Lessons *from* Mars

How One Global Company Cracked the Code on **High Performance Collaboration** and **Teamwork**

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Chapter 1

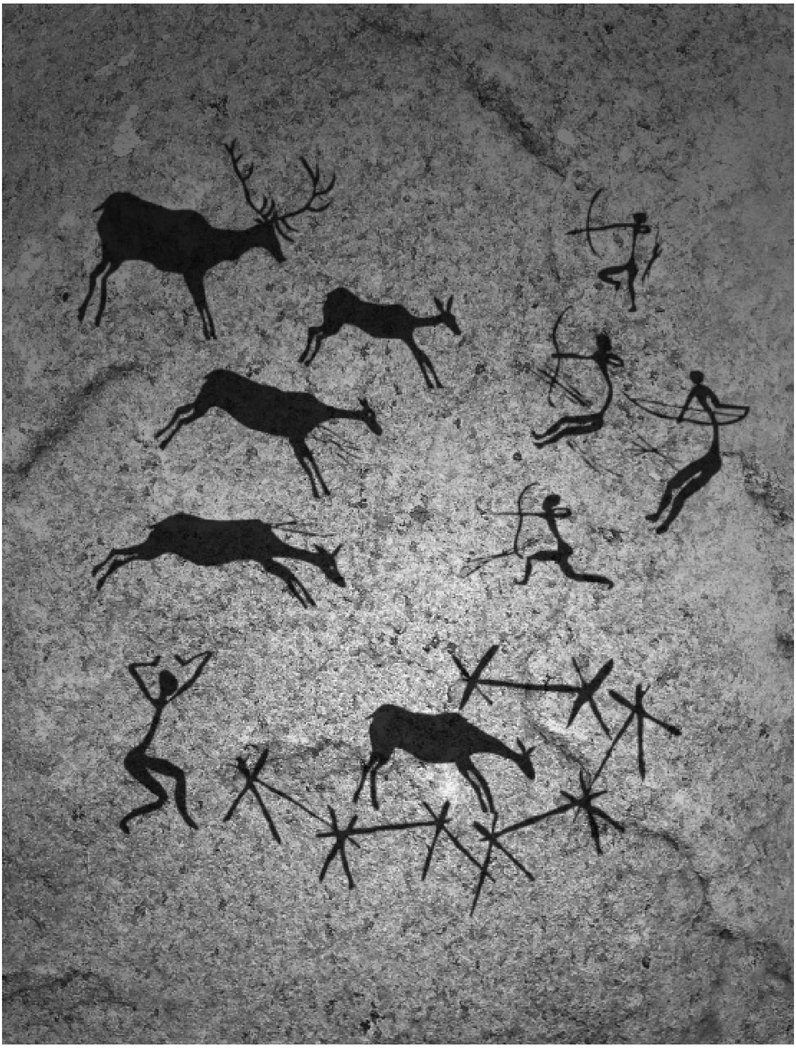
The "I" in Team, Part 1

The Return-on-Investment (ROI) on team building is lousy. I've seen figures that suggest a positive return on investments in things like corporate training programs and employee engagement. I've read about improved business performance based on increases in employee satisfaction. However, I have yet to come across any convincing work linking typical team-building programs to sustained improvement in team performance and outcomes. I feel certain that when, or if, those calculations are ever done, it will suggest a lot of money is being wasted, because the vast majority of the work done in the name of team building isn't creating any value.

I've been either managing teams or working with those who manage teams for almost 30 years. I've experienced or been part of leading hundreds of team-development or team-building exercises. I've taken part in paintball shoot-outs in the woods; I've led others in forming make-believe aircraft companies that designed and then mass-produced paper airplanes which then competed for greatest distance flown; I've sat in circles, and led those sitting in circles, passing a "talking stick" and telling deep, or at least less shallow truths. Some of this work was hugely enjoyable; some was really touching, some embarrassing and some, like my experience with paintball, surprisingly painful. Some of it left me feeling stoked or moved or just plain smiling. Some of it got me down or left me angry. None of these events, however, had a lasting impact on the performance of the group or groups involved.

But why?

Large organizations, run by very smart people, spend significant amounts of money trying to get good at something that you'd think is natural. I mean, humans evolved to collaborate, didn't we? Cave paintings in Europe show bands of early humans working together to bring down prehistoric creatures.



Observations of modern animal behavior suggest that the critters who evolved along with us also work together at things like hunting and child rearing. Birds do it, bees do it, even chimpanzees in the jungle do it. Apparently.

What's more, not only do we appear evolutionarily predisposed to collaborate, we think and act like it's a really good idea. Teamwork is something we hear about endlessly, starting on the playground, in school sports, and then at work. When we aren't hearing about teamwork, we're reading about teamwork in the latest company newsletter, or on motivational posters in the conference room:

Together **E**veryone **A**chieves **M**ore

When we're told that we're *not* team players, it's a severe criticism. Experts and students in the area of group dynamics devote days and months, even years, to reading about, writing about, and studying groups and teamwork. There are countless books and articles on the subject and who knows how many specific team interventions intended to enhance collaboration in the workplace. Yet, based on my 25 years of professional experience, all this inclination, effort and interest have yielded little in the way of sustained improvements in team effectiveness.

Again, why?

Part of the answer to the "Why?" is that teamwork is almost too sacred to question. Teams and teamwork, like organization charts and bitching around the coffee machine, are an essential part of corporate life for most of us. We may sense that the high we get from those team exercises, along with the bruises, wears off eventually and that things go back to the status quo, but no one is willing to look at that as failure. However, it's in my nature to challenge the status quo and I've become intensely interested in answering this particular "Why" question. I'd like to find some answers so that I, and those I work with, can then develop more effective approaches to enhancing collaboration in the workplace. That's what this book is all about.

The Framework I described in the Introduction arose out of my quest to understand why typical team building is so often a waste of time and what might work better. While this Framework is new, my fascination with groups and how they function is deeply ingrained. I'm the sixth of 11 children: five girls, six boys; five older than me and five younger. I grew up smack dab in the middle of a family whose particular dysfunctions (the subject of another book, perhaps) were magnified by our sheer numbers. Learning how to navigate that sometimes perilous environment instilled in me an intuitive sense of what it takes to survive in a group, and a natural interest in finding new and more effective strategies to do so. In 1994 I was fortunate enough to be hired by Development Dimensions International (DDI), based near Pittsburgh but with offices in New York City, near my home in New Jersey. I spent three years with DDI as an external trainer and consultant. It was during this time that I first encountered many of the concepts that I address in this book. For example, the idea of team dynamics, the stages of team development, and the use of personality types with teams were all part of my DDI experience. After three grueling years on the road for DDI, I was hired by IBM as an internal leadership coach and consultant to senior management at corporate headquarters in Armonk, New York. It was during my tenure in Armonk that I learned about David McClelland's work on motives, a framework that features prominently in the team effectiveness approach I developed. It was also during this period that I decided to go back to school for a second Master's degree, this one in Organizational Development. I attended the American University/NTL program, where our class cohort was also our laboratory for studying and working on group dynamics. I stayed at IBM for three years, leaving in 2000 for Mars, Incorporated, where I remain to this day.

My almost-sole focus on team effectiveness, though, only emerged eight years into my tenure with Mars. The part of the company I was working in at the time was reorganizing and my Organization Development (OD) role was made redundant. Unknown to me, a couple of senior managers who felt I had a talent for working with groups had a plan to keep me around. They proposed to our corporate learning and development organization, Mars University, that they create a role dedicated to supporting high performance teamwork. There was no budget for the role so it would have to self-fund. That is, I would have to charge my internal clients for my work and earn back the cost of my salary, wages and benefits. It was an unusual arrangement but Mars and I agreed to give it a go. I couldn't be more grateful. I was worried at first that I wouldn't find enough interested internal clients to support myself, but within six months it was clear that a role dedicated to team effectiveness could support itself and then some.

I soon realized that I had found my life's work. Ironically, not long after, I began to sense that as rewarding as the work was, and as much demand as there was for it, there was a problem. The role was functioning as designed; I was exceeding the expectations of my Mars University colleagues and my clients. I was earning my keep as clients rushed to fill my calendar, but the results I had expected weren't materializing. Teams were working with me—lots of them—but, more often than not, within a few weeks after my sessions with them, team members weren't working with each other any differently. Something was off. It would be a few years before I would conduct the inquiry that led to this book. As passionate as I was about my work at Mars, and as good as my clients told me I was, cracks in the traditional approaches to team effectiveness that I relied upon were showing years before this. I had always just assumed it was me.

Although I didn't know it then, my first clue to the troubled state of team building came in January of 1994, almost 15 years earlier. I was on my very first assignment as a consultant/trainer working for DDI. I found myself at a small factory in North Carolina, the sole output of which was the fabric, sometimes called cambric, that covers the bottoms of mattress box springs and the outsides of disposable diapers. It was a relatively new plant: clean and airy, sterile feeling, but pleasant for a factory. Just the week before, I had been certified to deliver DDI's team-building programs. The curriculum was solid and well-designed with excellent workbooks and videos, all based on Bruce Tuckman's 1965 "Forming-Storming-Norming-Performing" team development model. I was leading a workshop for about 18 employees in a bright classroom full of those one-piece chair-and-desk units that you see in middle and high schools. The seats were arranged, as you would expect, in neat columns facing the front of the room. Welcome back to eighth grade.

I don't recall precisely how long it took, but an hour or two into the half-day-long training program, things went south. This was an angry group of employees whose chief gripes were:

- Their managers treated them unfairly
- Management didn't listen to their concerns.

What's more, they deeply resented their bosses for bringing in this consultant guy from New York with his fancy training program to "fix" them, when the problem as they saw it was the bosses. It was a classic situation. Not knowing what else to do, I chose to depart from the neatly designed leader's guide. I was going to give them what they were asking for—a fair hearing. I worked with them to move beyond complaining to organizing their thoughts into a coherent list of topics they could discuss with management. The employees were grateful, if skeptical. Their managers were just plain pissed. They had paid for a "damned team-training program" and that was what they expected, not some outside agitator whose listening and list making only encouraged the sort of moaning they were trying to extinguish. As I look back on it, my actions were a quaint combination of rookie mistake and wisdom. Back then, it only felt horrible. I was fairly certain that my inexperience and lack of smarts, combined with astoundingly poor management at the plant, were to blame. I never suspected that part of the problems was that the approach was flawed.

Over 20 years have passed since my misadventure in North Carolina. In the intervening years, after working with close to a thousand teams using tools and approaches similar to those I had with me in the cambric factory, I have arrived at this conclusion. Whatever model you're working with – Four Stages, Five Dysfunctions, or 16 personality types – team building isn't as straightforward as it seems. Nor does it do what it promises.

Six years ago, I dedicated myself to working with teams at Mars, Incorporated in ways that would make a difference, long term. During that time, there have been two questions rattling around in the back of my mind that were the impetus for this book:

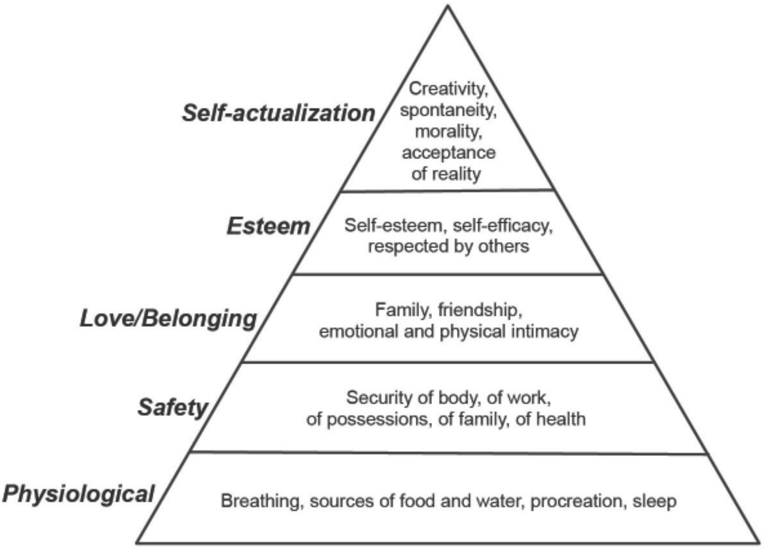
- Why do we spend so much time, money and effort trying to learn how to work in teams, or get better at it, when you'd think it would be second nature to us as social creatures?
- Why does all this effort have little lasting effect?

After all, we're hardwired to eat, to find mates, to play, all of which we humans do with considerable success. So why is collaboration so hard to get right?

It turns out I had been operating from a false assumption; we *aren't* coded to collaborate. For reasons I'll explain shortly, we're coded to do something else that sometimes, if properly directed, ends up as collaboration. The assumption that collaboration is innate leads us to do the wrong things to try to get folks to work together effectively. This in turn leads to processes and programs that end up like my visit to the fabric factory, misguided and not nearly as useful as leaders would like to think.

So what is the problem, exactly?

I think Maslow's Needs Hierarchy gets at the problem nicely.


Self-actualization
Creativity, spontaneity, morality, acceptance of reality
Esteem
Self-esteem, self-efficacy, respected by others
Love/Belonging
Family, friendship, emotional and physical intimacy
Safety
Security of body, of work, of possessions, of family, of health
Physiological
Breathing, sources of food and water, procreation, sleep

If you're reading this book, I'd guess you're already familiar with this elegant model. If so, bear with me. Our most fundamental needs, those towards the bottom of the hierarchy, deal with physiology and safety and are self-oriented: things like breathing, eating, mating and staying alive. Even though food and sex are usually better when someone else is with us, it's generally true that when things get tough or scary the first thing I'm going to think is, "How am *I* going to deal with this problem and save my butt and the butts of my progeny?", not "How am I going to work with *you* to deal with this?"

Which isn't to suggest that we're never there for each other. What about altruism? There's a lot to be said for altruism and the potentially powerful drive to sacrifice oneself for the benefit of others. We hear with regularity about people putting themselves at risk to save others, in war in particular. From my interviews with veterans and members of the military about their combat training, being there for your comrades, having one another's backs, is literally drilled into recruits for months. This kind of intensive conditioning, though, isn't seen in large, non-military institutions like for-profit corporations.

Then, there is this question: Are altruism and collaboration the same? Is helping others coming from the same mental/emotional place as working with others? I don't think so. Altruism by definition expects no tangible reward or quid pro quo. Collaboration, on the other hand, is all about shared outcomes and mutual expectations. What is more, in studies of charitable giving, altruism has been shown to be driven in large part by what it provides to the giver, the self. "Warm-glow giving," as it has been called, describes that feeling that the giver gets from his or her act of generosity. Other self-oriented feelings like guilt, social pressure and even social status have also been found to drive altruistic behavior. In other words, it's not about us, not about collaboration. It's about me. I write this not to demean altruism. I only want to make the point that our desire to support others, which is a wonderful and sometimes life-saving human trait, isn't necessarily purely other-focused and isn't sufficient to support—or even the same as—collaboration. If we go back to those prehistoric hunters depicted on cave walls, I feel pretty sure that they collaborated on taking down ancient ungulates not from the goodness of their Paleolithic hearts, but so that they could feed themselves and their families, so that they could survive and propagate their genetic code.

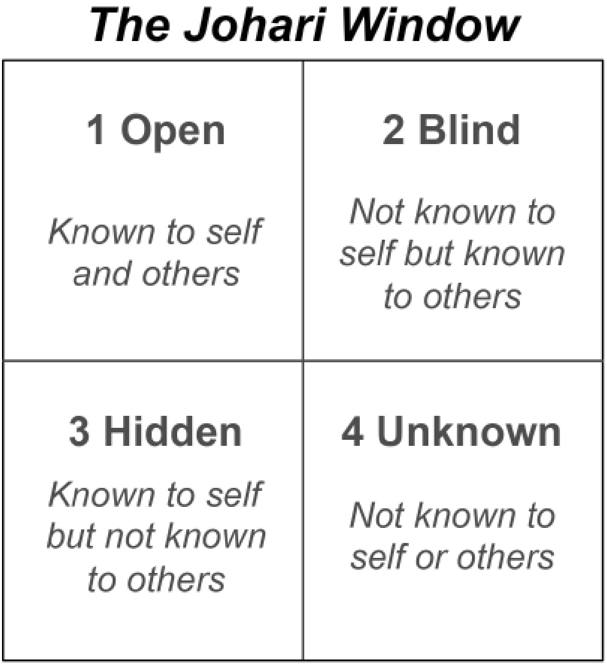
We need to distinguish between collaboration and two other human tendencies: helpfulness and cooperation. I see helpfulness as a sort of lower-order altruism. It may involve dropping a buck in the cup of a homeless woman on the street or helping the guy next door to pull out a tree stump or helping a colleague to figure out how to create a pivot table in her spreadsheet. Helpfulness involves acts of kindness that, at their best, like altruism, seek no reward. When helpfulness does start to involve quid pro quo exchanges, it moves into the space of cooperation. I'll help you so long as helping you helps me. We go along to get along, more or less. Some think of this as collaboration. I don't; at least I don't think of it as effective collaboration. As you will read later in this book, the kind of collaboration I'm interested in involves more commitment and intentionality than either helpfulness or cooperation. Helpful and cooperative people are good to have. For business teams and businesses to succeed, however, genuine, intentional collaboration is what is required. But you wouldn't know that, based on how our businesses are set up.

In the modern, Western world, most of our enterprises are designed to take advantage of our more common, or at least more easily accessed, self-first orientation. For example, the most common organizational structures, hierarchies themselves, play strongly to the bottom of Maslow's pyramid, to our instincts to take care of and work for ourselves first. In a traditional large organization, you will find hundreds, thousands, or hundreds of thousands of generally decent, *me*-centered people laboring away in an environment optimized to take advantage of this perfectly natural human tendency. Things like performance management, pay, recognition and rewards are all typically geared to individuals and they play on this individual survival mechanism. And therein lies the biggest problem with teams and collaboration at work. We preach collaboration, talk and train teamwork, but all the while most organizations are optimized to manage, foster and reward individual effort.

It's not news, right? This glaring contradiction in organizations is another part of what frustrates our efforts to get teamwork and collaboration to stick, and has led to the proliferation of articles, books and consultants focused on these subjects. I owe my career to the many brilliant people who have pioneered the field of group and team dynamics. What they offer can indeed help groups to operate more effectively for a time. Most of what I have tried and used, though, hasn't made the lasting changes for the teams that I or they hoped for. That brings me back to the gap in ROI with which we started this discussion. We do it, and it costs a lot of money, time and effort. We may even enjoy it, but we don't hold on to what we learn after the program is over. It was only a few years back that I began to pay attention to this feeling that something was off, that something was missing from the terrific body of work that I had been schooled in and benefited from. Because even though all those brilliant people studied it, and great minds worked towards it, we seem to keep having to re-learn and re-teach teamwork. Over and over and over.

Since my first feelings of uncertainty about team development, I have come to understand that most approaches to teamwork or team effectiveness aren't designed to directly confront this organizational paradox: Collaboration is second- or third-nature for a large majority of us and this predisposes us to consistently revert to our more selfish ways, especially where we're rewarded and recognized to do so. Those who created the most commonly used team effectiveness approaches may have thought that they were accounting for this reality, but I now believe that most miss the heart of the matter. The preponderance of team effectiveness efforts and tools focus on trying to move groups, en masse, up Maslow's hierarchy, away from protection and survival towards companionship and camaraderie, without effectively addressing the powerful pull of those lower-order drives that are completely aligned to traditional organizational structures and systems. It's an expensive misperception that the Framework I'll offer tackles head on.

Just think about all the work done on trust building—often a core element of team building. Trust-building exercises attempt to elevate us to the third tier of Maslow's hierarchy where we deal with matters of friendship and intimacy. One very common approach to building trust, one that I have used myself, involves personal self-disclosure and the Johari window.



The Johari Window

1 Open *Known to self and others*	**2 Blind** *Not known to self but known to others*
3 Hidden *Known to self but not known to others*	**4 Unknown** *Not known to self or others*

Like a lot of you, I’m a big fan of the Johari window and how it elegantly illustrates the ways that our knowledge of ourselves and of others can play out in relationships as well as in individual development. Consider box #3 in the window, “Hidden,” which is often a focus in trust-building work. The Hidden box describes those things about myself that I have so far kept to myself. My sharing information with you from this private zone is intended by team builders to bring us closer, to build trust based on my willingness to be vulnerable and your opportunity to experience me more fully. The resulting trust enhancement is expected to improve our collaboration. It seems to make sense. In those moments of self-disclosure, when we open our hearts to our colleagues, there can be strong emotional reactions of warmth and empathy that can bond us. I have rarely, however, seen interactions involving box #3, as wonderful as these self-disclosures can end up feeling, make anything more than a transitory difference in work-focused collaboration. Don't get me wrong—trust matters. Later in the book, I'll come back to the role I've found that trust plays in collaboration. For now, I can say that the relationship between trust and collaboration is generally misunderstood. Therefore attempts to address collaboration via trust are misguided. Sure, sometimes, when our disclosure resonates deeply with others there can be a lasting shift in personal relationships. But Maslow's pyramid is a slippery bugger, and when business gets bumpy, as soon as the fecal matter starts to fly, average Joes and Janes toiling in for-profit companies, making genuine efforts to collaborate, will come whooshing back down to the bottom of Maslow's pyramid like Neanderthals caught on a glacier during a thaw.

What's needed is to more fully acknowledge the power of the pull at the bottom of the hierarchy, to provide tools and techniques that account for and can build on this foundation of individualism in ways that eventually lead to cohesiveness. Instead of constantly fighting our nature and our nurture, we can start to work with it. How to do that requires more explanation, and it's the point of this book.

I'll share my research and more of my experiences in order to help you understand what shaped my perspective. All of what follows grew out of my years with Mars, Incorporated, my place of employment, a place for which I have a deep respect and affection. You may find some of it unusual—Mars has a reputation for being different. But if your work has involved leading or developing teams at any large organization, I think that you will find much of it familiar.

Mars Beginnings

I remember standing there facing the small machine on the wall, wondering, "Am I going to hate this—or love it?" That machine was a time clock. It was November 2000. I was beginning my second day at Mars, Incorporated, my first day with an ID badge and an Associate number that would allow me to punch the time clock just like every other Mars Associate all over the world. I was genuinely ambivalent. By punching in on time, I would qualify for the 10% daily punctuality bonus—or as it was known in the USA, “punc.” If you’ve heard anything about Mars and its quirky culture, you have probably heard about this now-defunct practice. Did you also know that when I say “every Associate,” I do mean every? From the president of Mars, Incorporated to first line managers to administrators to hourly Associates in our factories, every one of us was required to punch the clock. Unusual, right? I worried that I might find this time clock ritual distasteful. The thought that some functionary in payroll would track the time of someone like *me*, an experienced, mid-career professional with a Master’s degree—no, two Master’s degrees—as if I were some run-of-the-mill wage-slave! It felt like a ding to my accomplishments and self-esteem.

At the same time, the whole “punc” thing appealed to my sense of egalitarianism, my rebellious, “punk” side. There was, and still is, a part of me that resists corporate norms, especially the privileges of senior leaders. I have an inner rebel who wants to rally the workers to barricades to stand up for themselves. When I worked at IBM my anti-privilege urges were piqued daily. The executive parking spots and dining rooms, the cushy corner offices and the host of other perks that served to signal who was on top, and who was not, had me feeling ready to lead an insurgency on many mornings. This is the part of me that cheered for the Mars time clock that every single one of us punched. I also welcomed the undifferentiated parking lot, the Mars open office (which Mars had employed for five decades by the time I joined) and all the ways that Mars visibly embraced a “one for all, all for one” culture. This philosophy is best expressed in the Mars Associate Concept:

> We believe in a relationship between our company and our

> Associates that is more meaningful and powerful than what usually exists between employer and employee. Each of us is a stakeholder in our business, and we have a responsibility to uphold our principles and deliver great results. In return, each associate can expect to be respected, supported and valued as an individual, to be treated fairly and equitably, to be rewarded for their performance, and to have opportunities to grow and develop. This is a relationship of mutual trust, dignity and respect, based on the Five Principles, which values people as individuals and allows their great talents to be released.

"This is a place," I thought, "where collaboration—the way I prefer to work—might actually flourish."

The "we're-all-in-this-together" spirit touched and inspired me in my early days at Mars; even as the punc bonus is being phased out, it still does. But I've learned a lot since then, my ambivalence has been validated. Even in an open office, in a company where the Mars family still champions the voice of the lowest-paid Associates, and where the term "Associate" really does mean something different from "employee," there are still barriers to collaboration. The time clock, it turns out, was every bit as paradoxical a symbol as I had experienced it to be. Clock punching (by the time I got there, we pressed keys—punch cards were long gone) is a strictly individual endeavor. This icon of Associate equality was also a reminder that it was individuals who were hired, tracked, measured and rewarded. I punched in to get my 10%, I did my job, I got paid and maybe eventually, I would get promoted. We at Mars were individuals, albeit equal ones, laboring in an environment of goodwill that, just like in most other companies, was designed to make the most out of our individual-ness. Whether it's in a Mars office or an IBM factory or anywhere else, the time clock is just one artifact of many that speaks to the ways in which organizations are ideal places for individual effort to thrive, despite all the good intentions and talk of teamwork.

Mars, though, had more than just good intentions. As I was doing the research that led to the development of the Mars Framework for High Performance Collaboration and to this book, I learned just how unique the Mars commitment to getting teamwork right was and still is. I regularly spoke with academics and consultants, describing the task I had been given: developing a team effectiveness approach specifically based on Mars teams. Time and time again what I got back was a question: "Why would you do that? With all the good work that's been done on teams and group effectiveness, can you honestly expect to learn anything new?" I have to admit that at first, I felt the same way. As my inquiry progressed, and ideas and concepts began to resolve into genuine insights, my view shifted. The central idea emerged: Collaboration in teams was failing to thrive because individual team members neither understood, nor felt compelling, "this-puts-bread-on-the-table" reasons to collaborate. We, and I felt sure others, weren't providing gut-level clarity about why collaboration was vital and indeed a matter of individual survival. What was more, this idea wasn't much discussed, studied or written about by professionals in the field of team effectiveness. It might not be new news, but it became clear to me that it was essential.

Relatively late in the process of developing our team Framework, while attending a conference on high performance teamwork, I shared my methodology and early findings with one well-respected business school professor and author. He asked me, challenged me, saying, "You didn't find anything consistent in all this team data, did you?" In fact, I told him, I had. I described to him the consistent finding that, regardless of level in the organization, irrespective of function or geography, team members admitted to not collaborating because they lacked sufficient understanding about:

- What specifically required collaboration
- Why collaboration mattered—especially to them as individuals.

So team members defaulted to getting things done the best way they knew how—by working harder and longer by themselves. With this explanation, the business school professor warmed to me and my project, and we ended up spending a few hours discussing the findings. He probably doesn't remember me, or our conversations. I, however, will never forget his comment: "Big companies just don't do this sort of thing." Maybe others didn't, but Mars did. I believe we did so based in large part on our willingness, ironically, to stand alone and to be different when it makes business sense to do so. Mars, Incorporated, a 100-year-old family-owned company which had been following its own path through four-plus generations, where the open office was a thing way before it was a thing and where egalitarianism found expression in a time clock, saw that getting real about collaboration required new thinking and real investment.

While Mars may be unique, we aren't alone. Other companies with global footprints, operating in fiercely competitive environments, are confronting issues of sustainability and human rights even as we all strive to remain profitable and grow. Effective collaboration could make an important difference for all of us. For Mars, the decision to invest in building true collaborative capability would have important results that have proven to be useful beyond what any of us expected. In the next chapter I'll talk about the team effectiveness journey that Mars has been on and what it led to.

Summary

- The ROI on team building isn't favorable. While team-building activities have been shown to improve employee engagement and satisfaction, little evidence can be found connecting traditional team building to improvements in how teams collaborate to create greater value.

- Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs helps explain why we aren’t natural collaborators. We aren’t naturally inclined to collaborate unless it’s directly connected to basic human needs.
- Organizations, despite their interest and investments in teams and teamwork, typically incentivize individual effort through pay and bonus structures which ensure that individuals are drawn down towards the bottom of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.
- Team-building practices meant to counter this effect don’t have lasting effect because they fail to adequately account for our innate individualistic nature or to use it to the team’s advantage.