



## A Seven-Step Choreography for Thriving Teams

**Changes at team level will never take hold unless individuals' objectives and behaviours are synchronised with those of the group.**

Remember the last time you tried to change your habits in a big way? Perhaps you made a vow to eat healthier, or to listen more actively during meetings. Whatever it was, whether you ultimately succeeded or succumbed to the force of old habits, you almost certainly struggled. You may have done well early on, only to find that following through was more difficult than you expected. It's the classic "New Year's resolution" syndrome.

If sustaining individual commitment to change is a challenge, collective commitment in a business context is even more apt to flag over time. Every team member brings in their own story adding to the complexity of creating effective group dynamics.

To overcome these obstacles, workplace teams need a performance culture, i.e. an embedded knack for learning and adapting. This is especially important given the growing emphasis on **networked teams** in today's companies. As teams have become more central to firm activity, they've proliferated to the point that an increasing number of employees belong to several teams at once.

In our extensive experience working with leaders and their teams, we've found that instilling a performance culture involves two core principles. First, interventions should ideally occur at both the

team and individual levels. Otherwise, individual members' identification with group efforts may not be strong enough to survive the rigors of change. Second, it should not be an abstract exercise. Effective team processes for adopting change are like a dancing chorus: You need to orchestrate a choreography, learn from experience and cement skills through practice.

We have designed a choreography, which we call the **GROW 7A methodology**<sup>[1]</sup> (for reasons that will become clear as you read on). Our approach is the result of a long journey working with executives and teams to improve their performance.

### **The GROW 7A methodology for effective team development**

Let's explore what the GROW 7A methodology looks like in practice. We'll do this by describing the work of a global biotech company's CEO that we accompanied with his executive committee (ExCo).

The CEO (let's call him Carl) did not fit the alpha profile one automatically associates with senior leaders. A medical professional himself, he exudes an aura that evokes a kindly neighbourhood general practitioner more than a superstar surgeon. Carl's leadership style is truly inspirational – characterised by deep listening and consensus seeking. It could,

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however, occasionally slow down decision making, causing frustration to colleagues.

Inspired by **Jim Collins's book**, the theme of the journey was “from good to great”. The idea of the first workshop (held virtually to accommodate executives attending from around the world) was not to fix an urgent problem on the team – there wasn't one. However, the ExCo's business ambitions were such that they would not settle for “good enough”.

Ahead of the workshop, all ExCo members joined the online GROW 7A methodology platform to provide anonymous feedback to each other. They were also asked to assess how the team functioned. Both surveys were very short, qualitative and based on strengths.

### **The first two As: aspiration and alignment**

By showing vulnerability, Carl framed the team development journey as one where he and everyone in the team had room to grow. To create a safe environment and give his team members “permission” to engage in courageous conversations, he shared some leadership challenges he dealt with during his career. We used a drawing exercise as a creative way to onboard ExCo members on this journey. It helped them clarify and articulate their **personal aspirations** and identify driving values and principles that provide **personal alignment**. Carl's personal aspiration was to “*lead the ExCo to collectively deliver the company's strategic vision*”. He named “*responsibility, sustainability and growth*” as guiding values and “*fair process*” as his key guiding principle. Each team member shared their personal aspiration and guiding values and principles, creating a kind of personal charter for the work ahead.

We then looked at the same two dimensions – aspiration and alignment – but this time at the team level. Carl's team of eight members were tasked to come up with a team charter comprising a **team aspiration and team alignment**. They committed to “*creating superior value for patients, employees and shareholders*”.

### **Moving from awareness and assumptions to concrete actions**

The next step focused on creating greater **personal awareness**. Each team member accessed a report with the feedback provided by their teammates. They had a chance to read it and were asked to share with their colleagues what pleased them, what surprised them and what they saw as a key development area for themselves that would also enhance team effectiveness. Based on the feedback he received from his team and his own reflection,

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Carl chose to focus his development on asserting himself more, particularly in the ExCo's decision-making process.

In order to create an even deeper level of awareness, we took the team on a “deep dive” to explore possible leadership **drivers and blockers** [2] associated with the development objective they had committed to. Challenging **personal assumptions** is critical as it helps people confront some of their most deeply held beliefs – often unconscious – that may stand in the way of their progress. Understanding these assumptions, rooting them out and replacing them with new ones is key to achieving behavioural change. Carl's limiting assumption was that “being assertive and directive disempowers others and limits creativity”. With new insights, he realised that ExCo members would respect his judgement and welcome clearer directions.

Having created a deeper level of awareness at the individual level, the team was now ready to gain **team awareness** on how they were operating at the collective level. Using the team reflection survey results, they crystallised their collective insights into one key development objective: “We want to improve our decision-making process and accelerate our business transformation”.

Importantly, the team awareness stage is also when team members share their individual development objectives with the group. Merging individual and collective missions boosts team cohesion and mutual accountability. Each member claims a share of responsibility for helping other team members change.

Since the commitment was clear and the intention to make progress genuine, the team then challenged potential **team assumptions** that could stand in the way. In guided sessions, the ExCo was able to move from “*the team leader is responsible for the decision-making process*” to “*we recognise that decision making is a shared leadership responsibility*”. In the next step, the team defined specific **actions** at the individual and team levels to make the changes happen. What concrete actions would each team member take to achieve their development objectives?

### **Embedding a team performance culture in the work**

The first five As are designed to bring individuals and teams onto a productive track for change. Participants define a direction (aspiration, alignment and awareness), clear away conscious and unconscious obstacles to their journey (assumptions) and commit to a game plan (actions). Throughout, the trajectory of the team is yoked to

the values and goals of each member, so that collective outcomes don't fall prey to misalignment.

The next steps involve keeping momentum, monitoring individual and team progress – **advancement** – and celebrating success – **achievement**. These steps took place at Carl's company over a 9-month period following the initial workshop. The changes we witnessed were too numerous to mention, but one particularly amusing and gratifying moment came during a strategy session, where a decision seemed imminent but for the last-minute request of one ExCo member for more data. However, momentum was regained when another executive retorted, "Do we really need more data?" Carl, inspired by his team's faith in him, had learned to integrate more assertiveness into his empathetic and caring character and suggested the team had enough data to take the decision. Carl then received praise from one of the ExCo members for his "friendly directive style".

Once teams get the hang of the GROW 7A methodology, they seem to integrate it automatically whenever a change is required. To take hold, the steps must be embedded not only in the team members' mindsets and habits, but also in the digital platforms (such as MS Teams or Slack) that are our easy-reach collaboration tools in the new normal. Harnessing the special strengths of these platforms to drive collective and individual change will be one of the main enablers of effective teamwork in a hybrid world of in-person and virtual interactions.



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**Vincent H. Dominé** is an Adjunct Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. Specialised in top leadership team and board development, he directs the Leadership Development Programme in the Global Executive MBA.

**Fabio Coluccia** is a Leadership Consultant and Executive Coach at INSEAD.

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[1] The GROW 7A methodology is a central element of the digital leadership development solution for teams provided by Grow360 International Pte. Ltd., a company founded by INSEAD alumni. More information is accessible on the website ([www.grow360.com](http://www.grow360.com)). The proprietary solution is deployed in various INSEAD leadership development programmes as well as by teams in many leading organisations around the world.

[2] The concept was published in the book, *Exploring Leadership Drivers and Blockers* (Palgrave, 2019), co-written by Vincent Dominé with Ian C. Woodward (INSEAD Professor in Organisational Behaviour) and Samah Shaffakat (Liverpool Business School faculty).

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