

HOW OUR RESEARCH TEAMS FAIL AND SUCCEED



Teams are ubiquitous throughout our society, and yet, research has consistently found that with teams, the whole is rarely more than the sum of its parts. This is because teams are often used to perform tasks that aren't suited to teams, and because even when applied to the right task, teams are often structured poorly.

For simple productivity tasks (such as typing 400 letters), tasks that require coordination (such as working on an assembly line), and tasks where there is only one answer ($2+2=4$), competent individuals are generally more effective when working on their own. Teams have also been shown to deliver fewer ideas when engaging in collective brainstorming, and to make worse decisions. Teams are often less effective in these situations for a range of reasons, including: individuals on teams may engage in "social loafing;" the time required to coordinate activities decreases the team's productivity; or the differing views of team members can make a situation more complex than necessary.

Teams do have one advantage – when it comes to complex problems where there is no singular answer, and where the quality of the response matters more than the speed of the response, effective teams can deliver better outcomes than individuals. Importantly, this only holds true for *effective* teams. The deficiencies of ineffective teams – e.g., teams with a lack of clear goals, poor organization, unclear group norms, and poor communication – can quickly erase the benefits of a team.

Why then should we bother to work in teams? The reality is that some projects simply can't be completed successfully by any one individual due to either the scope of the work or the intellectual demands of the task. Most of the challenges facing society today – the very challenges that scholars research and universities prepare their students to tackle throughout their careers – are complex and multi-faceted. They can rarely be solved by any one individual, or group of individuals from the same field. These challenges require that people weave together knowledge from disparate fields to create holistic, systemic solutions.

So, despite the inherent challenges of teams, it seems that they are here to stay. How then, do we realize the potential of teams?

I have no question that a
team can generate magic.
But don't count on it.

- J. Richard Hackman

DEFINING A TEAM

The term “team” is used widely and inconsistently so it’s important to define how we are using the term here. One of the most commonly accepted definitions of a team comes from The Wisdom of Teams by Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith:¹

“A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they are mutually accountable.”

When we think of teams, we often think of sports. Aside from America’s love of sport, this is because sports teams are a great example of a true team – each member of the team brings skills and assets to the team but has to work interdependently with other members, through a shared strategy, to achieve a common purpose – to win.

In contrast, in organizations, we often refer to teams as a group of employees who report to a department manager. In reality, employees on many of these “teams” often have distinct, independent areas of responsibility, unless they are working on the same project.

SETTING YOUR TEAM UP FOR SUCCESS

Effective teams consistently share a few common characteristics which are, fortunately, neither difficult nor expensive to adopt. But importantly, these characteristics should be built into the team from the beginning when possible. Research by J. Richard Hackman, a Harvard Business School professor, found that a team’s first interaction strongly affects how the group operates throughout its entire life.² That’s not to say that teams can’t be redirected, but the hurdles become steeper.

5 CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE TEAMS

- 1. The Right Talent:** Team members should have the necessary skills to do the work (or the capacity to develop them quickly) and each team member should bring complimentary – but diverse – skills, knowledge, and experiences to the team. At the same time, it’s important not to overload the team – teams under 10 tend to perform best. As teams get larger, the amount of coordination needed increases exponentially, reducing productivity and increasing opportunities for miscommunication.
- 2. A Clear and Compelling Purpose:** It’s important that everyone on a team understands what they are working towards and feels invested in that mission. This includes setting clear and concrete goals for the team. Without a shared understanding, there will be varying levels of commitment on the team, or people will find themselves working towards different goals.
- 3. Clear Roles and Accountabilities:** Every member of a team should have a distinct role, and those roles should be clear to everyone on the team. Team members who don’t understand their role feel as though they are not useful and tend to become disengaged, leaving some team members carrying more of the load than others.

With clear roles should also come accountabilities. Everyone has had the frustrating experience of being part of a team where there is a freeloader. All too often, those issues go unaddressed which erodes the team’s trust and decreases the engagement of other team members. Effective teams deal with these situations quickly, candidly, and respectfully by addressing the team member directly and constructively exploring why that member failed to follow through on their commitments. In most instances, these issues are resolvable, but when they aren’t

the team leader needs to address the issue rather than let it persist unaddressed.

- 4. Agreed to Processes for Operating:** Effective teams set norms for how they will work together including how they will communicate with one another, hold each other accountable, make decisions, and manage constructive debate and conflict. Once a team agrees to a set of norms, it should stick to them and actively address situations when a member of the team violates a norm. Effective teams also establish processes for effectively coordinating their work including how they will share information, track progress, and use available resources.

- 5. Open Communication:** For a team to maximize the knowledge and contributions of everyone on the team, team members must participate freely and share information openly. This requires that everyone on the team understands what one another brings to the team, and that team members commit to pulling out the contributions of less forthcoming members. It also means that team members need to respect and listen to one another. However, it's important to recognize that respect is not synonymous with agreement. Teams that create a culture of respect tend to be more effective at engaging in constructive debate and disagreement – a friction that is necessary to solving complex problems.

References and Resources

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² Hackman, J. Richard. "Why Teams Don't Work." Interview by Diane Coutu. Harvard Business Review. May 2009.

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Background and inspiration for the five characteristics of effective teams come from the following resources:

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