SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT TEAMS AND TEAMWORK

There is a lot of folklore and unfounded intuition when it comes to teams and teamwork. We want to set the record straight by exposing some of the observations that managers find most useful.

Companies That Use Teams Are Not More Effective Than Those That Do Not

When companies are in trouble, they often restructure into teams. However, putting people into teams does not solve problems; if not done thoughtfully, this may even cause more problems. For every case of team success, there is an equally compelling case of team failure, as indicated by this chapter’s opening example. Teams can outperform the best member of the group, but there are no guarantees. Admitting the inefficiency of teams is hard, especially when most of us would like to believe in the Gestalt principle that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts! As we discuss in later chapters, teams can suffer from many drawbacks, such as too much emphasis on harmony or individualism.
causing a feeling of powerlessness and creating discord (Griffith, 1997). Teams are not a panacea for organizations; they often fail and are frequently overused or poorly designed. In the best circumstances, teams provide insight, creativity, and cross-fertilization of knowledge in a way that a person working independently cannot. In the wrong circumstances, teamwork can lead to confusion, delay, and poor decision making.

Managers Fault the Wrong Causes for Team Failure

Imagine yourself in the following situation: The wonderful team that you put together last year has collapsed into lethargy. The new product line is not forthcoming, conflict has erupted, and there is high turnover. What has gone wrong? If you are like most managers, you place the blame on a clash of personalities: Someone is not behaving as a team player, or petty politics are usurping common team goals.

Misattribution error is a tendency for managers to attribute the causes of team failure to forces beyond their personal control. Leaders may blame individual team members, the lack of resources, or a competitive environment. By pointing to a problem team member, the team’s problems can be neatly and clearly understood as emanating from one source. This saves the manager’s ego (and in some cases the manager’s job), but stifles learning and destroys morale. It is more likely that the team’s poor performance is due to a structural, rather than personal, cause. Furthermore, it is likely that several things are at work, not just one.

Managers Fail to Recognize Their Team-Building Responsibilities

Many new managers conceive of their people-management role as building the most effective relationships they can with each individual subordinate; they erroneously equate managing the team with managing the individual (Hill, 1982). These managers rarely rely on group-based forums for problem solving and diagnosis. Instead, they spend their time in one-on-one meetings. Teamwork is expected to be a natural consequence. As a result, many decisions are based upon limited information, and decision outcomes can backfire in unexpected and negative ways (see Sidebar 1-1).

Experimenting with Failures Leads to Better Teams

It may seem ironic, but one of the most effective ways to learn is to experience failure. Evidence of this is provided by the fallout that accompanied the Los Angeles Police Department’s (LAPD) handling of the riots that broke out following the Rodney King beating verdict in 1992. A Los Angeles Times editorial following the incident stated that “successful policing is a team effort; likewise, unsuccessful policing of the magnitude that occurred the night the riots broke out is a team failure” (Los Angeles Times, 1992, p. B4). The aftermath of the criticisms levied upon the LAPD and the people who run the department caused an overhaul within the management ranks of the department. A failed team effort should be viewed as a critical source of information from which to learn. The problem is that failure is hard to take: Our defense systems go into overdrive at the mere inkling that something we do is not above average. The true mark of a valued team member is a willingness to learn from mistakes. However, this learning can only come when people take personal responsibility for their actions.
Sidebar 1-1. Team-Building Responsibilities

Steve Miller, managing director of the Royal Dutch/Shell Group of Companies, develops exercises that allow teams to assess their performance as a group and the impact a leader has on the group. For example, one of his exercises involves giving each team a video camera. Each team has 90 minutes to come up with a 5 or 6 minute video that illustrates the old culture of the company and the new culture of the company. This exercise instigated a major change in the Austrian business offices of Royal Dutch/Shell.

In the first program involving the video camera exercise, the Austrian team was clearly lagging behind all the other teams in terms of motivation, participation and enjoyment. What's more, it was obvious to the Austrians as well as the other teams that they were not performing well. Needless to say, their morale was suffering, and Miller was uncertain how to help the struggling team turn things around.

At one point during the week, the team leader for the Austrian group was called away suddenly and was not present for the video exercise. At first, this seemed to be the worst thing that could happen to the Austrian team—they were leaderless and facing a real out-of-the-box problem.

The Austrian team surprised everyone by coming up with a powerful and humorous video. The video showed a man who needs to use the bathroom very urgently. The “old Shell” video depicts the man walking around in great discomfort, looking for a toilet. The doors are locked; there is all kinds of bureaucratic paperwork to complete and needless rubber-stamping. The clip ends with the man nearly collapsing in the men's room. That was the Austrian's idea of the “old Shell”.

The next clip depicted the “new Shell” culture. The same man immediately finds the men’s room, is greeted by a hospitable attendant and is offered personal toilet paper and amenities. The video concludes with the service attendant trying to zip up the man’s fly.

Everyone watching the video was completely stunned by the creativity and humor of the video. Clearly, the Austrians had won this competition, which turned out to be the beginning of a dramatic shift in their motivation, performance, and participation in the entire event. When the Austrian leader returned, he began to realize how capable and motivated his team really was. This single event was a turning point in how the team and the leader worked together; the team went on to dramatically improve their business in Austria (Pascale, 1998).
The truth is, teams have a flatter learning curve than do most individuals; it takes teams longer to “get on their feet.” However, teams have greater potential than do individuals. We discuss this further in chapter 2.

**Conflict among Team Members Is Not Always a Bad Thing**

Many managers boast that their teams are successful because they never have conflict. However, it is a fallacy to believe that conflict is detrimental to effective teamwork. In fact, conflict may be necessary for effective decision making in teams. Conflict among team members can foment accuracy, insight, understanding, and development of trust and innovation. We discuss conflict in teams in greater detail in chapter 7.

**Strong Leadership Is Not Always Necessary for Strong Teams**

A common myth is that to function effectively, teams need a strong, powerful, and charismatic leader. In general, leaders who control all the details, manage all the key relationships in the team, have all the good ideas, and use the team to execute their “vision” are usually overworked and underproductive. Teams with strong leaders may succumb to flawed and disastrous decision making.

As we discuss in chapter 10, a leader has two main functions: A design function, meaning that the leader structures the team environment (working conditions, access to information, incentives, training, and education); and a coaching function, meaning that the leader has direct interaction with the team (Hackman, 1996).

**Good Teams Can Still Fail under the Wrong Circumstances**

Teams are often depicted as mavericks: Bucking authority, striking out on their own, and asking for permission only after the fact. Such cases do occur, but they are rare and tend to be one-shot successes. Most managers want consistently successful teams. This is particularly important in industries where considerable tooling up is required for team members.

To be successful in the long run, teams need ongoing resources and support. By resources, we mean more than just money. Teams need information and education. In too many cases, teams tackle a problem that has already been solved by someone else in the company, but a lack of communication prevents this critical knowledge from reaching the current task force.

To lay the best groundwork for teams before the problems begin, it is important to consider such factors as the goals and resources of the team: Are the team’s goals well defined? Does everyone know them? Are the goals consistent with the objectives of other members of the organization? If not, how will the inevitable conflict be managed? Does everyone on the team have access to the resources necessary to successfully achieve the goal? Is the organizational hierarchy set up to give team members access to these resources efficiently? If not, it might be necessary to reconsider the governance structure within which the team must operate. What are the rights of the team members in pursuing their duties, who can they contact, and what information can they command? It is also important to assess the incentive structure existing for team members and for those outside the team with whom team members must interact. Does everyone have the right incentives (to do the things they are supposed to do)? Are team members’ incentives aligned with those of the group and the organization; for instance,
to cooperate with one another and to fully share information and resources? There is no cookie-cutter solution to team structure. For instance, it may be appropriate for team members to compete with one another (in which case, cooperation may not be an achievable feature of the group dynamic). Choosing the structure of the group and the incentives that motivate the individuals inside it are essential factors contributing to the success of any team.

Retreats Will Not Fix All the Conflicts between Team Members

Teams often get into trouble. Members may fight, slack off, or simply be unable to keep up with their responsibilities, potentially resulting in angry or dissatisfied customers. When conflict arises, people search for a solution to the team problem. A common strategy is to have a “team-building retreat” or “corporate love-in,” where team members try to address underlying concerns and build trust by engaging in activities—like rock climbing—that are not part of what they ordinarily do as a team.

A team retreat is a popular way for team members to build mutual trust and commitment. A retreat may involve team members spending a weekend camping and engaging in cooperative, shared, structured activities. This usually results in a good time had by all. However, retreats fail to address the structural and design problems that plague the team on a day-to-day basis in the work environment. Design problems are best addressed by examining the team in its own environment while team members are engaged in actual work. For this reason, it is important to take a more comprehensive approach to analyzing team problems. Retreats are insufficient because they allow managers to blame team interpersonal dynamics on the failures, rather than deeper, more systemic problems, which are harder to identify.

WHAT MANAGERS TELL US ABOUT THEIR TEAMS

To gain a more accurate picture of what managers face in their organizations in the way of teamwork, we conducted a minisurvey of 149 executives and managers from a variety of industries. Here are some highlights of what they told us.

Most Common Type of Team

By far, the most common teams were cross-functional project groups, followed by service, marketing, and operations teams (see also Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Cross-functional teams epitomize the new challenges outlined earlier in this chapter. They represent the greatest potential, in terms of integrating talent, skills, and ideas, but because of the diversity of training and responsibility, they provide fertile ground for conflict.

Team Size

Team size varied dramatically, from 3 to 25 members, with an average of 8.4. The modal team size was 5. These numbers can be compared to the optimum team size: As we discuss later in the book, teams should generally have fewer than 10 members—more like 5 or 6.

Survey results are based on the responses from executives in attendance at the Kellogg Team-Building for Managers Program, 1996–1999.
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Team Autonomy versus Manager Control
Most of the managers in our survey were in self-managing teams, followed by manager-led teams, with self-directing teams distinctly less common (see Figure 1-2). There is an inevitable tension between the degree of manager control in a team and the ability of team members to guide and manage their own actions. As a general principle, manager-led teams provide more control, but less innovation that stems from autonomy. We do not suggest that all teams should be self-directing. Rather, it is important to understand the trade-offs and what is required for each type of team to function effectively.

Team Longevity
The teams in our survey varied a great deal in terms of how long they had been working together. On average, teams had been in existence for 6 to 12 months (see Figure 1-3).

The Most Frustrating Aspect of Teamwork
Managers considered several possible sources of frustration in managing teams. The most frequently cited cause of frustration and challenge in teams was developing and sustaining high motivation, followed by minimizing confusion and coordination problems (see Figure 1-4). We discuss issues of motivation in chapter 2 as well as in a special chapter that focuses on team compensation and incentives (chapter 3). We look at conflict and ways to effectively manage it within a team in chapter 7.

Not surprisingly, the skills on the most-wanted list for managerial education were (1) developing and sustaining high motivation; (2) managing conflict productively; (3) providing leadership and direction; (4) fostering creativity and innovation; and (5) minimizing confusion and coordination problems. Consequently, we have designed this book to prepare managers and reeducate executives in how to effectively deal with each of these concerns.
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Skill Assessment

We asked managers to rate their own skills along a continuum from most to least proficient (see Figure 1-5). Managers felt most proficient in their decision-making, goal-setting, and leadership skills. They felt less proficient about fostering creativity and innovation, managing conflict, and compensation issues.

![Figure 1-3 Team Longevity](image)

![Figure 1-4 The Most Frustrating Aspects of Teamwork](image)
FIGURE 1-5. Skill Assessment