

TEAM A Guide to Breakthrough Teams

CL^{•••••}CK™

Steve Ritter

"This book made me think hard—really hard—about what it means to join or lead a group of people. Short, punchy and powerful."

Seth Godin, Bestselling Author, *Tribes*

"HCI members have embraced *Team Clock* as a simple, direct and powerful resource for engaging and leading teams in the new economy."

Michael Foster, Chairman and CEO , Human Capital Institute

"*Team Clock* has truly transformed the way my team communicates. I highly recommend it to business leaders everywhere."

Bo Menkiti, CEO, the Aroli Group

"*Team Clock* provides a wonderful common language for the development of professional learning teams."

Jack Eliot, Co-Director, Midwest Principals Center

"*Team Clock* provides leaders and team members with proactive, clear and easy to follow guidelines to improve a team's communication, trust and comfort level. Your team will thrive in productivity and functionality and promote positive outcomes. Applying *Team Clock* concepts bolster healthy, dynamic, mutually respectful and collaborative cultures."

Dr. Bhavna Sharma-Lewis

Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction

Addison School District 4, Illinois

“Team Clock is a perfect step up for students of team dynamics who are ready for a thought provoking framework that goes beyond the basic model of 'forming, storming, norming and performing.' Ritter’s work provides insight into group behavior and effectiveness, and the natural way groups evolve and grow over time. Team Clock is full of applications for every kind of group, from business teams to families.”

Professor Julie Hennessy, Clinical Professor of Marketing,
Kellogg Graduate School of Management, Northwestern University

“Team Clock provides teams with a direction for future growth”.

Dean Simpkins, Director, Football Coaching International

“Team Clock is a brief and unique analysis of the psychology of successful teaming. Through storytelling, case studies and graphics, Steve Ritter offers the reader a specific model and strategies for achieving effective teams – whether in sports, business or schools. Throughout the book, Ritter emphasizes the need for skilled team work if optimum success is to be achieved. In an era when 'professional learning communities' are emphasized as the bases for successful schools, Ritter’s book is a valuable tool in teaching the essentials of how these communities might successfully be implemented.”

Joanne Rooney, Ed.D., Co-Director, Midwest Principals Center

Introduction

In 1983, The Chicago White Sox came within one game of winning the American League championship of Major League Baseball. With the majority of the roster returning, most experts predicted a strong 1984 season. By the end of April, however, the Sox were 6-13 after losing five straight games.

As a life-long Sox fan, I was having a difficult spring. Deeply invested in the team, I followed them closely. I observed the way they managed victories and losses. I watched the way they handled adversity and disappointment. I scrutinized their responses to media pressure. As a fan, I was deflated, but as a licensed social worker, I was intrigued.

I couldn't help looking for a clinical explanation for why my team was underperforming. It seemed there was something going on that was different than a typical rough start to a season. Players ambled slowly to and from the batter's box. Teammates passively sat in the dugout. When questioned by reporters, players and coaches responded in monotones. The Sox weren't just statistically depressed, they were emotionally drained.

On Monday April 30, 1984, I was having lunch with a colleague, and fellow White Sox fan, at the family services

agency in suburban Chicago where we were both employed. Commiserating about the Sox over lunch had become our daily routine. In a workplace full of Cubs fans, the two of us were relegated to my cramped office to exchange reactions to last night's game or that morning's sports section of the newspaper. Between bites of our sandwiches, we dissected the season and second-guessed the manager's decisions.

As we bantered, the professional therapist side of me kicked in. "I know what's wrong with the team!" I declared. My friend laughed and dared me to call the White Sox' General Manager to offer my diagnosis. I took the dare.

In the years prior to voicemail, a switchboard operator answered my call.

"Chicago White Sox," she said.

"I'd like to speak with the General Manager of the White Sox, Roland Hemond," I replied.

"Just a minute, please," said the operator. My stomach dropped as I realized I was really about to speak with Roland Hemond.

"Hello," said Mr. Hemond.

"Um...uh..." I stuttered. "I'm...um...I'm Steve Ritter, and...ah...I think I know what's wrong with your team."

"Go ahead," barked Hemond.

"It looks like...well...it seems..." I stammered.

"I think the whole team is...depressed."

For what seemed like forever, the other end of the phone went silent.

"Mr. Hemond?"

More silence.

"Can you meet me for lunch?" Hemond responded.

“When?” I asked.

“1:00,” he replied.

“Where?” I asked.

“Greek Islands...Halsted,” he replied.

Click.

Stunned, I looked at my friend in disbelief as I hung up the phone. It was now about 12:30 p.m., and I was scheduled to conduct a therapy group in a half hour. My friend agreed to cover for me, and I pointed my car in the direction of the Greek Islands Restaurant.

Looking back, I’m not sure what gave me the courage to call Roland Hemond, but when a Major League General Manager asks you to lunch, you go. Giddy like a starstruck adolescent, all I remember from my drive to the restaurant was the constant thought pounding through my head, *I just got a meeting with the General Manager of The Chicago White Sox!* Somehow, I managed to get my car to 200 S. Halsted Street where I parked, took a deep breath, and braced for my big moment.

As I entered the restaurant, I spotted Mr. Hemond sitting alone at a table away from the lunch crowd. I noticed he was studying a set of index cards containing the rosters of other Major League Baseball teams. As I got closer, I realized he must be doing what most General Managers do during losing streaks: sort through lists of players in search of a trade that might improve the team.

I joined his table, introduced myself and prepared to substantiate my diagnostic claim based on the numerous observations I had collected during the first month of the season.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Hemond,” I began. “I’m the guy who called you about...”

Before I could finish my sentence, he stood and offered a handshake. Motioning for me to sit, he gathered the cards from the table and explained that he was, in fact, reviewing trade options. The two of us sat next to each other at a small round table intended for a party of four. I inhaled to speak, but Mr. Hemond held up his hand to indicate he wanted to speak first. Somberly, he revealed that the team had indeed been depressed.

He explained how baseball teams are like families. The players and coaches go weeks and months without seeing their loved ones. As a result, the coaches become like surrogate parents to the players. His eyes began to tear up as he shared that just weeks before the start of the season, two of the team's elders were diagnosed with aggressive forms of cancer and passed away suddenly. Hitting Coach Charlie Lau and first base coach Loren Babe had been deeply attached to the entire team. Their unexpected and abrupt loss had knocked the wind out of everyone.

As I felt the weight of his story, the White Sox' mediocre performance on the field made sense. The team was grieving a significant loss; no trade negotiation was going to change that. We talked for a long time about the nature of loss and the impact death has on families. At the end of our conversation, Mr. Hemond asked if I would consider being the team psychologist. The cross-town rival Cubs had recently hired a psychologist charged with training players to relax at the plate and improve their performance through imagery. The local media had eagerly chronicled these activities over the past few weeks.

Would I consider being the team psychologist?! The giddy adolescent in my head was screaming, *Yes, of course I want to be the team psychologist!* However, the licensed, credentialed social worker in

me replied, “These kinds of situations are better handled quietly. Perhaps you and I can guide things from behind the scenes.”

Mr. Hemond and I discussed a strategy for assisting the players and coaches with processing the emotions that accompany loss. We talked about this team’s clubhouse culture and identified natural team leaders. Some, like manager Tony LaRussa and catcher Carlton Fisk, were more vocal leaders. Others, like outfielder Harold Baines, were less boisterous but just as respected.

Mr. Hemond and I created a plan for coaching the verbal players to lead clubhouse discussions, while silent leaders would let their actions speak. Since everyone manages loss in their own time and their own way, we designed an approach that would be respectful of these differences.

I assured Mr. Hemond that his team’s response to loss was normal; as they worked through the grieving process, they would be equipped to make full use of their strength on the field. We agreed to stay in touch throughout the season to monitor the team’s progress. Numerous phone calls and letters were exchanged between us as the season unfolded.

The 1984 season leveled out. Following a .381 winning percentage in April, the White Sox rebounded to a .519 winning percentage in May, followed by .536 in June. On August 26, 1984, Chicago Tribune sports columnist Jerome Holtzman interviewed team owner Jerry Reinsdorf regarding the unexpected struggle characterizing the beginning of the season. Reinsdorf was quoted as saying, “I believe the biggest single cause of our decline was the death of Charlie Lau. We miss him terribly.”

DEVELOPING THE TEAM CLOCK

My experience with the White Sox fueled in me a quest to understand team psychology. A few years prior to my encounter with Roland Hemond, I had studied group psychology in my graduate social work courses at Loyola University of Chicago. Since the 1960's, traditional models taught that groups must go through a series of phases to manage challenges and deliver results. One of the more popular models, developed by Bruce Tuckman in 1965, describes a sequential process with four stages: forming, storming, norming and performing. Tuckman's model explains that teams gather around a common goal, engage in conflict, establish consensus, and become competent.

While I liked this model, it struck me as having one key limitation: It was too linear. In my experience, teams functioned cyclically. Life's unexpected twists and turns required constant adaptation that could not be measured by any straight line trajectory. Experiences like the Chicago White Sox only reinforced my belief that teams required a more dynamic model.

For the last twenty-five years, I have studied the rhythms, personalities, themes and patterns that come together to make teams work. The result of my research is a simple yet powerful tool I call the Team Clock™.

In the following pages, I will show you how the Team Clock can help you forge more satisfying and effective partnerships. Many clients and friends have told me the Team Clock has helped them become better leaders and teammates. I hope it will do the same for you.