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Laura McClendon
Sullivan University

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The Synergist: How to Lead Your Team to Predictable Success by Les McKeown

Laura McClendon¹

¹College of Business, Sullivan University, Louisville, Kentucky, USA

Written in the same narrative version as the classic business novel *The Goal* (Goldratt & Cox, 1992), *The Synergist* deftly navigates the world of style conflict within an organization and provides explanations and assessments on how to become “the synergist,” the uniting force behind any successful group undertaking. As McKeown notes, the interactions among individuals are what constitute the bridge between the organization’s vision and the day-to-day actions that strive toward that vision. Presenting in a hypothetical case-study format, the author seamlessly transitions from identifying each style type (Part I) to explaining the synergist’s role (Part II) to implementing the recommended tools and effectively leading the team (Part III). Given today’s organizations’ inclinations toward interorganizational teams and groups, a keen understanding of the underlying composition of teams provides a valuable roadmap for avoiding the inevitable group gridlock.

PART I: THE UNSTABLE TRIANGLE

Here we are introduced to the three natural group styles: the visionary, the operator, and the processor. McKeown does an excellent job of humanizing these initially vague personality types; by McKeown creating interacting characters and presenting each particular style from the character’s point of view, we see the emerging issues, frustrations, and challenges within the group setting. The V-O-P triangle, as it is called, is highly unstable and naturally contentious. McKeown first takes an in-depth look into each of the three V-O-P triangle styles.

The visionary operates in creative spurts and will focus solely on the “big picture,” choosing not to become involved with any trivial details. While the visionary possesses strengths related to vision—the ability to foresee ideas and the ability to motivate others—he or she also possesses weaknesses that may be seen as irritating: the need for ownership of an idea, commitment extremes, lack of structure, and the fear of getting caught up in small details. This last weakness can be particularly disruptive, as it manifests itself in behaviors that others tend to shun:

arriving late to meetings, failure to follow up with people, and avoiding background research.

The operator is prone to action; he or she is in a constant state of motion and loves having (and completing) a to-do list. The operator is also prone to overcommitment, impatience, and shortcuts, and requires clear direction in prioritization and delegation functions. The operator is, however, a natural doer and will not only keep the process moving but also provide a reality check for the other members of the group.

The processor is a logical thinker and is driven by rules, order, and consistency. While an excellent team member for his or her perspective and accuracy, the processor also has a propensity for preciseness, data, and the need to overanalyze. If presented with ambiguity or doubt in a potential circumstance, this person’s default answer will be “no.” In addition, his or her risk-averse behaviors may directly clash with the visionary’s broad plans and the operator’s forward-thinking momentum, causing the processor to withdraw and prevent others from interfering.

As McKeown explicates, these three styles are naturally occurring; one is not better than another, nor is one more productive than another. Each simply has a different agenda.

PART II: THE SYNERGIST—TRANSFORMING THE GROUP BY TRANSCENDING PERSONAL AGENDAS

So are all groups doomed to fail? Not at all, explains McKeown. Left as a simple V-O-P triangle, groups will quickly fall into gridlock; however, the synergist may emerge and transform the group into an efficient three-dimensional team. The *synergist* is simply defined as a fourth style, but one that is Darwinian in nature: It emerges from any of the previous three styles, but only when needed. As McKeown notes, the synergist is focused “primarily on what is best for the enterprise” (p. 131). This perspective is intentionally detached; the synergist’s viewpoint is one seen from an elevated level. Synergists may occur naturally, but most are trained over time. The synergist’s “toolkit” possesses nine specific, teachable skills: time management, priority management, crisis management, delegation, conflict management, difficult conversations, communication skills, inclusiveness, and accountability. All nine of these

Address correspondence to Laura McClendon, College of Business, Sullivan University, 3101 Bardstown Road, Louisville, KY 40205, USA. E-mail: lmclendon@sullivan.edu

skills emerge within two general categories, both of which are essential to the success of the synergist: personal productivity and teamwork. Most importantly, the synergist must make a specific commitment: “When working in a team or group environment, to place the interests of the enterprise above my personal interests” (p. 147). Through commitment and by utilizing the toolkit and the commitment, anyone can learn to be a synergist.

McKeown momentarily pauses the synergist conversation so as to define the two types of teams, organic and constructed. A constructed team is just that—one put together by construction, such as a project group; on the other hand, an organic team has an ongoing goal and a win/lose aspect. If the organic team fails, the entire enterprise will fail. Obviously, both types of teams have different compositions and different goals; for the organic team to succeed, it is essential to have a functional V-O-P-S (visionary–operator–processor–synergist) mix. For the constructed team, a V-O-P-S mix may or may not exist.

PART III: BECOMING A LEADER OF LEADERS

In the final portion of the book, McKeown unearths the actions necessary to leading a team from a synergistic perspective. Now that McKeown has described what a high-performing team should ideally sound like, he goes a step farther than most instructional business books and illustrates for the reader how a synergistic team within this realm would operate. As he notes, there is a “rhythm of success” through which all successful teams travel:

Investigation → *Interpretation* → *Implementation*

Each stage has a trio of imperatives, attributes that the team will not develop without the synergist. At some stage, even a synergistic team will encounter dissension; however, only through one, unanimous voice are goals attained and implemented. When implementation milestones are missed,

group reaction should be fast and effective; likewise, once the project (or goal) is complete, the lessons and learning opportunities should be identified by a V-O-P-S subgroup. After all, continuous improvement and predictable success are the overarching objectives of the synergist model.

Generally, this book will be beneficial to any practitioner who, personally or professionally, habitually deals with groups and their subsequent undercurrents and inevitable conflicts. The characters and situations are written to resemble familiar, common circumstances to which most readers will relate. While slightly clichéd in some places, McKeown successfully weaves together knowledge and practice to create a book with refreshing insights and new suggestions. In addition, while the book is obviously written to approach the perspective of group dynamics, McKeown makes several recommendations relevant to individual growth and development, making *The Synergist* a worthy read.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura McClendon is a PhD candidate at Sullivan University in Louisville, Kentucky. After obtaining a BA in Business Administration from Transylvania University (Lexington, Kentucky) and an MBA from the University of Louisville, she went to work in the public sector for 10 years in the industrial marketing and sales realm. She has presented at the Eastern Academy of Management Annual Meeting and the International Association of Conflict Management Annual Meeting. She is currently working on her dissertation and teaches organizational behavior at Sullivan University. Her research interests lie within the areas of conflict management and organizational behavior. She may be reached at lmccleendon@sullivan.edu.