

*High-stakes projects need all-star teams. But all-stars often play by their own rules—and fight like cats and dogs.*

## Virtuoso Teams

by Bill Fischer and Andy Boynton

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Blood on the stage, racial tensions turned violent, dissonant music, and dancing hoodlums—*West Side Story* was anything but the treacly Broadway musical typical of the late 1950s. It was a high-stakes, radical innovation that fundamentally changed the face of American popular drama. The movie version earned ten Oscars. Not a bad achievement for the team of virtuosos—choreographer Jerome Robbins, writer Arthur Laurents, composer Leonard Bernstein, and lyricist Stephen Sondheim—who created it.

In nearly any area of human achievement—business, the arts, science, athletics, politics—you can find teams that produce outstanding and innovative results. The business world offers a few examples. Think of the Whiz Kids—the team of ten former U.S. Air Force officers recruited en masse in 1946—who brought Ford back from the doldrums. Recall Seymour Cray and his team of “supermen” who, in the early 1960s, developed the very first commercially available supercomputer, far outpacing IBM’s most powerful pro-

cessor. More recently, consider Microsoft’s Xbox team, which pulled off the unthinkable by designing a gaming platform that put serious pressure on the top-selling Sony PlayStation 2 in its first few months on the market.

We call such work groups *virtuoso teams*, and they are fundamentally different from the garden-variety groups that most organizations form to pursue more modest goals. Virtuoso teams comprise the elite experts in their particular fields and are specially convened for ambitious projects. Their work style has a frenetic rhythm. They emanate a discernible energy. They are utterly unique in the ambitiousness of their goals, the intensity of their conversations, the degree of their esprit, and the extraordinary results they deliver.

Despite such potential, most companies deliberately avoid virtuoso teams, thinking that the risks are too high. For one thing, it’s tough to keep virtuoso teams together once they achieve their goals—burnout and the lure of new challenges rapidly winnow the ranks. For another, most firms consider expert individuals

to be too elitist, temperamental, egocentric, and difficult to work with. Force such people to collaborate on a high-stakes project and they just might come to fisticuffs. Even the very notion of managing such a group seems unimaginable. So most organizations fall into default mode, setting up project teams of people who get along nicely. The result is mediocrity. We've seen the pattern often.

For the past six years, we've studied the inner workings of teams charged with important projects in 20 of the world's best-known companies. We've found that some teams with big ambitions and considerable talent systematically fail, sometimes before our very eyes. In interviewing the managers involved, we discovered that virtuoso teams play by a different set of rules than other teams. The several dozen high-performance teams we studied, drawn from diverse fields, fit a few overarching criteria. Not only did they accomplish their enormous goals, but they also changed their businesses, their customers, even their industries.

Unlike traditional teams—which are typically made up of whoever's available, regardless of talent—virtuoso teams consist of star performers who are handpicked to play specific, key roles. These teams are intense and intimate, and they work best when members are forced together in cramped spaces under strict time constraints. They assume that their customers are every bit as smart and sophisticated as they are, so they don't cater to a stereotypical "average." Leaders of virtuoso teams put a premium on great collaboration—and they're not afraid to encourage creative confrontation to get it.

Among the work groups we studied were two from outside the mainstream business world—the creative teams behind *West Side Story* and the 1950s-era television hit *Your Show of Shows* and its successors. Both teams were vivid, unique, and, ultimately, managed to change their very competitive businesses. We also offer a more current business example from Norsk Hydro, the Norwegian energy giant. We intently studied a variety of sources, including diaries, interviews, video archive materials, and the impressions of many of the principals involved. In the following pages, we'll describe in more detail what constitutes a virtuoso team, how these teams work, and what they require in the way of leadership.

## Assemble the Stars

Most traditional teams are more concerned with doing than with thinking. In other words, the working assumption is that execution is more important than generating breakthrough ideas. Team assignments, therefore, fall to people who seem to be able to get the work done. A less conventional approach, however, is more likely to produce exceptional results.

In virtuoso teams, thinking is more important than doing: Individual members are hired for their skills and their willingness to dive into big challenges. Instead of assembling a variety of individuals and averaging their talents down to a mean, virtuoso team leaders push each player hard to reach his or her potential within the overall context of the team objective. Virtuoso team members are not shy; they typically want to take on a risky venture that can pull them away from their well-trodden paths. They love daunting challenges, and they accept the risk of exposure and career damage if their projects fail. The risk increases pressure on the team to deliver; accordingly, the individual members give their utmost to assure that radical innovation happens.

If you want great performances of any type, you have to start with great people. In 1949, a young comic named Sid Caesar distanced himself from his competition by relying on a group of virtuoso writers including Neil Simon, Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, and Woody Allen. *Your Show of Shows* and Caesar's other weekly productions were the biggest commercial successes on TV at the time. Week after week over a period of nine years, Caesar and his cadre of writers created live, consistently award-winning performances in a string of TV comedy hits. Mel Brooks famously likened the group to a World Series ball club, echoing the sentiments of many who acclaimed the team as the greatest writing staff in the history of television.

They may have been the best comedy writers in America—but they weren't the nicest. As is the case with all virtuoso teams, Caesar's staffers engaged daily in high-energy contests. It was as if each writer knew he or she was the best; every day, each tried to top the others for the "best of the best" title. The interpersonal conflict often intensified as the writers jostled aggressively to see whose ideas would be accepted. Mel Brooks frequently irritated Max

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Virtuoso teams differ from traditional teams along every dimension, from the way they recruit members to the way they enforce their processes and from the expectations they hold to the results they produce.

# TRADITIONAL TEAMS VS VIRTUOSO TEAMS

## Choose Members for Availability

- ❖ Assign members according to the individuals' availability and past experience with the problem.
- ❖ Fill in the team as needed.

## Emphasize the Collective

- ❖ Repress individual egos.
- ❖ Encourage members to get along.
- ❖ Choose a solution based on consensus.
- ❖ Assure that efficiency trumps creativity.

## Focus on Tasks

- ❖ Complete critical tasks on time.
- ❖ Get the project done on time.

## Work Individually and Remotely

- ❖ Require individual members to complete tasks on their own.
- ❖ Allow communication via e-mail, phone, and weekly meetings.
- ❖ Encourage polite conversations.

## Address the Average Customer

- ❖ Attempt to reach the broadest possible customer base; appeal to the average.
- ❖ Base decisions on established market knowledge.
- ❖ Affirm common stereotypes.

## Choose Members for Skills

- ❖ Insist on hiring only those with the best skills, regardless of the individuals' familiarity with the problem.
- ❖ Recruit specialists for each position on the team.

## Emphasize the Individual

- ❖ Celebrate individual egos and elicit the best from each team member.
- ❖ Encourage members to compete, and create opportunities for solo performances.
- ❖ Choose a solution based on merit.
- ❖ Assure that creativity trumps efficiency.

## Focus on Ideas

- ❖ Generate a frequent and rich flow of ideas among team members.
- ❖ Find and express the breakthrough idea on time.

## Work Together and Intensively

- ❖ Force members into close physical proximity.
- ❖ Force members to work together at a fast pace.
- ❖ Force direct dialogue without sparing feelings.

## Address the Sophisticated Customer

- ❖ Attempt to surprise customers by stretching their expectations; appeal to the sophisticate.
- ❖ Defy established market knowledge.
- ❖ Reject common stereotypes.

Liebman, producer of the *Admiral Broadway Revue* and *Your Show of Shows*, and vice versa: Liebman found Brooks arrogant and obnoxious, while Brooks, for his part, declared that he owed no allegiance to Liebman. The tension among team members led Caesar to describe the competitive atmosphere as one filled with “electricity and hate”; two other virtuosos translated Caesar’s description into terms of “competition” and “collaboration.”

The *West Side Story* group was also famously discordant. To build the team, Jerome Robbins, a young classical ballet choreographer with an impressive résumé, sought out Leonard Bernstein, one of the moving forces in classical music composition and conducting; Arthur Laurents, a highly regarded and successful screenwriter; and budding lyricist Stephen Sondheim. All of these talented players had enormous egos and greedy ambition. In their very first meeting, Laurents refused to play a subordinate role to the famously egotistical Bernstein, insisting vociferously that he was not about to write a libretto for any “god-damned Bernstein opera.” All the team members engaged in similarly nasty tugs-of-war with one another. They needed each others’ skills, not peace and quiet.

## Build the Group Ego

Traditional teams typically operate under the tyranny of the “we”—that is, they put group consensus and constraint above individual freedom. Team harmony is important; conviviality compensates for missing talent. This produces teams with great attitudes and happy members, but, to paraphrase Liebman, “from a polite team comes a polite result.”

When virtuoso teams begin their work, individuals are in and group consensus is out. As the project progresses, however, the individual stars harness themselves to the product of the group. Sooner or later, the members break through their own egocentrism and become a plurality with a single-minded focus on the goal. In short, they morph into a powerful team with a shared identity.

Consider how Norsk Hydro used a virtuoso team to handle a looming investor relations crisis. In 2002, Bloc 34, the potential site for a big oil find in Angola, turned out to be dry. Hydro had made a serious investment in the site. Somehow, senior management would have to convincingly explain the company’s

failure to the financial markets or Hydro's stock could plummet.

The senior managers understood that this problem was too critical to leave to conventional approaches, but Hydro was certainly not a natural environment for a virtuoso team. Rich in heritage, unwieldy, and traditional, with a strong engineering culture and a decidedly Nordic consensus-driven approach to decisions, the company never singled out or recognized individual performers. In fact, most of Hydro's business activities were specialized and separated. Teamwork was satisfactory but unexceptional, and tension among employees was firmly discouraged.

Defying precedent, team leader Kjell Sunde assembled a high-powered group comprising the very best technical people from across the company. Their task? To review a massive stream of data—one that had occupied the minds of some of the best professionals for more than four years. Their goal? To understand what had gone wrong in the original analysis of Bloc 34 and to assure key stakeholders that the company would prevent such an outcome from occurring again. Their deadline? A completely unreasonable six weeks.

Sunde's challenge was to strike a delicate balance between stroking the egos of the elites and focusing them on the task at hand. Each of the brilliant technologists was supremely confident in his abilities. Each had a reputation for being egocentric and difficult. Each had a tendency to dominate and aggressively seek the limelight. In a consensus-driven company like Hydro, the typical *modus operandi* would have been to exhort the individuals to surrender their egos and play nicely together.

But Sunde went in the opposite direction, completely breaking with corporate culture by publicly celebrating the selected members and putting them squarely in the spotlight. The Bloc 34 Task Force, nicknamed the "A-team," established a star mentality from its very inception. Selection for the project was clearly a sign of trust in each member's ability to perform outstanding work on a seemingly impossible task. For the most part, the members knew one another already, which eliminated the need for them to build polite relationships and helped them jump in right away.

Sunde then set about building the A-team's group ego. He guaranteed the members the respect they craved by assuring them that they

would work autonomously—there would be no micromanagement or intrusive scrutiny from above. Team members would have absolute top priority and access to any resources they required, their conclusions would be definitive, and there would be no second-guessing. All this set a positive tone and bolstered group morale.

Still, there were plenty of early clashes. To control the friction, Sunde introduced an overall pattern to the teamwork. First, he paired off individual team members in accordance with their expertise and his sense of their psychological fit. Each half of the couple worked on a separate but related problem, and each pair's problem set fit together with the other sets to form the overall puzzle, which team members had to keep in mind as they worked.

Eventually, each team member understood that if the team failed, he would fail too. This kept any of the members from developing an entrenched sense of idea ownership. As it worked, the team transformed itself from a collection of egocentric individuals into one great totality. Had the group started out as a cohesive whole, individual talents might never have been realized and harnessed to the goal.

### **Make Work a Contact Sport**

Typical teams are all too often spatially dispersed—they are managed remotely and get together only occasionally for debate and discussion. Most of the time, such a scenario works quite well. But when big change and high performance are required, these standard working conditions fall short of the mark. In virtuoso teams, individual players energize each other and stimulate ideas with frequent, intense, face-to-face conversations, often held in cramped spaces over long periods of time. The usual rounds of e-mails, phone calls, and occasional meetings just don't cut it.

When virtuoso teams are in action, impassioned dialogue becomes the critical driver of performance, not the work itself. The inescapable physical proximity of team members ensures that the right messages get to the right people—fast. As a result, virtuoso teams operate at a pace that is many times the speed of normal project teams.

*Your Show of Shows* and Caesar's other TV programs were developed each week in a small, chaotic suite of rooms on the sixth floor of 130 West 56th Street in Manhattan. Experimentation and rapid prototyping were the

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name of the game; only the best ideas survived. One team member compared the daily atmosphere to a Marx Brothers movie: People shouted at the top of their lungs; piles of food and cigarette butts lay everywhere. The pace was dizzying, yet everyone stayed focused. The pressure-cooker environment resulted in fierce interpersonal clashes, but there wasn't time to sulk or stay angry. The tight work space and relentless deadlines created a cauldron of energy and a frenzy of ideas.

Members of Norsk Hydro's A-team joked that they were not a task force; rather, they were "forced to task." Sunde established a dedicated room for the team and filled it with computer workstations and other necessary scientific and communications equipment. The space functioned both as a workroom and as a common meeting place (members of the team spent as much as 90 hours per week together). The atmosphere was relaxed and informal, and the discussions that took place there were open, honest, and passionate. Team members "would continually interact," Sunde said, "bouncing ideas off each other and to a degree competing, or at least keeping their eyes on each other."

The intense pressure on virtuoso teams affects project duration as well. These work groups usually break up for one of two reasons: Either the sheer physical, intellectual, and emotional demands take their toll (though *Your Show of Shows* and the team's other comedy hits lasted for nine years, there was high turnover within the writing group) or the stars, who are always in high demand, find themselves drawn to other new and challenging projects. Still, as long as the team members remain passionately interested and feel they have the opportunity to leave a significant mark on their company or their industry, they will work long and hard.

### **Challenge the Customer**

Virtuoso teams believe that customers want more, not less, and that they can appreciate the richness of an aggrandized proposition. Virtuoso teams deliver solutions that are consistent with this higher perception. The vision of the demanding customer becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, for while competitors create diminished offerings for their clients, virtuoso teams redefine taste and expectations and raise the level of market acceptability.

Before *West Side Story*, Broadway musicals were typically limited to a conventional formula of nostalgia, comedy, and feel-good endings. They were easily marketable entertainment. A typical hit of the day was *Damn Yankees*, a musical about a baseball fan who makes a pact with the devil. There was no room for tragedy, social critique, or even art on the Great White Way.

Robbins, Bernstein, Laurents, and Sondheim believed otherwise, but few agreed with them. Getting *West Side Story* to the stage was a huge challenge because most producers thought the project too risky, dealing as it did with themes of social consciousness and racial violence. How could it possibly make money? As venture capital dried up, Robbins and the others persisted, laying their careers on the line to bring audiences something totally new, daring, and different from anything they had experienced before. The enormous success of their project vindicated them.

Sid Caesar similarly believed that nothing was too much for his audience. At a time when American TV was beginning its long slide into programming mediocrity, Caesar wanted to get away from the crude, pie-in-the-face, seltzer-bottle slapstick that he found degrading. In a turnabout from convention, he and his team regularly presented audiences with challenging material. Liebman put it this way: "We take for granted...that the mass audience we're trying to reach isn't a dumb one. It has a high quota of intelligence, and there's no need to play down to it.... We strive for adult entertainment, without compromise, and believe that the audience will understand it."

For Norsk Hydro, the "customers" were the equity market analysts. The team members' job was to manage the market's reaction; if their explanation was slapdash or incomplete, the company's market value would nosedive. Faced with a similar situation, most businesses would have tried to downplay the fact that a gigantic project had failed, offering a pallid apology and then weathering the ensuing storm. Some companies, however, are able to turn these incidents to their advantage. (In 1988, for instance, an Ashland Oil storage tank ruptured while being filled. Diesel fuel damaged ecosystems and contaminated drinking water. The company's full disclosure and aggressive cleanup efforts restored its good name.) Likewise, Norsk Hydro turned the Bloc

34 incident to its advantage. The thoughtful explanations the virtuoso team provided left market analysts impressed with the firm's ability to respond convincingly and quickly to market concerns. The company received kudos in the press and was spared from any serious financial erosion.

### **Herd the Cats**

Most leaders of traditional teams—even those working on big projects—emphasize consensus and compromise. Their goal is to keep stress levels low, meet deadlines, and produce acceptable results. By contrast, leaders of virtuoso teams must be far more deft and forceful. Their goal is to help individual performers, and the group as a whole, achieve their utmost potential.

The worst thing you can do to highly talented, independent people is to constrain their expressiveness; you have to trust and encourage their talents. At the same time, however, a team made up of these individuals must meet strict goals and deadlines. Balancing the virtuosos' needs for individual attention and intellectual freedom with the uncompromising demands and time lines of a high-stakes project requires unusual skill. For this reason, leaders of virtuoso teams assume different kinds of roles, and use different management tools, than do leaders of traditional teams.

One way to manage a virtuoso team is to be a rigid—even villainous—perfectionist. Jerome Robbins was a perfect example of this. He combined the unforgiving discipline of a boot camp sergeant with an artist's attention to detail. He pushed, prodded, embarrassed, and demanded excellence from his people; he overlooked no detail in an effort to capture the cast's total attention. For example, he posted articles about interracial gang warfare on the theater walls and encouraged others to find and share similar reports. Each gang-member character had a biography—for the first time on Broadway, there was to be no anonymous chorus—and actors were forbidden to use any other names in the theater. Robbins segregated the cast into their respective gangs. "This stage is the only piece of territory you really own in this theater," he barked. "Nothing else belongs to you. You've got to fight for it." This sparked genuine antagonism between the groups, which imbued the final production with verisimilitude.

Needless to say, tensions ran high, and the stress on individual players was enormous. In the end, many cast members hated Robbins (one thespian observed, "If I go to Hell, I will not be afraid of the devil. Because I have worked with Jerome Robbins."). Still, his hard-nosed leadership won him great respect. Chita Rivera, who starred as Anita in the Broadway version of *West Side Story*, noted that "...if [Robbins] hadn't been the way he was, none of those people would have danced the way they did. None of them would have had the careers that they had...because people give up, we all give up, and we give up a lot of times too soon. He made you do what you were really capable of doing, something you never even dreamed you could possibly do."

Other leaders of virtuoso teams take the opposite tack: They strive for excellence by fostering a galloping sense of intellectual and creative freedom in individuals and in the group as a whole. Sid Caesar let his team members express themselves as freely as possible and encouraged creative pandemonium. Though the process might have looked chaotic to an outside observer—and to NBC's management—Caesar kept the group focused on the goal: to produce the very best comedy possible for each show. His team members would work shoulder to shoulder to write and rewrite the same scene many times in the same week—sometimes in the same day—in a frantic effort to perfect it through repeated testing. Ideas, situations, and lines would be tossed back and forth, and, though most would be rejected, a choice few would be accepted and pursued. In the brainstorming maelstrom, ownership of the ideas was difficult to pinpoint. This created a sense of mutual respect and unity in the group; the writers felt they belonged to something bigger than themselves. "He had total control, but we had total freedom," writer Larry Gelbart, a contributor to *Your Show of Shows*, said of Caesar's management style. This statement goes to the very heart of what it means to lead a virtuoso team.

Regardless of their personal approaches, all leaders of virtuoso teams exploit time as a management tool. At Norsk Hydro, Sunde used time in a very specific way. Because presentations were kept to a strict limit of 15 minutes, members used their allotment to maximum effect. And the time limit prevented the more aggressive members from imposing their

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points of view on others. The deadline pressure was so great that the team had no choice but to maintain its focus on the task at hand. As one technologist put it, the strong adherence to time “made everyone aware that they had to dance to the same rhythm.”

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Companies in every industry pursue ambitious projects all the time, tackling big product changes, new market entries, and large reorganizations. But when breakthrough performance is called for, it's clear that business as usual won't suffice.

If you want to stamp out mediocrity, re-

member the instructive lessons from Sid Caesar's writers' group, the *West Side Story* team, and Norsk Hydro's A-team: Don't hesitate to assemble the very best and let their egos soar. Encourage intense dialogue—and then watch as the sparks fly. If you allow the most brilliant minds in your organization to collide and create, the result will be true excellence.

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