The Synergist

Best-selling author and speaker Les McKeown opens *The Synergist: How to Lead Your Team to Predictable Success* with a piercing diagnosis: most team-improvement programs fail to produce lasting change because they treat symptoms — distrust, poor communication, fear of change — instead of the root cause.
From that observation, McKeown builds his case for the Synergist: the often-overlooked role that determines whether a team's potential becomes a team's performance.

Check out these Book Notes for an overview of a tool every leader needs in his toolkit..

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The Synergist: *How to Lead Your Team to Predictable Success*

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Book Description:

In this book, McKeown argues that every successful team includes a critical player, the Synergist, who can take the three existing types – The bold dreamers (Visionaries), the pragmatic realists (Operators), and the systems designers (Processors) – and knit them together into a dynamic, well-rounded team. Most importantly, according to McKeown, the Synergist is a role that anyone can learn.

While most attempts at teamwork improvement deal only with the symptoms of group dysfunction such as distrust, poor communication, and fear of change, McKeown address the root cause: the innately unstable Visionary-Operator-Processor triangle. Because each of the three styles' motivations, views, and goals are incompatible, without a Synergist every team will eventually implode, stall, or underperform. Only the Synergist can put aside their own agenda and interpret the language of difficult personalities, capture the best from each person, and put the good of the enterprise ahead of their own ego.

Book Quotes:

The secret to being an effective Synergist is simplicity itself: it lies in recognizing a small number of key interactions that every team or group experiences, and in making unobtrusive but essential interventions at those pivotal moments on your group's path to success.
LOCATION: 104

Put simply, organizations don't succeed in and of themselves. They succeed only through individuals working in groups and teams. Groups and teams lie at the heart of every successful enterprise—in fact, they are the

heart of a successful enterprise. LOCATION: 122

In the best—and most successful—organizations, it's these interactions among individuals that together form a vital bridge between the organization's overarching vision and the day-to-day actions required to realize that vision. From these multifaceted human interactions spring the ideas, decisions, plans, strategies, and tactics necessary to move the organization forward to success. LOCATION: 126

If you can ensure that when your people interact they are effective and deliver the goods, you win. Watch them stutter or fail in those same interactions, you lose. LOCATION: 134

The reason why most group- and team-improvement programs fail to produce permanent long-term change is simple: it's because they address the symptoms of group dysfunction (distrust, poor communication, fear of change, to name just a few) rather than the root cause. LOCATION: 157

The Visionary is one of three natural "styles" or roles that all of us default to when we are in a group or team situation (we'll meet the other two, the Processor and the Operator, shortly). LOCATION: 230

Visionaries are often charismatic, engaging communicators, able to motivate people to bring their best to every endeavor. They inspire deep loyalty in others, and frequently a small tight team or posse will develop around them, a group of committed individuals who share the Visionary's . . . well . . . vision, and want to help realize it. LOCATION: 233

You can always recognize a Visionary through a few behavioral traits: They abhor routine…They adore discussion and debate…They're comfortable with ambiguity…They like risk…They trust their own judgment—and use it often…They aren't wedded to past decisions. LOCATION: 238-254

The second natural style that people in group or team situations default to is that of the Processor. Processors have an innate desire to bring order to any situation. They focus not only on what they've been asked to do, but also on the underlying systems and processes that will make doing it more consistent and repeatable. And if those systems and processes don't yet exist, they'll begin by designing and implementing them…They value routine…They dislike risk…They prefer not to be rushed. LOCATION: 341-359

Processors bring a crucial skill set to any group or team. They manage risk, provide consistency, and ensure that all the details so cavalierly dismissed by the Visionary are hunted down and recorded appropriately. LOCATION: 366

The third and last natural style that people default to in group or team situations is that of the Operator. Operators are the doers in any enterprise—they're the practical-minded folks that get stuff done. Operators work best alongside Visionaries, and in a sense, they're mutually dependent: a Visionary needs an Operator to translate his or her vision into day-to-day tasks, and then to get those tasks completed. An Operator, on the other hand, looks to the Visionary for the big picture, for motivation and inspiration in the tough times, and for the flexibility and lateral thinking to change the enterprise's direction if things aren't working out. LOCATION: 463

As with the Visionary and the Processor, you can recognize an Operator by certain behavioral traits: They're action oriented…They improvise—and move on…They ask forgiveness rather than permission…They work prodigious hours…They often work alone…They don't like being micromanaged. LOCATION: 470-486

The problem is, as we'll see in chapter 3, Operators are the least naturally inclined of our three types to play well in teams—they'd much rather be out on their own getting stuff done. LOCATION: 490

The unavoidable outcome of this V-O-P instability is that, left to itself, every group or team will eventually implode, gridlock, or underperform—it's just a question of when. LOCATION: 515

The third key principle is that to avoid this fate, and to produce a high-performing group or team, a fourth, learned style—that of the Synergist—must be added to the mix. LOCATION: 518

When the Visionary gets recharged, it's rarely done in a vacuum—usually, getting recharged for a Visionary means glomming on to a new idea or concept to bring back to the office as the "next new thing." LOCATION: 598

The shiny-blue-ball syndrome—this pattern of bringing fundamentally important new ideas back from idle time, proselytizing it strongly, realigning everyone else around it, then moving on to something else equally fundamentally important—comes from the two basic attributes that drive every true Visionary: 1.They abhor the thought of dealing with trivia. For a Visionary, it's important to work at a highly strategic level—with big things that make big differences. So of course, whatever they become interested in must by definition be important, vital, or game-changing. 2.Visionaries have an almost inextinguishable appetite for anything new, innovative, and/or challenging. LOCATION: 610

Because Visionaries have a high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty, they don't feel pressure to reconcile two opposing thoughts unless (and until) they have to. LOCATION: 622

No group or team can innovate or deliver truly creative solutions without a Visionary on board, and even a mature, well-structured business with strong reserves needs Visionary output throughout the organization if it is to avoid becoming bureaucratic and arthritic and slide into decline. LOCATION: 628

The core contribution that any Visionary brings to the organization, group, or team is, of course, at the root of the word itself—vision. LOCATION: 631

Perhaps the single most disruptive weakness of Visionaries is an almost pathological fear of getting caught up in what they would view as mind-crushing detail. LOCATION: 669

Visionaries suffer from NIHS—Not Invented Here Syndrome. Put simply, no matter how good an idea someone else comes up with, true Visionaries will not be content until they have put their mark on it in some way. LOCATION: 676

For the Visionary, everything is "imperative," "vital," "fundamental," and very little is "meh." And it's only a matter of time—often very little time—before the next, possibly even contradictory must-have or must-do book, theory, methodology, or guru comes along. LOCATION: 688

Anything with the stench of routine is an abomination to the Visionary. The idea of having their creative juices constrained by process or predictability has them climbing the walls. LOCATION: 699

Remember, Visionaries thrive on change and can't abide slavish adherence to routine or maintenance-type activities. If you don't consciously plan variety into the Visionary's schedule, they'll introduce it themselves—often with negative, unplanned consequences. LOCATION: 764

Leave the Processor or Operator unsupervised for a while and they'll surely deviate from their initial goal, but chances are not by too much. Leave Visionaries unattended for a while and who knows where they might end up. LOCATION: 785

Because Visionaries live in a constant state of hyperlinking from subject to subject and have so many initiatives on the go at any one time, working for them requires that you know vast amounts of information

about multiple projects—or at least have rapid access to that information at a moment's notice. LOCATION: 801

In contrast to the Visionary's oscillation between bursts of creative energy and idling, the Operator is in a constant state of steady, forward motion—or at least, that's how they want to be. LOCATION: 936

In its simplest form, an Operator doesn't mind being told what to do (in fact, they prefer a clear-cut set of directives to a blank sheet of paper any time), but they don't like to be told how to do it. LOCATION: 966

As we've seen, Visionaries are at their most productive (and most engaged) when working at the leading edge of strategy and innovation, while Operators prefer to be at runway level, transforming the Visionary's grand plans into reality. Except in the simplest of enterprises, without an effective Processor on the team to build and maintain the systems and processes needed to support their efforts, both the Visionary and the Operator will quickly become overwhelmed by the complexities of execution: put simply, without the Processor's efficiencies, the Operator cannot effectively implement the Visionary's strategies in anything other than the most basic of environments. LOCATION: 1270

Processors feel compelled to bring order to all they see. They're easy to recognize not just in business, but in every walk of life. LOCATION: 1278

For a Processor, data is all important. More precise than experience, more accurate than judgment, data is the fundamental currency in which the Processor trades. LOCATION: 1294

Building scalable systems is the highest added-value activity a Processor can engage in. LOCATION: 1334

There is no doubt that working for a Processor is much easier if you are yourself a Processor. Their need for control, adherence to system and routine, their risk-aversion and unrelenting focus on precise detail are very hard for a non-Processor to cope with for prolonged periods. Nonetheless, the keys to a happy and successful working relationship with a Processor manager are the same irrespective of your own personal style. LOCATION: 1494

Each of us tends toward one style by default, and usually have traces of the others, too, sometimes strongly so—but almost always we have one dominant natural style. When we're placed in group situations, the attributes that characterize our natural style cannot help but come out…So when the Visionary, Operator, and Processor find themselves together in a group situation, they each think, talk, and act in accordance with their natural style, resulting in three wholly different agendas being pursued. LOCATION: 1583-1588

There are three main reasons why, once they're placed in a group or team environment, the Visionary, Operator, and Processor are destined to arrive at gridlock or compromise: they each have different motivations, different goals, and different perspectives. 1. Different motivations. The single most powerful differentiator between the three natural styles is in the answer to a question fundamental to all of us: what motivates us?…2. Different goals. Separate and distinct from an individual's intrinsic motivation is the ultimate goal they are seeking…3. Different perspectives. Not only do the Visionary, Operator, and Processor have irreconcilable motivations and different goals, but they each see the environment within which the team operates in entirely different ways. LOCATION: 1606-1616

Visionaries are most motivated by two things: (1) Starting—getting involved with something new and exciting; and (2) Solving—finding the solution to a problem…The two most satisfying activities Operators can engage in are (1) Finishing, i.e., completing a task on their list; or (2) Fixing, by making something work that wasn't working before…The Processor's two main motivating drives are (1) Systematizing—bringing order to chaos; and (2) Supervising—controlling and managing that which they have systematized. LOCATION: 1634-1667

Hence the Visionary, Operator, and Processor mostly live their institutional lives apart from each other, and they don't develop a natural tendency to work together…Of course, in an organization of any size, it's impossible for colleagues to entirely avoid being in each other's company, both professionally and personally. And when it does happen, the Visionary, Operator, and Processor soon discover that they have a visceral dislike of the environment in which the other operates. LOCATION: 1695-1698

If for the Visionary the ultimate goal is to solve something, and for the Operator it is to act, then for the Processor it is to control. LOCATION: 1755

For Visionaries, the team goal is a creative and elegant solution or idea; for Operators, it's actionable decisions; and for Processors, it's analyzing and aligning those decisions with existing systems and processes. LOCATION: 1775

In summary, when they get together to work as a team, the Visionary, Operator, and Processor see the exact same landscape through different lenses. The Visionary sees patterns and perspective, the Operator sees opportunity and obstacles, and the Processor sees compliance and contingent liability. LOCATION: 1877

If the V-O-P team is unstable, how can we make it stable? The answer is by adding a fourth—learned—style to the team, and thereby turning it into more than a V-O-P team…In the rest of this book, I will show you precisely what this fourth style, which I call the Synergist, is, how it is developed, what it does, and how it changes the unstable team into a stable, successful V-O-P-S (Visionary, Operator, Processor, Synergist) team. LOCATION: 2218-2226

In due course I termed this fourth, learned style "the Synergist," because in my observations that's essentially what it did. When the Synergist style appeared, the gridlocked, personal-agenda-driven team would be transformed into a powerful, results-oriented V-O-P-S team—one in which the Visionary, Operator, and Processor were all free to be themselves, but in a way which enabled them to work together fruitfully and which brought out the best in each other. LOCATION: 2279

The Synergist is the missing link that transforms the two-dimensional V-O-P group into a truly three-dimensional team…The Synergist is focused primarily on what is best for the enterprise (the organization, department, division, project, group, or team). LOCATION: 2285-2293

The good news is that the Synergist is a style that anyone can emulate irrespective of their natural style. Any Visionary, Operator, or Processor can (and should) learn to also be a Synergist. LOCATION: 2303

Learning the Synergist style is rather like packing a raincoat for a trip when unseasonable weather is predicted—if and when you need it, you can pull it out of the bag and use it—and when it isn't needed, it can be set aside and you can wear what you originally planned to wear. LOCATION: 2403

But to transform into a V-O-P-S team, it's not enough for there to be merely one or more people on the team who are primarily Synergists. All team members need to develop at least a minimal degree of the Synergist style. LOCATION: 2502

The Synergist style isn't persistent: it appears intermittently as needed by the V-O-P team. LOCATION: 2520

The specific commitment that the Synergist makes is a simple one: "When working in a team or group environment, to place the interests of the enterprise above my personal interests." LOCATION: 2566

The Synergist's challenge: To uncover painful, difficult, or negative issues arising from the individual styles and facilitate their resolution. LOCATION: 2714

SYNERGISTS ESSENTIALLY DO TWO THINGS: they put the previously gridlocked V-O-P team back on track by removing conflict and tension, and they create an entirely new environment that allows the team to perform at the highest level. LOCATION: 3112

At the 30,000-foot level, this pattern of high-quality, team-based decision-making looks like this: Investigation Interpretation Implementation. LOCATION: 3130

The Synergist's role is to ensure that time is spent bringing just enough of the right information to the table in order to make a good decision. LOCATION: 3194

The Interpretation stage is also when each individual team member's energies are drained most quickly, because it is here, in the cockpit of actual decision-making, that everyone's opinion and personal preferences come to the fore. As a result, there is frequently more for the Synergist to do in the Interpretation stage than in any other. All in all, once the team moves into the Interpretation stage and starts the process of decision-making, a high level of stamina is required to ensure that the end result is in keeping with the enterprise commitment. LOCATION: 3360

Here's the definition of objectivity in the context of the Synergistic team: the commitment to base decisions solely on the appraisal of the relevant facts, and without undue consideration of personal prejudices. LOCATION: 3526

Note: should you wish to find any quote in its original context, the Kindle "location" is provided after each entry.