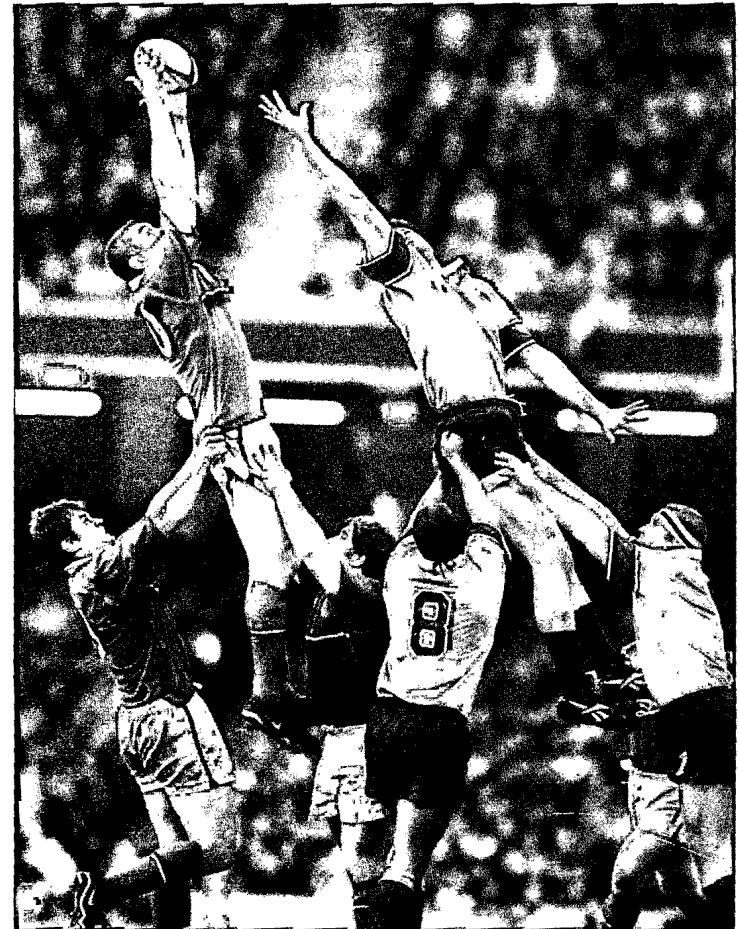chapter

# 6

# Cohesion and Teamwork

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**Rugby has a fantastic bonding effect . . . It brings friendships to the fore . . . You get strong guys up front, quick guys in the back, you get poets, you get freemasons, everybody playing in the same team, and it's a fantastic culture.**

—*Francois Pienaar, Captain, South Africa, World Cup Winners 1995*

Team cohesion describes the tendency of a group to stick together and remain united as it pursues its goals. As the Pienaar quote illustrates, team cohesion (or team unity) can generate strong emotions among team members. But, as anyone who has been a captain, manager, player or observer of rugby can testify, achieving team unity and getting a team to work together to achieve a common goal can be difficult. Individual team members sometimes have personal goals and aspirations that bring them into conflict with the team's goals and objectives. As a consequence, those individuals may try to pull the team in different directions. Teammates may dislike one another, which may lead to poor or nonexistent communication on and off the pitch. On the other hand, teammates may like one another so much that to maintain harmony, they do not risk honest appraisal, accurate feedback and open communication.

So what steps can team leaders and coaches take to ensure that the team is actively working to become unified and cohesive? This chapter seeks to answer that question by focusing on four strategies that have been used successfully in sport teams: team performance profiling, team goal setting, a game-plan exercise to develop role clarity and role acceptance, and an exercise to promote mutual respect.

## Team Performance Profiling

Team performance profiling is a method that teams use to identify the ideal characteristics necessary for success and the degree to which those characteristics are currently present. Performance profiling provides a foundation for decision making and goal setting because it helps athletes understand

- their own team's areas of perceived weaknesses,
- their own team's areas of perceived strengths,

- the concept of an ideal team,
- areas in which their team might resist improvement,
- where there is a discrepancy within the team about strengths and weaknesses,
- where there is a discrepancy among athletes in what is considered important,
- where there is discrepancy between athletes and coaches in what is considered important, and
- strategies for monitoring performance.

Essentially, team performance profiling allows coaches and athletes an open and communicative environment to facilitate goal setting.

Several positive psychological consequences can result from the process of engaging collectively in team performance profiling. First, and most important, the team's task and social cohesion will be improved. Teams high in task cohesion work together to attain the group goal, and teams high in social cohesion work together to maintain social relationships in the group. With greater task and social cohesion, there is greater satisfaction with the team's goals. Finally, when teams act together to participate collectively, other psychological perceptions that reflect a sense of unity are enhanced. Team interactions that occur during team performance profiling can lead to the development of common perceptions and beliefs about the group—such as the team's goals, its unity and the level of current satisfaction.

Team performance profiling has received considerable attention over the past several years, and one reason has to be the simplicity of the process. There are eight steps to follow, and to facilitate the completion of these steps, each athlete is given a copy of both the Athlete Performance Profile sheet (see table 6.1) and the Team Performance Profile sheet (see table 6.2, p. 141).

1. Each athlete, working independently, identifies up to 10 elements of team play that are viewed as most critical to rugby team success and records these in the first column of the Athlete Performance Profile sheet. These 10 elements should represent all aspects of team play—offensive play, defensive play, lineouts, scrums and tackles. In the example in table 6.3 (p. 142), notice that the rugby forward has listed both offensive and defensive elements of team play.

### TABLE 6.1   ATHLETE PERFORMANCE PROFILE SHEET

| Performance element (individual) | Performance element (group) | Importance score (1 to 10) | Current level (1 to 10) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | | | |
| 2. | | | |
| 3. | | | |
| 4. | | | |
| 5. | | | |
| 6. | | | |
| 7. | | | |
| 8. | | | |
| 9. | | | |
| 10. | | | |

2. The athletes divide into two subgroups—backs and forwards. The leader chosen for each subgroup lists on a blackboard or flip chart all the elements identified by individual athletes. The subgroup then discusses the elements listed.

3. After a thorough discussion, the subgroup comes to a consensus on the 10 elements considered most significant for team success. The leader of the subgroup then copies these elements on the Team Performance Profile sheet. In the example in table 6.4 (p. 142), notice that for brevity only four elements have been listed—lineouts, rucks, mauls, tackles.

4. Each athlete then copies the 10 elements from the group consensus into the second column of the Athlete's Performance Profile sheet. In the example in table 6.3 (p. 142), notice that the group consensus items are slightly different than the individual player's elements. Using a scale varying from 1 to 10 (where 1 means "not very important" and 10 means "most important"), the athletes decide on an importance score for each element. To provide a frame of reference for developing an importance score, encourage the athletes to think of a highly successful team and

### TABLE 6.2   TEAM PERFORMANCE PROFILE SHEET

| Performance element | Mean importance score (1 to 10) | Mean current score (1 to 10) | Discrepancy (importance – current) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | | | |
| 2. | | | |
| 3. | | | |
| 4. | | | |
| 5. | | | |
| 6. | | | |
| 7. | | | |
| 8. | | | |
| 9. | | | |
| 10. | | | |

Element in need of immediate attention:

1. _____

Elements that need work over the season:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

how that team would rate on these elements. Generally, when players engage in the process of performance profiling, the elements listed are either rated at or very close to 10.

5. Next, the leader of each subgroup calculates the average importance score for each element (all the individual scores are added and then divided by the number of individuals in the group). The answer is then entered in the second column of the Team Performance Profile sheet.

6. The athletes independently assess their subgroup's current level for each of the elements; that is, the athletes use their own perception to rate the subgroup at that time in the season. The following question can be used as a prompt: "Where would you rate our unit at the present time on each of the 10 elements?"

### TABLE 6.3 SAMPLE ATHLETE PERFORMANCE PROFILE SHEET

| Performance element (individual) | Performance element (group) | Importance score (1 to 10) | Current level (1 to 10) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Lineouts | Lineouts | 10 | 7 |
| 2. Rucks | Rucks | 10 | 5 |
| 3. Mauls | Mauls | 10 | 8 |
| 4. Tackles | Tackles | 10 | 8 |
| 5. Passing | Passing | 10 | 6 |
| 6. Ball retention | Ball retention | 10 | 6 |
| 7. Defense in rucks | Scrummaging | 10 | 5 |
| 8. Attack from scrum | Receive kicks | 10 | 5 |
| 9. Defense in scrums | Penalty defense | 10 | 6 |
| 10. Lineout defense | Penalty plays | 10 | 7 |

### TABLE 6.4 SAMPLE TEAM PERFORMANCE PROFILE SHEET

| Performance element | Mean importance score (1 to 10) | Mean current score (1 to 10) | Discrepancy (importance – current) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lineouts | 10 | 6 | 4 |
| Rucks | 10 | 4 | 6 |
| Mauls | 10 | 7 | 3 |
| Tackles | 10 | 7 | 3 |

**Element in need of immediate attention:**

1. Rucks
2. Lineouts

**Elements that need work during the season:**

1. Mauls
2. Tackles

Again, a scale ranging from 1 to 10 is used (1 means "could not be any worse" and 10 means "could not be any better"). The athletes record their evaluations in the fourth column of the Athlete's Performance Profile sheet.

7. The leader calculates the mean score for the subgroup's current level for each of these elements. The mean current level is then entered in the third column on the Team Performance Profile sheet.

8. The leader subtracts the mean current level of the subgroup from the mean importance level. This calculation provides a discrepancy score for each of the 10 elements (fourth column), which helps the athletes clearly see their unit's perceived strengths and weaknesses. The higher the discrepancy score, the more work that is needed on the element. Notice that in the example in table 6.4, lineouts and rucks are calculated to be the two areas needing immediate attention.

These eight steps can be used for the game of rugby as a whole or can be repeated for four separate areas of rugby: performance, technical, tactical and mental aspects. After identifying the elements that need the most work in each of the four areas, the team can then set goals related to various elements. The team must decide which elements in each of the four areas need improvement immediately. These would be targeted as the short-term goals for the group, and the remainder of the elements could be designated as long-term goals. Experience has shown that only one or two elements should be chosen from each of the four areas as short-term goals. Any more than that may be too many.

## Team Goal Setting

In any group situation, athletes naturally have individual goals and aspirations for themselves: to score more points than the previous year, make more tackles or have a greater involvement in the team offense. Individual goals are not only inevitable, they are also essential for individual progress. What are essential for team progress, however, are team goals. Research has shown that in collective endeavors, group goals are far more effective for group success than individual goals. It is important to note that group goals are not the sum of the group members' personal goals.

Group goal setting has been found to foster respect, cohesiveness and a means to provide the team with focus and direction. Group goals should focus on performance processes, such as *Secure the ball from at least 80 percent of our line-outs*, rather than outcomes, such as *Win the championship*. Performance processes are the foundation for team outcomes because they are simply more under direct, personal control.

To engage in group goal setting, coaches and players should develop an open environment that encourages honest dialogue. The process of group goal setting can increase the cohesion of a group by fostering common beliefs about the team's goal, its unity and the level of satisfaction present. When individual members help to establish goals for the team, cohesion is enhanced, goal acceptance is increased, and team members are more com-



Setting group goals encourages the development of mutual respect among teammates, creates cohesion and provides direction for the team.

mitted to the achievement of the goals. Furthermore, the leadership behavior of the coach in the goal-setting process also influences group cohesion. When coaches emphasize the importance of goal setting and allow members to participate in team goal-setting processes, what results is a stronger sense of task and social cohesion.

For the team to engage in team goal setting, two sets of information are essential. The first is knowledge of the area (or areas) in which team goals are to be set. Team performance profiling is the process you should use to identify such elements targeted for goal setting. The second set of information required is current (or baseline) statistics for the targeted elements. For example, if securing lineout possession was identified as a problem area through team performance profiling, the team's current standard must be known before a goal can be established. Knowing that the team is successful in securing the ball only 45 percent of the time provides a frame of reference for setting a future goal.

Players can follow five simple steps to participate in team goal setting. The information gathered can be recorded on a sheet, such as the one shown in table 6.5.

### TABLE 6.5   TEAM GOAL-SETTING SHEET

| Performance element | Baseline | Personal estimate | Group's estimate | Team's estimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |

1. Each athlete identifies the short-term goal (the performance element having the largest discrepancy score) from the team profiling exercise (see table 6.4 for a sample). These goals are recorded in the first column.

2. The baseline data (current performance level) for each element is entered in the second column. The coach can gain access to this information by referring to previous play statistics or video footage.

3. Working independently, the athletes record a personal estimation or target for the team goal in the third column.

4. In their subgroups (backs and forwards), athletes come to a consensus on the group's estimate for the team goal. This target is recorded in the fourth column.

5. Finally, the entire team comes together to discuss the team's goals. One leader for the team records the total team's estimate for the team goal in the fifth column.

Establishing a period of time in which to achieve the team's goals is extremely important in the goal-setting process. The team must decide when to reassess the goals and examine the progress that has been made. Because the elements identified are short-term goals, reevaluating the goals is recommended after two or three matches. At that point, the coach should provide feedback with regards to the goals that were set. The team may discover that the targets were either too high or too low, and they need adjustment. A new target date is then set. These same five steps can be carried out for long-term goals as well. Reassessment of long-term goals should be done every four to six weeks.

# Understanding and Accepting Individual Roles

**The synergy effect is paramount. But, for the whole to truly become greater than the sum of its parts, everything has to come together in a common understanding of what it takes to win the game. Each player has to understand how his cog fits into the whole machine, each player working to achieve his individual objectives in the knowledge that his teammates will do the same, each player knowing his role in the context of the collective role.**

—*Kevin Bowring, Welsh Rugby Union National Coach, 1996-1998*

Successful rugby teams generate order out of apparent chaos. For 15 individuals to function effectively in a fast-moving, ever-changing environment, the planning and practice of group processes is required. This task can be aided by the game-plan exercise. The purpose of this exercise is to develop a common understanding of the specific task ahead, clarify individual and group roles, generate role acceptance and identify key words and concepts to be used on the field of play. Role clarity is the degree to which a player understands what behaviors are expected while role acceptance is the degree to which the individual is satisfied with his or her role responsibilities.

The game-plan exercise represents the forum for discussing and agreeing on strategy before it is implemented, and it is carried out in four stages. In stage 1, the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing team are summarized in as much detail as is available. In stage 2, the team comes to an agreement on how these strengths and weaknesses will be countered or exploited. In stage 3, the team members identify key words or phrases that reflect the game plan. Finally, contingency plans are prepared by considering various what-if scenarios.

One strength of the game-plan exercise is that it provides a mechanism for public acceptance of team strategy, and it crystallizes lists of issues into a few key words or phrases. The example in figure 6.1 shows more specific details of the four stages of the game-plan exercise. Bear in mind that this exercise is designed to build on the existing strengths of the team, to emphasize to each player the critical elements of a successful team performance and to identify key words that summarize the qualities of the team at its best.

First, at a team meeting, team members identify verbally what they perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of the opposition. A facilitator collates this information on a blackboard or flip chart. The coach should have significant input in this process but should not dominate the proceedings. To encourage a sense of ownership of the process, the coach should prompt each team member to make a contribution. Once the list is completed, team members identify how the perceived strengths can be countered and the perceived weaknesses exploited. Once the team has discussed and agreed on a strategy, the facilitator lists the strategy

## Stage 1: Opposition assessment

***Strengths:***

1. Rucking speed

2. Back breaks

3. Kicking high ball

***Weaknesses:***

1. Scrums

2. Lineouts

3. Ball retention

## Stage 2: Counters

***Strengths:***

1. Get quickly to breakdown

2. Up hard on defense

3. Wings drop and help

***Weaknesses:***

1. Drive backwards, wheel

2. Catch and drive

3. Hard tackle and drive

## Stage 3: Cue words

1. "Tackle and drive"

2. "Up hard"

3. "Drop and cover"

4. "Be aggressive"

## Stage 4: What-ifs

1. If they score early, tackle hard, drive over the ball, retain our possession.

2. If they kick to fullback, flyhalf and scrumhalf help with coverage.

3. If their backs break gain line, drop flanker into the backline.

**Figure 6.1**  Game-plan exercise example.

on a separate sheet and crosses out the specific opposition quality that has been addressed.

(Note: An emphatic swoosh of the pen across a substantial opposition strength can do much to engender team confidence. Obviously, the opposition is not encountered on a flip chart, nor does crossing out a team's strength nullify their threat in reality; however, there is a link between the pregame mindset of a team and their performance on the field of play. It is this mindset that the game-plan exercise seeks to influence.)

It is important during this process to achieve acceptance of the potential consequences of a particular strategy for some team members. For example, let's presume that it is agreed that the outside half should kick a higher percentage of first phase possessions than normal, perhaps because the opposition's fullback is perceived to be weak under the high ball. This decision inevitably means less ball-in-hand for the three quarters. Because backs prefer to run with the ball (versus chasing kicks), any concerns they might have about the agreed-on team strategy should be voiced at this point, rather than during the game.

As the agreed plan evolves, the facilitator should start to request key qualities that the team intends to display, such as "discipline", "aggression" or "patience". Team members should be encouraged to suggest how these qualities will be shown during the game. For example, will aggression be better reflected by knocking the opposition backwards in the tackle, by pumping the knees when rucking and by driving low with the ball into contact situations?

Finally, a few key words or phrases should be highlighted to the players as take-away messages from the agreed game plan. Teammates should be encouraged to remind one another of these during the game, especially if things are not quite going according to plan. For example, during a British Student Championships final at Twickenham in 1995 between Brunel and Swansea Universities, the lead changed hands three times in the final two minutes of a desperately hard-fought game. A towering drop-goal put Swansea into a 30-28 lead with only a few seconds remaining; most people believed Swansea had secured victory. However, the key words "patience" and "discipline"—

agreed on by the Brunel players before the game—strengthened their resolve. Swansea saw them storm back from the kickoff, win a penalty almost immediately and kick the goal for a famous 31-30 win. The beneficial impact of the agreed key words in this nail-biting situation were identified by several Brunel players after the game.

To test the effectiveness of the game plan, coaches should offer a few what-if scenarios for players' consideration: What if the opposition scores immediately from the kickoff? What if the referee makes a series of bad decisions against us? What if we are failing to win our own ball from the lineout? What if we are 10 points down with five minutes to play? Team members should discuss what elements of the game plan might need to be changed in such situations (if any). They should determine whether the key qualities agreed by the team are the right ones to cope with all possible scenarios, and they should know whether a distinct, alternative game plan is required or just variations on the agreed plan.

The wisdom of a process that focuses on how to respond positively to potentially negative events might be questioned by some people, but rugby is not a game of perfection. Knowing how to get the most from a team on a bad day is a key skill. Ignore such preparation at your own peril.

# Promoting Mutual Respect

**The main reason the Lions beat the Springboks in 1997 was because we became a team in the true sense of the word, we understood each other, we had respect for each other, we had a deep sense of a common purpose.**

—*Richard Hill, British Lions flanker*

Rugby is a highly interdependent sport. Teammates are mutually reliant for both team performance and physical well-being. Consequently, the development of mutual respect among teammates underlies the task cohesion and team spirit that form the bedrock of a successful team. The following mutual respect exercise is a simple strategy to help develop such mutual respect and enhance the self-confidence of each individual. This exercise is

a way of letting players know the reasons why their peers value and respect them, a process that fulfills an important psychological need. The mutual respect exercise requires all team members to identify why they want their fellow players on the team. This strategy has been used to good effect with the national teams of England and Wales.

The principle underlying this exercise is that the natural bond among teammates has great potential to strengthen the self-belief of each individual and, hence, of the team. Teammates often have great respect for each other's personal and playing qualities, yet they may not feel inclined to express that respect openly, perhaps for fear of creating the appearance of a mutual admiration society. The net result of such reluctance is a missed opportunity to boost team cohesion. The mutual respect exercise allows the expression of respect without the burden of speech making. All players like to know that their teammates appreciate them. While they may know this intuitively, it does no harm to be told explicitly, especially before a big game.

For the mutual respect exercise, each player is given a form containing the names of all their teammates. At the top of this sheet is the phrase "I want [teammate's name] on my team because . . . " After each player has independently and confidentially written their comments about every other player, the forms are collated by the facilitator or group leader. All the comments about a particular player are transferred onto a single summary form. This is repeated for each player. The summary sheets are distributed in sealed envelopes to each player.

Questions arise of how often to do this, whether to include all squad members or only the 15 starters and when and how to present the feedback. Our advice is for the coach to use this strategy sparingly (saving it until an important occasion), to include every squad member and to provide the summary sheets for players in sealed envelopes. We recommend distributing the envelopes the evening before the game to allow players to sleep in the warm glow of their teammates' positive comments. Figure 6.2 provides examples of the types of comments made by international players about one another. All involved in the process knew that there was no room for empty flattery and that the sentiments had to have a solid basis in reality.

**I want Player A on my team because:**

He never takes a backwards step.

He has huge heart, spirit and pride.

There is no tougher player in world rugby.

He is as hard as a rottweiler.

He is a born leader.

He is an inspiration.

**I want Player B on my team because:**

He is the old master.

He has sound stability and control.

He is known for steering the ship up front.

He has a motivational, calming influence.

He is a great reader of the game.

He is a superb player.

**Figure 6.2**    Sample comments from the mutual respect exercise.

The comments tend to reflect qualities well justified by performances over the years. As a result, they positively affect the self-image of the player receiving them. Player A is clearly seen by his teammates as someone who plays with passion, determination and the sort of physical robustness that inspires those around him. The image of this man as a rottweiler dog may provide the same sense of identity enjoyed by Brian Moore, the ex-England hooker affectionately known as Pit Bull. Player B is seen by his teammates as someone whose effectiveness is based more on his experience and decision-making ability than aggression. He would probably be encouraged by their comments to view his age (mid-30s) as an asset, rather than a potential source of anxiety.

# Summary

Will Carling, England and British Lion, once said, "Most of all things, I love being part of this squad. I can't express how much it means to me . . . It's a team, a group, it's a pride of brothers . . . That's it. Whatever happens, we are brothers in pride." As this quote illustrates, players develop strong bonds with their teammates, a genuine sense of team unity. The reasons for this cohesion are obvious to anyone who has experienced the joys and pains of sport—the sacrifices, the training, winning, losing and

so on. It is inevitable that some sense of unity develops in every team. The exercises outlined in this chapter are intended to speed up this process, to facilitate the bonding of individuals on a team, for that team to become more unified and for that unified team to become better and more successful.