

# Working on 'we'

**BUILDING HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS - PART 1**



Changing the World –  
One Organisation at a Time™

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synergistics®**  
INTERNATIONAL

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## The promise of teamwork

Teamwork makes the dream work, right?  
Absolutely... but only if the team *works*.

Those of us who spend a lot of time and energy being part of a team, leading a team or working with a team know that the promise of teamwork can sometimes feel more like wishful thinking than reality. There's a good reason for this: Research focused on senior teams found that only 21% of teams were effective<sup>1</sup>.

This statistic is more than disappointing; it's unacceptable. Given the snapping rate of change, the need for co-ordination and 'joined up' thinking among team members is more important today than ever before.

When teams perform at the best of their abilities, it's magic! An unseen switch gets flipped. Fixed individual positions give way to fluid collaboration and team flow. Gone are the 'trip wires' of egos, blame, shame, butt kicking, and the could've, would've and should've. People are prepared to trust one another and adapt to change as they 'merge awareness into action'<sup>2</sup>. In short, they go from 'me' to 'we'.

In this paper we share our perspectives on teams and teamwork and what it takes to help teams be more effective. It's a preview of a more detailed paper that we'll publish in 2019- with more insights into ensuring that when 'we' works, the dream works.

### The benefits of a high-performing team.

Our research has shown that when teams operate in a constructive way, they achieve significantly better results than teams operating in more defensive ways. For example, they:

- are **96%** more effective when working together
- are **60%** less likely to waste time
- increase the quality of solutions by **69%**.

'When teams perform at the best of their abilities, it's magic!'

# What is a team?

The word 'team' has become a catch-all to describe any group of people who belong to the same business unit or are working on the same project. However, there are significant differences between a *group* and what we'll call a *real team*. While a shared goal is critical to team effectiveness, it is the level of interdependence required in achieving the goal that distinguishes a group from a team.

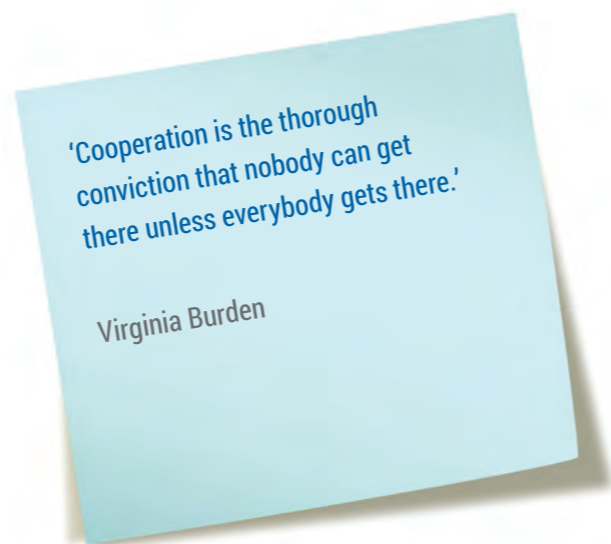
In a real team, each member depends on the skills, knowledge and experience of their colleagues to help them achieve their individual objectives. These objectives are, in turn, critical to the team achieving its collective objectives. In a real team, if *you* succeed, *I* succeed, and unless everyone gets there, no one gets there<sup>3</sup>.

To illustrate the point, here's an analogy and a workplace example:

- A singer in a band could sing acapella (without the band or music), with their individual talent providing the entertainment. The band, even if it performed without the singer, would still need all the musicians to play their instruments in time and together for the music to be entertaining. The band is a real team.
- A sales function from the same company selling different brands to the same customer is a sales group. Developing and pitching a comprehensive solution to the customer that leveraged all their brands in a way that met the customer's needs, this would make it a real team.

# What makes a team effective?

We've discovered plenty of frameworks and models of the conditions that promote and support team effectiveness. In considering these and our own extensive experience in working with teams, we've identified eight keys to team effectiveness, which we discuss in the pages that follow.



## Balancing the needs of the individual vs the needs of the team

The old adage "there is no 'I' in team" is a nonsense. Of course there is. Team flow and high performance in teams comes from individuals in the team making an active choice to place the team's needs over their individual ones. There are some inherent tensions involved in navigating this choice, such as;

- Feeling able to challenge and to disagree without risking the acceptance of team members.
- Being able to balance the desire to make decisions independently while being able to compromise and collaborate when it matters
- Holding on to our individuality while still aligning to a collective perspective.

How well individual team members balance these 'pulls' depends largely on their level of self-awareness and their ability to regulate their emotions and thoughts when triggered by other team members or team discussions that don't align with their views.

Effective teams are able to have the conversations that matter when it counts. The ability to do this well requires higher levels of self-awareness and social sensitivity.



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## 1. Self-awareness

who we are, what motivates us  
and how we show up

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To operate effectively in the peer-to-peer relationships required of teamwork, individuals need to be aware of and understand themselves – how they think, what motivates them, what they value and how these factors influence their behaviour with others.

How we see ourselves along with how we perceive and experience others has a significant role in determining the quality of our interpersonal relationships with team members.

A common example we see of how lack of self-awareness can derail both an individual and a team is when a leader reports that one of their team members continually dominates team discussions in relentlessly pursuing their own individual agenda. In such cases, the team member lacks awareness of both the degree to which they are motivated solely by individual results as well as lacking awareness about how their behaviour is perceived by the team and its negative impact.

Knowing ourselves enables us to develop some strategies for managing our own thoughts and behaviours when we feel triggered by team members or team discussions. Without this awareness we are unconscious of our own biases and their impact on others.

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## 2. Social sensitivity

our consciousness of others and  
our relationships with them


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Social sensitivity is the ability to perceive and correctly interpret social cues while responding and interacting to them respectfully. A high level of social sensitivity between team members has been shown to be a predictor of high performance in teams <sup>4</sup>.

People with higher levels of social sensitivity usually have:

- high levels of interpersonal awareness
- an ability to see themselves in relationships with others
- an ability to understand the dynamics between people and regulate their emotions and adapt their behaviour to respond appropriately.

The more socially sensitive, the more we are able to 'read' the room and the more we can adapt and respond to unspoken signals in an effective way.



**'Effective teams are able to  
have the conversations that matter  
when it counts.'**

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## 3. The Leader's Impact

how the leader shapes the  
behaviour of their team

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An effective team has a clear leader who's accountable for the team outcomes. They maintain a clear focus on what their team members should prioritise and where they ought to invest their time and energy. They're also aware that team members often model their own behaviour on that of their leaders.

The leader shapes the team's effectiveness through:

- being clear in their messages
- being clear about what they expect of the team, the type of team they want to build, the team's role and how the team will operate
- having a clear view of what 'good' looks like in terms of what needs to be achieved and the standards that must be met in terms of behaviour and performance
- providing direction without being overly directive and doing their people's jobs for them.

Their behaviour is also important in creating a foundation of trust and authenticity in which team members feel able to speak up, challenge the status quo, be creative and be vulnerable in their team interactions. They must be perceived as:

- being open to feedback
- encouraging frank debate and collaboration
- enabling a level of risk-taking while also attending to results and outcomes.

In doing this well, the leader will avoid all the risks of vague, ambiguous and ineffective leadership that leaves team members frustrated, confused and unwilling or unable to take the initiative and make decisions. A 'command and control' approach is equally unhelpful, as close supervision and micro-management can lead to passive behaviour among team members and their feeling intimidated or becoming increasingly risk-averse – waiting for direction rather than taking the initiative.

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## 4. Purpose and Direction

why our team exists

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Effective teams have a clear reason or purpose for their existence. They know that their effort will make a difference because they have a shared understanding of their purpose, their direction and how they'll be measured.

Research has shown that high-performing teams have a clear and compelling purpose<sup>1</sup> – compelling because the purpose is:

- challenging, with a stretch goal that the team has the ability and capacity to attain
- 'consequential', in that it makes an essential and significant contribution to the organisation's overall strategy.

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## 5. Real team, right roles, right level what we do

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In an effective team, individual talent is used to best effect and the skills, knowledge and experience levels of the individual team members match the quantum of the team's deliverables.

Patrick Lencioni, an American author specialising in team management, has described some of the major roadblocks to team effectiveness<sup>5</sup>. They include the comprehensive, negative impacts of low trust in a team, and its inevitable effects on the team's ability to engage in positive conflict, which in turn weakens its ability to deliver results.

We have witnessed this kind of dysfunction ourselves and have also seen the extent to which poor design of a team's work increases the pressure on team members, exacerbating negative behaviour while creating dysfunctional team dynamics.

### How can we get it right?

Before establishing a team, the leader needs to ask themselves whether establishing a team is the best approach to the challenge they're trying to address. If the work is routine or procedural and most of it can be done independently of collaboration, a team is unlikely to be the best option. The probability of a team being effective increases if the work is suited to teamwork.

Having formed a team, it's important to ensure:

- **Clarity on who is in the team and why.**  
A real team is bounded. Who is in and why is clear. As incredible as it seems, Wageman's research found that fewer than 10% of the teams they studied, knew beyond doubt, who was on the team. It is no surprise then that teams are challenged! Our observation is that often leaders can feel reluctant to exclude people from a team even when they do not play a genuine role nor are they a decision maker in key issues impacting the team. The cost of this reluctance to be decisive is that it leads to inefficiency and ineffectiveness in how the team works. It increases

the number of linkages required, increasing the time it takes to get alignment. It slows the team down while creating role confusion.

- **Role clarity.**  
Everyone in the team knows their role and expected contribution, as well as their fellow team members' roles and contributions. Boundaries, interdependencies and interfaces are known and clear, and as things change team members' role clarity enables them to renegotiate their roles.
- **Recruit the right people.**  
High performing teams rely on having the right people in the right roles. Individual team members must have the knowledge, experience and skills to be able to maximise the impact of their position and role for the team. In the cut and thrust of every day working, things often change quickly, and team members have to be able to pivot quickly and seamlessly to be effective. This is not possible if people are not the right fit for a role.

In addition to competency, equally important is the mindset and attitude of individual team members to collaboration. Setting a team up for success is ensuring that team members are recruited for their interpersonal collaborative motivation and skills as much as their task skills.

- **The leader works at the right level.**  
This applies especially to executive teams. Leaders need to avoid focusing on the minutiae, perhaps as a reaction to increasing pressure or owing to a preference for detail. It can slow progress and lead to the team putting too much emphasis on day-to-day tasks instead of the overall outcomes they're required to deliver. In the case of an executive team, this will likely reduce effectiveness at every leadership level in the organisation.



## 6. Cohesion and constructive norms and behaviours how we work together

It can be argued that the most important elements of team effectiveness are the norms that characterise team members' interactions and teamwork. For example, teams that agree on a 'code' or charter that outlines their agreed values and standards of behaviour when interacting with each other (both within and outside the team environment) increase their chances of being effective.

Human Synergistics' research has shown that when the norms that underpin team interactions are 'constructive', the teams' effectiveness is much higher than when the norms are 'defensive'. This conclusion was reached using our Group Styles Inventory™ (GSI), which measures team climate, behaviour and impact using the 'Circumplex' – a graphic model that measures 12 group 'styles', or ways in which group members approach a task and work together as a team.

The styles are categorised into three main clusters:

- Constructive styles**  
 Team members' behaviour reflects a concern for getting the job done (task skills) and for satisfying the needs of individual members (people skills).
- Passive/Defensive styles**  
 Team members' behaviour reflects a concern for maintaining their personal security. They may be prevented from performing effectively by their need for acceptance, convention and self-protection, and a need to avoid threatening situations and people.
- Aggressive/Defensive styles**  
 Team members' behaviour reflects a concern for maintaining their status/position. These teams tend to over-emphasise the task side of things and pay little attention to team members' needs and concerns.

# Ways of behaving as a team

## Constructive Styles

Effective groups show **stronger** tendencies along the Constructive styles

### 1 - Humanistic-Encouraging

- Communication is supportive and constructive
- Group is helpful to members in crystallising their ideas

### 2 - Affiliative

- Discussion is relaxed and open
- People really listen to one another

### 11 - Achievement

- Group sets goals and works toward them
- Alternatives are carefully analysed with the goal in mind

### 12 - Self-Actualising

- Conflicts and differences are used to generate better ideas
- Problems are viewed positively as interesting and challenging tasks

## Passive/Defensive Styles

Effective groups show **weaker** tendencies along the Passive/Defensive styles

### 3 - Approval

- Follow majority without much discussion
- Differences are smoothed over rather than resolved

### 4 - Conventional

- New and different ideas are resisted
- Group seems constrained; limited to certain perspectives

### 5 - Dependent

- Members express a need for assistance
- More initiative and leadership needed

### 6 - Avoidance

- Members are evasive when decisiveness is needed
- Group puts off dealing with difficult issues

## Aggressive/Defensive Styles

Effective groups show **weaker** tendencies along the Aggressive/Defensive styles

### 7 - Oppositional

- Atmosphere of conflict and disagreement
- People's ideas are 'put down' and negated

### 8 - Power

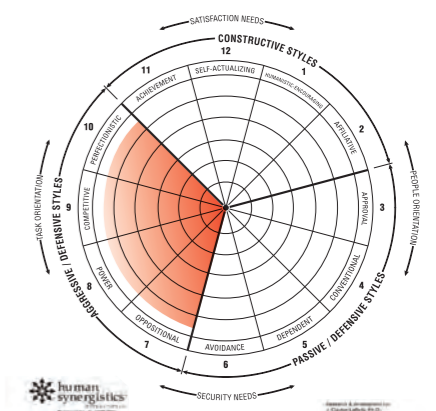
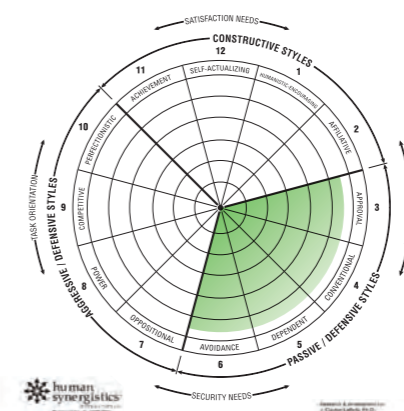
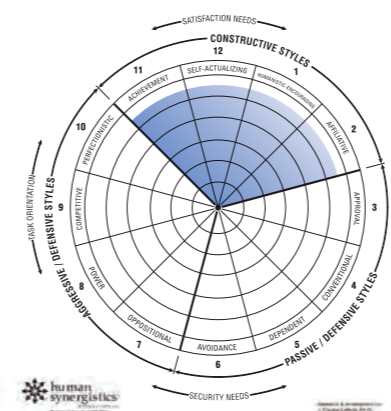
- Points are made too assertively
- Group has an attitude of over-confidence

### 9 - Competitive

- Everyone is talking—and no one is listening
- Members compete with each other rather than cooperate

### 10 - Perfectionistic

- Groups lose sight of the "big picture" (larger problem)
- Tendency to be unrealistically or unnecessarily precise



# The Constructive Difference (GSI)

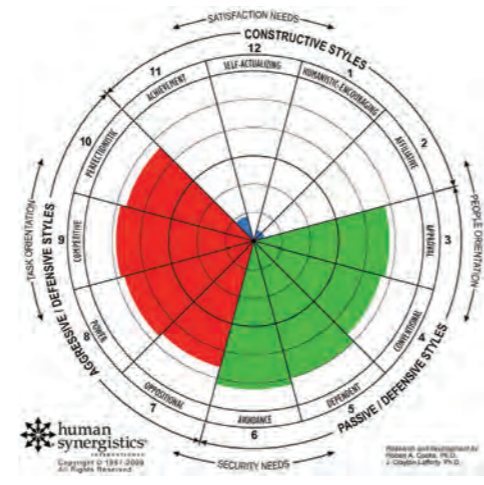
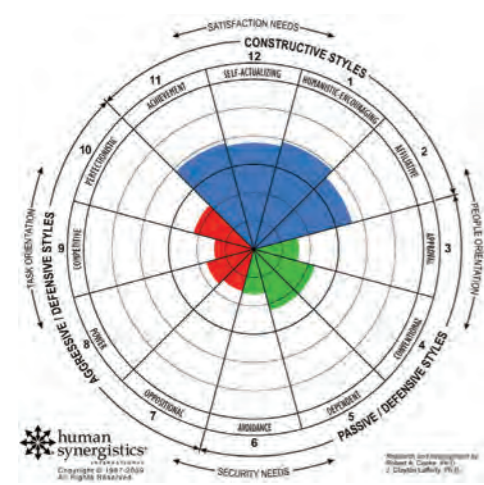
Constructive styles have been shown to be more productive and effective than the others, leading to high-quality decisions to which members are strongly committed. In contrast, Defensive styles are counterproductive and lead to solutions of marginal or poor quality and limited group acceptance.

The graphic below shows performance data for a sample of 86 teams, highlighting the positive effects of Constructive styles on team effectiveness.

86 Teams consisting of 1,385 total members, isolating the top 10% and the bottom 10% teams.

MOST CONSTRUCTIVE

LEAST CONSTRUCTIVE



Using a Scoring Scale between 1 and 5

Human Synergetics Circumplex by Robert A. Cooke, Ph.D., and J. Clayton Lafferty, Ph.D. Copyright © 1973-2018. All rights reserved. Used by permission.



## 7. Effective practices and ways of working our roles in the team

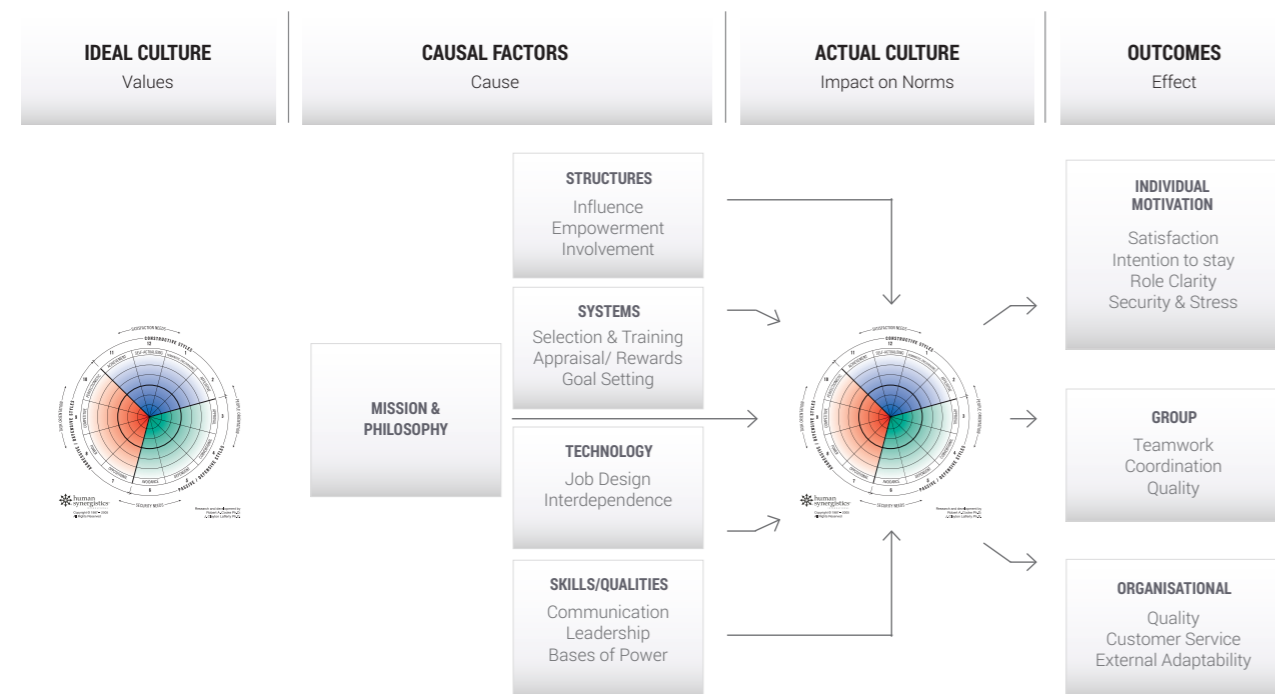
Teams need an effective operating rhythm that provides clarity on things like:

- How often they meet, how long for
- The types of meetings and their purpose
- Which issues need to be brought for collective problem solving and input from all team members, before a decision can be made and which do not
- Which decisions can be made within function independent of team collaboration.

## 8. Organisational culture how context and operating environment affect us

Neither individuals nor teams in an organisation operate in a vacuum. They're part of an overall organisational system that's shaped and influenced by the organisation's culture and climate.

The impact of organisational culture and climate on teams is highlighted in the 'How Culture Works™' model below developed by Dr. Robert Cooke. The model shows how the values of an organisation influence the 'causal factors' – five elements that shape culture, which in turn affects the effectiveness of the 'group' outcomes.



How Culture Works Model from Robert A. Cooke, Ph.D., and Janet L. Szumal, Ph.D., Organisational Effectiveness Inventory™ (OCI/OEI) Feedback Report, Human Synergetics International, Plymouth MI. Copyright © 1987 - 2018. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

The group outcomes influenced by organisational climate and culture include:

- **Intra-unit teamwork**  
The extent to which the members of a team work effectively with one another and the extent to which others can depend on them.
- **Inter-unit teamwork**  
The extent to which cross-functional teams co-operate and co-ordinate well with each other, working collaboratively to achieve targets and goals.
- **'Departmental level quality'**  
The quality and level of work produced by the team or group and whether the department or business unit is getting the best from its team members.

The 'How Culture Works' model also suggests a number of factors that should be considered before establishing a team:

Factors to consider	Description
Mission and customer service focus	The role of the team in helping the organisation to achieve its mission. How does the team's purpose fit with the bigger picture? Why is what it does important?
Structures	The role and type of the team, especially in terms of members' influence of and involvement in key decisions.
Recruitment and selection	How team members are recruited and on-boarded, and the skill mix required to deliver the outcomes.
Goal setting practices	The extent to which the team can set its own goals and/or negotiate its goals and measures of success.
Performance appraisal	How performance is evaluated for the team as a whole and its individual members.
Training and development	How the team as a whole and individual team members are developed (including access to team coaching).
Recognition and reward	How the team is recognised, valued and rewarded.
Leadership	The role of the leader and how they'll support the team in their work and encourage teamwork.
Communication channels	How communication will work between the team and the rest of the organisation and key stakeholders.



# Practical wisdom

## Top 10 tips for helping teams become more effective

From our perspective, the way to help teams to become more effective and high performing is to help them become more autonomous and manage themselves to their best effect. We recommend that you:

1. Be deliberate in designing the team so that it's set up for success right from the start. Ensure that the work is suited to team work, that there is some level of collaboration and interdependence needed to achieve a common goal.
2. Be clear about your expectations and how you'll measure the team's performance and success.
3. Establish a shared understanding and compelling team purpose or better still involve team members in establishing this purpose.
4. Conduct a 'kick off' or launch workshop with the team to discuss and agree on a charter that outlines team members agreement as to;
  - Purpose
  - Values and behaviour (during and outside team meetings)
  - Roles and responsibilities
  - Ways of working.
5. Provide coaching and regular feedback to team members and encourage feedback between peers as to 'what's working' and 'what needs work'.
6. Involve team members in determining criteria that guides which issues need collective problem solving and decision making vs individual problem solving independent of team input.
7. Make it a priority for team members to collaborate on cross functional issues so that they have the opportunity to collaborate regularly.
8. Create opportunities for team members to get to know each other better in more relaxed and informal settings. Increasing familiarity with each other's preferences can build trust.
9. Make time at the end of each meeting to evaluate how effective the meeting and conversations were. 'Did we have the conversations that mattered?' 'Did we discuss things effectively?' Using a tool to do this will help provide a consistent standard against which the team can judge its development.
10. Celebrate successes and milestones achieved.

*'Coming together is the beginning.  
Keeping together is progress.  
Working together is success.'*

Henry Ford



Coming together is the beginning.  
Keeping together is progress.  
Working together is success.

HENRY FORD



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