A Team Perspective on *Getting Things Done When You Are Not in Charge*

by Geoff Bellman

(Based on his book, *Getting Things Done When You Are Not in Charge*. Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco. 2001.)

Why was *Getting Things Done When You Are Not in Charge* (GTD) successful? First, the title! People identified with it, moving them toward the book. Then, beyond the title, the book helped individuals negotiate large organizations in ways that benefited them and the organization.

This article steps beyond applying GTD to individuals and applying it to teams. Let’s begin with the book’s central model:

![Diagram of the central model]

If we were to express that model as a paragraph, it would read like this: There are four primary elements necessary to a team that is getting things done together when that team is not in charge. The central element is the team itself, the resources it brings, its collective awareness of its effectiveness. The team must simultaneously consider its larger purpose, its assessment of the current reality, and the people that are important to its purpose and reality. Attending to these four elements and the dynamics among them gives the team the focus it needs to empower itself and move forward together.

Now let’s explore each of the four primary elements of the model in greater depth.

**TEAM**

Our first awareness is of the team itself. Here they all are assembled in a room or collected together through software online or on a conference call. From the beginning, members are building an awareness of who their teammates are and what they might bring to the project. The continuing challenge for the team—right from the first minute—is to increase their shared public awareness of who they are together. This usually builds from who they are individually, but must move beyond this to seeing themselves as a collective force and resource.
Work within the GTD model will help them begin to see themselves as a team and to move their attention from their quite separate lives and work to what they are going to do here together. Key words that inform their continuing work on the team are assess and aware.

- Assess encompasses all the team does to become clear on the resources it brings, and does not bring, to its work together. This starts now and continues through the project. Just as an individual might constantly be looking at her abilities, so a team must—but its much more complicated for a team. The team needs substantial agreement on its abilities if it is to move forward together. Getting that agreement from eight team members takes more time and must be much more explicit than one person moving forward with an internal intuitive understanding of the abilities she brings. When it is working well, the shared self assessment has the effect of building confidence in the team. Their collective knowledge of the talent base they are working from allows them to step into the work arena with a certain knowing and strength.

- Aware is about what happens on the job as the team performs together. Assess takes place off line; aware happens on line. Aware is about our collective awareness of how we are doing together right now. Beyond that, its about reaction—what we are doing with what we are sensing. This seldom comes quickly to a team, and you cannot depend upon it arriving easily. It takes practice in the trenches, continued work together.

Think of a basketball team. Think of the difference between a “team” of very able individuals who lack a collective awareness of what they are doing and a team that knows how it is moving as a unit. We’ve heard sportscasters struggle to put this magic into words; we’ve heard coaches and players trying to infuse their teams with this transforming awareness that allows the team to react as one.

You could use this central element of Team as the basis for a number of questions:

- What are we particularly good at individually? Collectively?
- Where do we need to do work to improve what we offer—Individually? Collectively?
- What is this team’s potential, given the talents of the people on it?
- What is the team’s potential that goes beyond individuals, but is because this unique array of people and talents are assembled on one team.
- How would we express our abilities to an organization that wants to use them?
- What can we do as a team in the moment to increase our awareness of the collective impact of what we are doing?
- What are indicators that we are working, moving, well together?
PURPOSE

The top of the triangle expresses what the team is reaching for. This is all about wants, goal, meaning, outcome, accomplishment…all those large intentions that stretch us as individuals because they represent desired movement forward in our work and lives. Purpose has the potential to be transformative for a team; it offers the real possibility that together we could act in service to a shared higher aspiration. The transformative aspect of it is the “secret” to getting things done when you are not in charge: When together we can aspire to something larger than work, something as large as life itself, we change the game and increase our power. When a team operates entirely in service to the goals of its sponsors it has fewer options than a team that is operating in service to shared life goals. Said differently, if you are playing in a game where you are clearly not in charge, change the game. Move to a game where you are in charge…And what game might that be? The life game…Together we recognize that we are in pursuit of important goals in our lives; we are not simply pursuing goals important to the company we work for. This is not to suggest that company goals are unimportant. They are important—and especially important to the company. But we did not join this team, we are not pursuing those company goals, simply because we were given this team project. We are doing it because it contributes to our lives; it’s a life project as well as a work project.

With the new shared clarity about life as the larger consideration, the game shifts: What was a team work game becomes a team life game. Practically, this means that our team’s options expand beyond what our sponsors can offer. For example, we can choose to spend more time on this than the company would expect. Why? Because the work is important to our lives. Or, we could put forth recommendations that might be resisted by the management. Why? Because supporting our recommendations is more important to us than the possible discomfort of management resistance. Note the implications of power that come with this pursuit of purpose. The team claims its power by uniting around a shared higher purpose that redefines the game and how they play it. Key words to pursuit of purpose are aspire and express.

- Aspire refers to the team’s regular search for higher meaning in the work they are doing together. This is an observable aspiration; together they discuss what they are reaching for through the work they do. Members join in helping clarify what it is that is so important to all of them. They gain a sense of their unity of purpose as they talk about it…and that sense of communal unity gives them the unique collective strength they take out into the project, into the world.
• Express is the online externalization of the aspiring they’ve done off line. This is where the purpose infuses the project with life during the day-to-day work the team does together and with others. The team’s purposes must be evident in word and deed. No, the team need not talk with people about the details of their aspirations, but their words must link. For example, if a team aspires to “changing the world for the better” through their work, they may or may not express and own this aspiration to others they work with. But we would hear that sentiment expressed as they talked to others...we might hear a team member say, “Our recommendation makes sense for many practical reasons, and beyond that, we think this will be an even better place for people to work if we do it.”

Some questions your team might find useful as you explore Purpose together:

- What is it that we are really attempting to do together?
- Why is that important to us? And, why is that important to us?
- How might this project serve us in our lives—not only in our work?
- What really moves us about this project, and working on it together?
- How could we express our work together is part of the Life Game, not just the Work Game?
- What powers do we potentially hold together that go beyond what our sponsors could give to us?
- How could we make it clear to the people that we are working with that our motivation to do this work is larger than the work itself? And, would that be useful?
- How might we hook into larger life purposes of key people we regularly work with on this project?

REALITY

This corner of the triangle is all about what is really going on here. It’s clearly different from the higher purpose we aspire to; it has to do with what we accomplished so far. The gap between the Purpose and the Reality suggests that change might be needed; the gap provides the creative tension necessary to movement...but that is getting ahead of ourselves; let’s look more deeply into Reality.

I must be honest: I’ve never liked this corner of the triangle. Working on it through writing about it has told me much about my own discomfort in facing up to Reality. I’m much better at aspiring to higher Purpose than digging into the reality of the way things are right now. And that’s where I’ve been missing something very
important: A team needs a shared sense of its starting point before it can move off together toward shared purpose. Otherwise, we will each start from our own sense of the current reality…I’m picturing us scattered across the landscape, not even in sight of each other…and now we are each marching off toward purpose. This is hardly the image of an effective team. And I have had just that experience with teams: I’ve joined a team; we are clear on what we want to create together because we’ve spent most of our time together on just that. We set off toward our inspiring Purpose…and now we find people dropping out. What is happening? Often it’s the Reality that we started from different places and were unaware of it; we were not as joined as we thought. Key words to Reality are accept and seek.

- Accept refers to a basic stance toward the reality that the team perceives: Accept it. Accept as in understand it, learn about it, respect it, embrace it, and even surrender to it. None of these characterizations need imply agreement or approval; rather, they imply an honoring of what is really happening. Do not separate yourselves from what is really going on. Holding an undistorted view of the truth of what really exists will enable you to see not only what you are surrounded by, even caught in, it will also help you find the ways out, the ways that lead toward Purpose. Off line, the team must cultivate its acceptance of what it is discovering out in the real world; they need to support each other in it. In tough times, the temptation will be to blame others, curse the situation, and in other ways distance yourselves from what is happening. The team has to reach out toward other perceptions of the current reality and use those to modify their own. They need to take a constructive stance of absorbing what they learn, facing “the truth”, seeing truth as a friend to their work, whatever its implications. Team meetings remind members of the value of broadening understanding, of accepting others’ perceptions as valid.

- Seek expresses the stance of team members toward the real world: They seek understanding; they seek learning; they are not standing back or reinforcing what they already “know”. They come with more questions than answers, especially early in their exploration. They know they don’t know, they ask questions, they show acceptance of what they learn. Since they are working as a team, they agree together on what they are going to ask; they know what they want to learn about. And seek includes confirming that they understand what they have learned. Through their reach into reality, teams will succeed better when they dip deeply enough that they can feel what it’s like to be there. Then they know the truth. The team needs internal processes that assure their accepting and seeking leads to a shared sense of what Reality is right now.
As the team considers the current Reality, here are some questions worth considering:

- What do we know about the current reality at this moment?
- What do we want to learn about?
- Who has opinions about what is happening right now that we ought to take into account?
- What do we want to ask of others to gain a deeper understanding of what is going on right now?
- How do we ask questions in a way that assures we reflect our respect and gain the deep understanding we are seeking?
- What is the team process we will use for inquiring into the situation while holding our opinions to one side before coming to our team conclusions?
- What can we do to assure ourselves that our biases are not interfering with our understanding of Reality as seen by others?
- How can we develop the shared sense of the current reality that we need in order to move forward together?

**PEOPLE**

I’m assuming this small team is working with others beside its own members. These other people are invested in the issue the team is working on. They may be part of the larger system; they may be managers who asked for the team’s work; they could be the potential recipients of what the team produces; they may have to live within the results. All of this People impact, or are impacted by, the team. It’s a mistake to leave them out; you will suffer the consequences. The questions are Who are they? and How deeply do we involve them? It’s not a question if you are going to involve them; they are already involved. It’s more a question of how their roles and responsibilities affect your central project. The easy part is identifying who they are; the hard part is deciding how deeply to work with them. In any case, they will take time.

A useful way of seeing these people is for the team to ask itself: What do we want these people to experience as a result of our work with them? More specifically, what do we want them to know, to do, and to feel. Generally, the more people there are, the more you are going to have to plan for your contact with them. And, the more outcomes you expect, the more time it is going to take in contact with these key people.
Build a sense of openness and inclusiveness if you want to foster good relationships with the key people. Keep them informed; involve them in resolving issues; answer their questions early; build trust through the ways you work with them. Two key words to remember are engage and enlist.

- **Engage, not avoid.** Move toward these key people not away from them. Know that your work is to some extent dependent on their acceptance. Much good team work has been lost over the years because the recipients of the team effort rejected it. Off line, in team meetings, identify the key people you will be working with and figure out how you are going to engage them. Use the know/do/feel outcomes expressed above to guide you in how to deal with these folks. Make sure your team planning provides for the time you will be spending with people. Help move the mentality of the group toward an affirmative, accepting engagement with people, rather than seeing them as a hindrance to your work. No, they are part of the work.

- **Enlist the people who can help you most.** Enlist means to sign them up, to ask for their help and support. You want to know that you can count on them to back your work, so make sure you have the key people signed on rather than assume they are signed on. Too often out of discomfort or avoidance or busyness, we just don’t ask for the support we need. Then when we need it, it’s not there. In team work where the support of key people is particularly critical, the team should review key individuals and groups, checking in to see where special effort is needed to achieve the desired outcomes with people. Enlisting goes beyond just signing people up; it also involves putting their resources at your disposal. You want their capabilities to be used to strengthen your effort, not to resist it.

Here are some questions that a team might ask itself related to People:

- Who are people—that other than ourselves—that are key to our work?
- What do those people know/do/feel about our project right now?
- What would we like them to know/do/feel?
- How could we move toward people in a spirit of engagement?
- What could we do to close some of the gaps we see between the last two questions?
- How could we further reinforce the good relationships we already have with people?
- What resources do those people have that we would like to use?
- How might we enlist people and their resources?
SUMMARY

Seeing teams through the GTD model underlines many of the points made elsewhere in this book.

We haven’t yet considered why these four elements of Team, Purpose, Reality, and People as displayed in a triangle, rather than a list. The triangle expresses their relationship to each other. Not only does Team at the center relate to each of the corners, those corners relate to each other.

- The side connecting Purpose with Reality creates the change dynamic between what people want and what they’ve got, leading to increased pressure to change.
- The side connecting Reality with People creates a responsibility dynamic as the key people understand the reality together and accept some responsibility for it.
- The side connecting People with Purpose creates a commitment dynamic as key people become clear on what they are reaching for and this process increase their motivation to attempt the reach.

It’s these connections that suggest the triangle, the delta sign, the algebraic symbol for change. The triangle is also one of our more solid structures; leaning on any point tends to strengthen it, rather than destroy it—which fits with what the GTD model intends to convey.

The triangle model with its four elements, the two key words within each element, and the list of questions following each element are offered as guidance toward meaning and exploration. The model provides some meaning. It’s valuable in its simplicity; you can easily recall it—unlike many management models in print today. You can use it to check for team understanding of what it has and what it needs. The questions guide your exploration of your unique team situation. The right question asked of the right team at the right time provokes thoughtful discussion and deepens the team’s appreciation of each other.