee. Design is a consequence of discipline. High performing teams apply discipline. Teams do not become teams because they call themselves teams or because they have engaged in some 'team building' activity. Team building may help in getting to know people better, but discipline is essential to achieving as a team.

Likewise, having a detailed decision-making process map doesn't guarantee informed or better decisions. For teams to leverage diversity of thinking, they must gather a divergence of opinions so that greater understanding can emerge and from which more informed decisions can be made.

Much of what you will read in this book is common sense; however, it is not common practice. This is due to the inherent paradoxes in teams. In *The Paradox of Teamwork*, Gordon Rabey says,

Teams ... have no identity, and recognition and reward remain focused on the individual. Yet the value and the power of the synergy of teamwork are unchallenged and ... [leaders] constantly seek to capture its benefits. Teams have the collective strength that will achieve targets and influence motivation and morale – but the ideas which stimulate their actions come from individuals, not necessarily their leaders. A team can incubate but it cannot initiate. Innovation begins when an idea and an individual meet...

As a team coach, I dedicate my time and energy to understanding and addressing the paradoxes in teams. In doing so, I have helped teams to unlock their power and access their collective capacity and capability to achieve the greatest things possible.

This book provides practical frameworks and approaches to understanding and overcoming the following three paradoxes:

1. Given that teams are the predominant unit of organisational performance, why are they preoccupied with tactical and operational issues and less focused on addressing the strategic and transformational imperatives?

2. Given that teams are so powerful, why is teamwork so rare? If teams create a sense of belonging and identity, why do many team members feel unsafe to speak their truth and discuss the undiscussables?
3. If teams have the potential to unlock their collective capacity and capability, why do they operate at less than the sum of their parts most of the time?

## PARADOX ONE: TEAMS ARE THE PREDOMINANT UNIT OF ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE

*'In every team, there is a group  
but not every group is a team.'*

—John Kotter

Much is known and has been written about teams. There are many definitions of what constitutes a team. Common to all definitions, however, is the premise that accomplishing anything of value and meaning requires the coordination of action between at least two or more people. Teams matter because they exist to achieve what individuals cannot achieve by working independently of each other.

At the outset of a team coaching program, I often find that team members interchangeably call themselves the leadership 'group' and the leadership 'team'. Much can be different in a name. When invited to reflect on the differences between a group and a team, most do not see the distinctions. Groups and teams differ significantly and both have a role and place, albeit dissimilar.

For teams to be the predominant unit of organisational performance, it's important to understand the key distinctions between a group and a team.

A group is nothing more than a collection of individuals who independently contribute to a common objective, thus requiring low levels of integration and alignment. Working groups

function well in certain contexts where complexity is low and the objectives are straightforward. However, they become less effective as the environment becomes more complex and the objectives become more challenging. When identifying and seizing synergies become a prerequisite for survival and long-term sustainability, a group must evolve into a team or it will drift into oblivion.

For example, committees, councils and review boards are not necessarily teams nor may they be required to operate as a team. More typically, they comprise individuals who only come together to inform each other of progress in their respective areas of responsibility and to share information that may be relevant to others.

Teams are the primary unit of performance in organisations. Only through teamwork can we combine different, complementary skills, knowledge and perspectives to identify and seize opportunities, overcome difficult obstacles and achieve challenging objectives.

Teams, unlike groups, operate from a unifying purpose, one that inspires the team members to a cause greater than themselves. Teams distinguish themselves by how they commit to engage and relate when together and apart, and above all they hold themselves and each other accountable to collective performance goals they know can be achieved only by working interdependently.

High performing teams develop a culture of their own. They visualise a shared future, motivate each other, learn from each other, resolve disputes and perform their jobs in ways that



strengthen the overall system. In this way, they identify and seize synergy opportunities that realise an envisioned future.

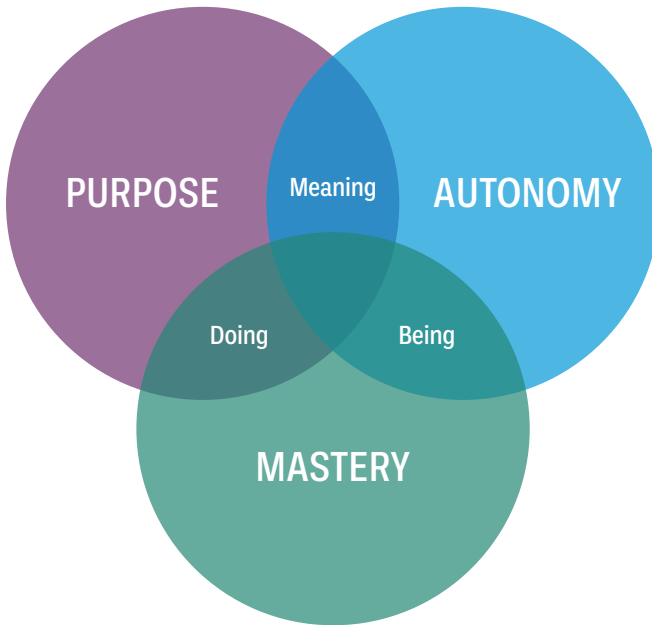
High performing teams develop a culture based on humility, hard work, excellence and learning. The members become able to translate both their victories and their failures into inputs for continuous improvement. And each member develops unique, specialised skills that increase the team's inventory of competitive advantages. They periodically reinvent themselves and the way they work, thus quickly adapting to and generating new possibilities.

A summary of the key distinctions between a group and a team include:

A group of leaders	A leadership team
Deal best with complicated matters.	Deal best with complex situations.
Bring specialist knowledge to solve problems.	Bring collective experience, expertise and insight to understand the problem.
Follow existing processes and established practices.	Seek new ways and possibilities—take risks and experiment.
Focus on short-term results.	Focus on longer term benefits.
Impact is measured by progress and momentum.	Impact is brought about through transformational change.
Integrate performance and success.	Integrate performance and learning.
Individual accountability to domain specific KPIs.	Mutual accountability to collective goals.

## PARADOX TWO: TEAMS ARE SO POWERFUL YET SO RARE

Several phenomena explain the power in teams. By way of context, Daniel Pink in his book, *Drive*, identifies three motivators that drive people to do their best at work: autonomy, mastery and purpose. Teams provide the structure and space to access and leverage these three motivators.



Let's explore each of the three motivators as the source of power in teams.

### **Purpose**

Flourishing teams align to a common and shared purpose. Teams provide members with a sense of purpose, '... when

members experience the work of their teams as being at least as important as their individual work,' says Ruth Wageman et al in their book, *Senior Leadership Teams*. 'Clarity of purpose makes the extraordinarily challenging and the consequential work of leadership teams feel possible. It orients the team in a way that allows it to pull together towards the same end, rather than pull – diligently if frustratingly – in different directions.'

Teams provide a unique opportunity to be part of something far greater than oneself. High performing teams provide members with a sense of purpose. This leaves them feeling:

- **Impactful:** The reason they exist and what they do has consequences, far beyond imagined, on all stakeholders.
- **Ignited:** Teams are at their best when their energy, passion and commitment are ignited by the continuous challenge to add real value to the organisation and its stakeholders.
- **Inspired:** Having a clear and common purpose inspires team members to identify why they need each other in order to achieve the critical challenges.

## **Autonomy**

Teams exist to achieve the results that individuals working independently cannot reach. Teams have the autonomy to galvanise around performance challenges. Autonomy comes from the Greek word 'auto' meaning 'self' and 'nomos' meaning 'custom' or 'law'. High performing, autonomous teams are self-governing; they self-determine their purpose and the values to which they commit. Teams have the autonomy

to determine the ways of working that enable them to best coordinate action. Most important, the power of a team is in the autonomy that exists to access collective wisdom to bring about new thinking and to create new ways of achieving the best outcomes.

As John Katzenbach and Douglas Smith shared in their book, *The Wisdom of Teams*, teams have the autonomy, ‘... in jointly developing clear goals and approaches ... are flexible and responsive to changing events ... adjust their approach to new information and challenges with greater speed, accuracy and effectiveness ...’

## **Mastery**

Teams provide access to the wisdom inherent in the collective capacity and capability. Teams provide a depth of resourcefulness by bringing together complementary skills and experiences that exceed those of any individual on the team.

High performing teams distinguish themselves by the responsibility each member takes for their own and each other’s learning. The openness to seek and offer feedback is fundamental to developing individual and collective mastery. Team members commit to learn with and from each other and collectively evolve and grow.

## PARADOX THREE: POTENTIAL IN THE COLLECTIVE CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY

Teams have access to the collective capacity and capability, and the potential to achieve the greatest things possible. Imagine the teamwork required within NASA and between other stakeholders to successfully land the Perseverance Rover on Mars.

Michael Dell, founder and chairman of Dell Technologies, said, 'A culture of teamwork is an organisation's most competitive advantage ....'

While Dell's view is widely held to be true, reality would demonstrate that most teams operate at less than the sum of their parts most of the time. Part Two and Part Three provide further insight into why this may be so and what teams can do to access the power and potential in their collective capacity and capability.

Many executives attest that measuring teamwork is difficult. As Patrick Lencioni explains in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, '[Teams] impact organisations in such comprehensive and invasive ways that it's virtually impossible to isolate it as a single variable. Many executives prefer solutions that are more easily measurable and verifiable, and so they look elsewhere for their competitive advantages.'

Having the brightest and most experienced team members with diverse skills and attributes does not necessarily guarantee access to the power and potential in a team. In his book, *Leading*

*Teams*, researcher Richard Hackman says, 'What teams need to thrive are certain enabling conditions.' In Part Three, we explore how the 5 Disciplines create 'enabling conditions' for teams to transition to become flourishing, high performing teams. These 'enabling conditions' include:

- A known mandate from the team's stakeholders.
- A clear and unifying purpose for why the team exists.
- Agreed and committed ways of working, and how team members relate and engage with one another and others.
- Common performance goals for which the team holds itself accountable and which can be achieved only by working interdependently.
- Commitment to learn with and from each other and evolve the collective wisdom.

Although the potential and power of teamwork cannot be denied, it can be difficult to measure and achieve. While teams may have access to infinite potential, it's not a given.

## COMING UP IN PART TWO

Teams matter because they enable the performance outcomes that individuals working independently cannot. They provide members with a sense of belonging by identifying with a unifying purpose, the autonomy to access infinite possibilities, and the opportunity to learn and grow.

Accepting the importance of teams isn't a guarantee to experiencing the power in teams. Based on years of research and experience working with leadership teams, I will help you understand the reality of most teams and the possibilities to evolve, become and accomplish so much more than you believe possible.