Questions for Reflection

*Building Teams* Seminar

In his memoir *Second Wind*, Boston Celtics basketball player Bill Russell describes one of his first conversations with his coach, Red Auerbach. "He told me that he was counting on me to get the ball off the backboard and pass it quickly to other players. This, plus defense, was to be my fundamental role on the team, and as long as I performed these functions well, he would never pressure me to score more points." This meant that Russell would never have to improve his individual score at the expense of the team.

Team learning was built into the Celtics' everyday practice. They found dozens of ways to keep focused on their collective potential. Retiring players pulled aside rookies to tell them what they might expect from opponents on the league. The Celtics traded only once in thirteen years: every player knew that as long as he contributed to winning, he could stay. Auerbach made a point of telling the substitutes... how important they were precisely because they came in only when they were needed. On the court, as Russell says, "The most important measure of how good a game I'd played was how much better I'd made my teammates play."

It must have all added up to something, because the team did not merely play championship games or have a championship season. They created a championship *era* that lasted from 1957 to 1969, during which they were number one in the league for eleven out of thirteen seasons.

Many management teams simply aspire to play the equivalent of one great game. They'd be excited, they tell us, if they could improve delivery time to customers by 20 percent. We know a few teams who are trying to pull off, in effect, a great season -- a string of successful results. But the real potential of the learning discipline is to help teams to re-create themselves so that gains in capability don't just last for one season, but are sustained and self-reinforcing.

Unlike team-building, team learning is not a discipline of improving team members' skills, not even communication skills. *Alignment* better captures the essence of team learning. Alignment means "functioning as a whole." Building alignment (you never get there) is about enhancing a team's capacity to think and act in new synergistic ways, with full coordination and a sense of unity, because team members know each other's hearts and minds. As alignment develops, people don't have to overlook or hide their disagreements, indeed, they develop the capacity to use their disagreements to make their collective understanding richer. ...Improved conversation is the primary medium with which management teams build this alignment -- by using *dialogue* and *skillful discussion*. These are critical and collective thinking skills.

Adapted from: Team Learning chapter in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*  

(Continued)
Questions for Reflection:

1) What aspects of playing basketball motivate the players to achieve the team goal? What factors motivate them?

2) How can we apply these types of motivators at work?

3) An individual “star” player, like Bill Russell, had to be coached to focus on supporting other players, and not simply scoring points by himself. This was needed in order to create a winning team that could sustain excellence. How can group leaders at UW coach individuals to support the work of others on their team?

4) What are the implications of the point of view that team learning is primarily built through “improved conversation” that enables members to “think synergistically” and to “use their disagreements to make their collective understanding richer”? What does this mean for how we develop and lead work teams?