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Teams: Vehicle of Choice for Transporting the Organizational Future

Richard F. Ghiselli

Purdue University, null@purdue.edu

Joseph A. Ismail

The Pennsylvania State University, null@psu.edu

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Teams: Vehicle of Choice for Transporting the Organizational Future

Abstract

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Teams: Vehicle of Choice for Transporting the Organizational Future

by
William E. Kent
and
Debra F. Cannon

Teamwork is much more than lip service paid to the concept. This article was written for the executive, the educator, and the student to broaden awareness of the vast potential of teams and teamwork.

Teams teamwork ... words so common to the corporate lexicon that they may well be the business equivalent of patriotism. What leader or manager does not pay homage to the ideals of teamwork? In integrating theory and application, it becomes evident that teaming is not really an option for most organizations; it is a vital key to their survival and ultimate success.

At Westinghouse's Productivity and Quality Center in Pittsburgh, for example, 90 people in a 100-person department share the title of manager of quality service. Productivity went up 18 percent in the first six months of their self-directed team reorganization and continues to rise.¹

At Levi Strauss and Company, team management is the norm. Workers run a typical plant and the Levi policy manual has shrunk from 700 pages to 50. Flawed jeans have been reduced by a third; time between ordering and shipment has decreased by 10 days, and processing time for a pair of jeans has shrunk from five days to one.²

The power of teams, although available and tempting, is not necessarily easy to tap. A commitment to a team approach involves very real risks, and the risks increase as one goes up the organizational ladder. Supervisors, managers, and COO's must undergo the most change in order for teams to work, which often results in a transformation of the entire organization's culture.

Fortunately, a significant amount of excellent research on teams has been conducted. Certainly, not all the answers are in and likely never will be, but a great deal is known.

Teams Can Be Effective

Teams can be highly effective in solving complex problems. They offer advantages, in comparison to larger formal organizational groupings, in their flexibility of being more quickly assembled, deployed, refocused, and disbanded as needed. Motorola, for example, succeeded in producing the lightest, smallest, and highest quality cellular phones in the world through the efforts of multiple teams. The best selling car in the United States, the Ford Taurus, was conceived, designed, and created by a group of vendors, engineers, production personnel, and marketing representatives known collectively as "Team Taurus."³

Teams can provide reinforcement to the forces that drive businesses today, customer driven, continuously improving, and partnering with suppliers and customers. There are numerous reasons why teams can succeed. Bringing together complementary skills and experiences, teams allow for members to develop trust and confidence in each other's abilities and build on that. Teams can succeed because they can be (and should be) enjoyable and even fun. Katzenbach and Smith have concluded there are five "common sense findings" about teams:

- A demanding performance challenge tends to help create an effective team.
- The disciplined application of "team basics" is often overlooked.
- Team performance opportunities exist in all parts of an organization.
- Teams at the top are the most difficult.

Most organizations intrinsically prefer individual over team accountability.⁴

Common Problems Are Found in Teams

Katzenbach and Smith believe there are three fundamental reasons why people resist being a part of teams and/or do not have confidence in their value. The first is a lack of conviction in the intrinsic value of teams. Some people simply feel that individuals working within the normal organizational structure perform better than teams, without the waste of time involved in organizing and getting used to one another. Secondly, teams may cause personal discomfort and risk. Some people are loners or feel uncomfortable with the closeness that arises out of teamwork. Others feel that they do not have the time to devote to a team in addition to the normal workload. The third problem source is caused by weak organizational ethics or politics displacing performance on a daily basis.⁵

In response to the three reasons for resistance to teamwork, Katzenbach and Smith do recognize that teams can and do fail. Primarily, this is due to not adhering to the discipline of what makes teams successful. Even though the values of individuality are strong in the culture, the many noteworthy accomplishments brought about through teamwork are paramount. With regard to organizational

politics, there must be a clear and consistent message from the top that performance will always overrule favoritism or cronyism.⁶

Scholtes points out 10 common problems that teams encounter once formed, any one of which can impair performance: floundering, overbearing participants, dominating participants, reluctant participants, unquestioned acceptance of opinions as facts, rush to accomplishment, attribution (making and stating untrue assumptions about others), discounts, "plops" (cynical remarks intended to discourage discussion), digression, and feuding members. Scholtes has three general ground rules for team problems: anticipate and present group problems whenever possible, think of each problem as a group problem, and neither over-react nor under-react.⁷

Weisbord points out that all team members continually struggle with three questions: Am I in or out? Do I have any power and control? Can I use, develop, and be appreciated for my skills and resources? Weisbord emphasizes that every person wants to be valued and recognized, even if committed to a team's mission. The insecurities and egos of humans cannot be ignored.⁸

Teams Can Learn to Work Together

Scholtes offers a nine-part recipe for building a successful team: clarity in team goals, an improvement plan, clearly defined rules, clear communication, beneficial team behaviors, well-defined decision procedures, balanced participation, established ground rules, and awareness of the group process. According to Scholtes, each team member will inevitably be concerned with three issues: personal identity in the team, relationship between team members, and identity with the organization.⁹

Katzenbach and Smith also stress the importance of a common commitment to the team's purpose or working approach in order for the group to make progress. In addition, team success is dependent on extremely clear rules of the road: What is each member expected to contribute? How will the members work together? What members will work on what projects together? How will team meetings be structured and conducted? How will non-team responsibilities and matters be handled? One interesting point emphasized by the two authors was that teams do not have to necessarily get along, but they do have to get things accomplished. The focus of the team must be on the accomplishment of defined objectives and goals.¹⁰

Scholtes acknowledges that a certain level of tension is inevitable for teams. He states that all teams will (and perhaps should) evolve through four stages of team growth. In the forming stage, cautious exploration of fellow team members takes place as well as determining acceptable group behavior and the team's mission. In the storming stage, members begin to realize that the tasks may be difficult and some team members may be difficult. Efforts are made at establishing a pecking order. The norming stage is characterized by reconciliation of competing loyalties and responsibilities, acceptance of group ground rules, and acceptance of membership in the team. In the performing

stage, problems are diagnosed and solved; capabilities of the team are expanded, and the group acts as a cohesive unit.¹¹

Burke feels that emotions play a legitimate role in teams and should not be unnecessarily suppressed for the sake of false "harmony." Team members should agree that the expression of emotion is acceptable as long as it is directed at the differences of opinion and not at the persons holding the opinions. In particular, teams should be cautious of "groupthink," which is the tendency of members to withhold differing opinions in order to protect one another's feelings.¹²

Team Leadership Should Be Fluid

Shuster cautions that, while a team may have a designated leader, it is critical that all members realize each has a responsibility to lead at times. Each member holds unique talents, and so the leadership responsibilities should remain somewhat fluid.¹³

Margerison and McCann describe a team leader as having a "linking" role to coordinate and integrate the work of others. The team leader offers key skills, including listening before deciding, being available and responsive to problems, allocating work to people based on capabilities, encouraging respect and understanding among team members, setting high standards, and setting achievable goals while also pressing for improved performance.¹⁴

Communication skills are often listed as paramount to effective team leadership. Scholtes specifies the abilities to listen, to ask for clarification, to summarize, and to contain digression as crucial. Employing effective feedback is also important and involves knowing when and how to give both positive and negative comments.¹⁵

Hackman emphasizes that one critical aspect of leadership is recognizing those individuals who make their best contributions as solo performers. Hackman stresses that every organization has such people; some do not have the skills necessary to work constructively in teams, and, more importantly, are not willing or able to acquire the needed abilities. Forcing such people on teams can be destructive and can actually "sink" a team, regardless of the strong leadership provided.¹⁶

Hackman uses three questions to ascertain how well a team is doing: Does the product or service of the team meet the standards of its clients, those who receive, review, or use the team's work? Is the team becoming more capable as a performing unit over time? Does membership on the team contribute positively to every person's learning and well-being?¹⁷

Shuster offers several tools for effective team problem-solving. In addition to brainstorming, approaches less familiar to some are also recommended:

- **Nominal Group Technique:** Each team member is given several blank index cards. Privately, they list their own ideas regarding a specific assigned problem. The cards are turned in and the ideas listed anonymously on a flip chart. All ideas are then evaluated for further consideration.

• **Fishbone Diagraming:** A problem is presented to the team and written in a box at the end of a straight horizontal line, representing the fish's "head." Diagonal lines are drawn that represent possible causes or contributions of the problem. These diagonal lines may be labeled with headings such as personnel, equipment, policies, etc.

• **Why-Because Pursuit:** This can be used with fishbone diagraming or independently. It is used to uncover deep-rooted causes or problems. A "pursuit" might go like this: "Employees are unskilled in using machinery." ... Why? Because of lack of training. Why? Because it was considered too costly. Why? (and so on).

• **Force-Field Analysis:** This is a technique for generating, displaying, and analyzing the consequences of a solution/recommendation. A flip chart is divided into "driving forces" and "restraining forces" with those forces that encourage implementation of a given solution listed as well as those that discourage solution implementation. Good, as well as negative consequences of the solution can also be delineated. By arraying both sides, the value (or lack of value) of a solution often becomes apparent.¹⁸

Team Climate Continuum Determines Success

The current or evolving organizational climate in any given business will determine, to a degree, how closely and fervently the team concept is embraced. It may be useful to think of this line of thinking as a continuum, with four levels identified for discussion. An organization could easily be "between" two levels, or perhaps at a unique evolution point:

• **Level I organizations**, which can be described as "traditional," are characterized by a history of strong authority in the company. The departments generally work independently and rewards accrue to individuals, and not groups. Things run much smoother when management is present.

• **Level II organizations**, or those "evolving," are going through or contemplating a partial break with the authority model. There have been some successful team projects, and recognition of the importance of inter-departmental cooperation is reflected in the reward system. Employees have sometimes been surprised that management need not always be present.

• **Level III groups**, also known as "progressive," are beginning to embrace the following slogan: "It is commitment, not authority, that brings results." It is common for different departments to have to work together and they generally do work well together. Individuals who are not team players will not succeed in such organizations. Management no longer runs things but, instead, coordinates activities.

• **Level IV companies**, those known as "transformational," are characterized by cross-functional teams functioning routinely and well. In such environments, authority is not stressed, but synergy is. People are rewarded for their synergistic potential and for flexibility across tasks and responsibilities. While management is still needed, everyone is a manager in doing his/her work.

Generally speaking, a Level I company should be thinking primarily of ways to reduce the weight of authority in use and increase a sense of teamwork. Two sure signs of a Level I organization are frequent statements by employees to the effect of "that's not my job" and considerable evidence that management need be present for things to run smoothly. The leaders of a Level I organization may want to benchmark other companies that have made more progress regarding teamwork. Most importantly, such an organization should conduct an audit to define its own values, plot the future, and ask if the present authoritative structure can deliver the goals desired.

An organization that recognizes itself in the Level II description should certainly continue experimenting with the use of teams and consider perhaps being somewhat bolder. A Level II company should be benchmarking others regarding the use of teams, with a strong consideration given to forming quality assurance teams. Company-wide training on authority, empowerment, and delegation could be beneficial. With a foothold in the teams concept, a Level II company should persist in building a teamwork-friendly work environment.

A Level III company is serious about teams and team-building. Cross-functional teams focusing on quality assurance or operational problem-solving should be formed. A Level III company is in a position to assign challenging problems to teams, problems that consistently have evaded solution through normal hierarchical approaches. A Level III company is poised for success in a future that is not only uncertain but ever-changing. A question for Level IV companies may be what can follow. For Level IV players, there is a next step, a high risk game with a potential high payoff, self-directed work teams.

Self-Directed Teams Are Ultimate Concept

Self-directed work teams (SDWTs) are the most ambitious expression of a commitment to teams. They represent what teams can be if allowed to manifest themselves in their purest form representing cumulative and synergistic energy, intellect, and devotion of each team member. J.D. Orsburn puts it this way: "Self-directed work teams ... require nothing short of a philosophical break with the past." They also require time; many experts say it can be two to three years before SDWTs become truly effective.¹⁹

Yet, according to Kimball Fisher, no CEO today can afford to dismiss the concept of SDWT altogether. In his words, "We are witnessing a pivotal point in modern organizational history, a time when the structures and assumptions of traditional work-place management are once again being challenged. Some have dubbed it the second industrial revolution because the pervasive, classic U.S. workplace design, with its stovepipe functions, rigid bureaucracies, chain-of-command reporting relationships, and encumbering policies and regulations may be becoming obsolete." He goes on to say that these policies did work in the past but will not work in the future.²⁰

According to Orsburn, "A self-directed work team is a highly-

trained group of employees, from 6 to 18 on average, who are fully responsible for turning out a well-defined segment of finished work." A completely operational SDWT works in ways that makes an observer not only wonder if a manager is present but also whether there is any need for a manager. Members of a SDWT plan set priorities, reorganize, coordinate with others, measure, and take corrective action, all once considered the exclusive province of supervisors and managers. They also solve problems, schedule and assign work, and, in many cases, handle personnel issues like discipline and team member selection and evaluation. Extensive training for team members in the administrative, interpersonal, and technical skills required is crucial to maintain a self-managing group.²¹

Does the concept work? SDWTs can work and, in some cases, extraordinarily well. For example, Xerox Corporation plants using SDWTs are now 30 percent more productive than conventionally organized plants. Proctor & Gamble gets 30 percent higher productivity at its 18 team-based plants. The company considers work teams so vital to their competitive strength that, until recently, they would not comment about them.²²

Certain Elements Are Required

Self-directed work teams are not a plug-in enhancement that a CEO may simply purchase and install. Orsburn presents a nine-point checklist of "must have" elements for effective SDWTs:

- **Top-level commitment:** A dedicated and courageous champion often, but not always, the top executive, is needed to protect the endeavor and ensure the availability of all necessary resources.

- **Management-employee trust:** This is a two-way street. Managers need to trust that, given time, employees will actively support the massive changes necessary for success. Employees need to know that management is serious about wanting them to assume more responsibility and power.

- **Willingness to take risks:** Executives and managers must be willing to risk a complex and costly organizational innovation. Other employees must be willing to trade their traditional jobs for less clear-cut, more demanding roles as team members, team leaders, and facilitators.

- **Willingness to share information:** Team members will need detailed information. Secrecy and teamwork are not good work mates.

- **Sufficient time and resources:** Work teams can take years to mature. Management must be willing to invest time and needed resources into work planning and refocusing, and occasionally physical redesigning of offices and work spaces.

- **Commitment to training:** SDWTs stand or fall on the training they receive. Intensive, long-term training will be needed to counteract habits and attitudes left from years of working in the narrow environment of blindly giving, following, or resisting orders.

- **Operations conducive to work teams:** The very deep involvement of SDWTs requires an operation that includes a range of employee tasks, with some complex enough that improved skills and commitment can lead to improved productivity.

- **Union participation:** If an operation is unionized, executives must take early and continued steps to make the union an active partner in the transition to teams. Both union and management must find common ground in the shared understanding that a more compatible company is the best guarantee of job security.

- **Access to help:** Organizations going to SDWTs will need experienced and readily accessible help throughout the transition.²³

The transition to using SDWTs is an evolutionary process requiring progression through several prescribed stages. The first stage of "start up" actually begins prior to team formation with a steering committee that establishes the feasibility of teams and develops a mission statement. Simultaneously, a multi-level design team develops an approach plan with training being an integral ingredient. Training begins prior to startup and continues throughout.

The next "progression" is to a state of confusion. Orsburn stresses that the initial enthusiasm found in the first stage is typically replaced by difficulty in reaching cooperative decisions, questions of job security, and a hope by some that the transition will collapse. In stage three, confidence grows as teams master new skills and meet ambitious goals. Lines between salaried and hourly people begin to blur. A team member may emerge as the primary source of direction and information, acting as a facilitator and coach. Monitoring of the team by management and encouragement of rotation of the leadership role are appropriate at this stage.

Stage four may find the team meeting challenging goals with limited resources. The team can also become too self-focused at this stage with symptoms such as protecting a poorly performing member or reluctance to accept a new team member. Mature teams, emerging in the fifth stage, are characterized by a powerful commitment to achieving corporate and team goals. Managers must still continuously seek new ways to foster the commitment, trust, and involvement of team members such as through constant energizing with training and information.²⁴

Some SDWTs Do Not Work

The single biggest reason for failure of SDWTs is a lack of management commitment to the whole changing process. Robert Houserman, vice president of human resources at TRW, says: "Work teams are in trouble if people see them as an experiment ... they're in double trouble if they're seen as the property of human resources." Another typical shortfall is the unwillingness to provide the necessary budget and time for training to help team leaders and members acquire new skills.²⁵

In realizing the complexities of providing the right environment and nourishment for SDWTs, there are examples of hospitality companies that have achieved such high functioning teams. A number of companies illustrate the synergistic results of effective teams, but two particularly impressive companies have progressed to SDWTs. These two organizations, representing very different organizational environments, reinforce the high-level commitment and other necessary dynamics vital to SDWTs.

Treasure Island Inn in Daytona, Florida, has achieved multiple industry awards. While General Manager Bob Davis is the instigator and motivator of all five of the employee teams, he is quick to give full credit to them for these awards, and, more importantly to him, the impact they have had on guest satisfaction and the hotel's bottom line.

"First Mates" was the first quality assurance team formed by Davis. Comprised of all department heads and other selected employees, this team's goals and activities center around projects that help hotel guests and staff and, in particular, the community. It is this latter focus that garnered the Florida Hotel and Motel Association's Gold Key Award for Community Service in 1992 and 1993 and, in 1994, the American Hotel and Motel Association's "Star of the Industry" Award for Florida for the third year in a row.

Other teams at Treasure Island Inn are generally hotel focused. FROGS (Front office, Room attendants, Operators, Guest services, Security) has as a stated purpose the identification of situations before they become problems and, if problems do arise, preventing them from reoccurring. Each member of the team serves as a conduit or vehicle of communication between fellow workers and FROGS. One of the group's challenges was a persistent and frustrating problem with linen storage and distribution. Ostensibly a housekeeping problem, discussion quickly showed it impacted the front desk and, ultimately, guest satisfaction. The correct solution took a full six months but resulted in annual savings to the hotel of \$84,000. The team's solution was completely embraced by staff members because it was an idea of their own making.

Are there problems inherent in the teams approach? Davis observes, "Anyone who thinks forming and supporting employee teams is all fun and games is sadly mistaken." He readily admits his first efforts at forming teams failed. He has found new teams go through an almost inevitable laundry list of obstacles before they become effective including questions of individual roles and the group's mission. But Davis is not discouraged. He has gone on to organize "In The Weeds," a food and beverage team, "KOPS," a security-oriented team, and "The Squeaky Cleans," a housekeeping team.

Team Efforts Are Rewarded

There are many rewards for the team efforts, including Treasure Island Inn being designated a "Quality Property Resource" by the American Hotel and Motel Association. Team members themselves

observe that they have become more confident and more open in communicating. Those involved in the community projects feel that their work has enriched their lives and helped them professionally and personally.²⁶

“Teaming” is a concept well understood and practiced throughout the Taco Bell Corporation. The new organizational paradigms of this organization have significantly increased managerial spans with a typical Taco Bell general manager today responsible for multiple units. In one region, there is a general manager over 18 restaurants. The district level, with positions now referred to as market managers, have likewise been expanded to 15 to 40 units.

Two market managers over the Orlando district, Ken Borglum and Mike Feinman, have taken the concept of teaming to such a level that their region started referring to the two as “Feinborg,” an indicator of their synergistic efforts.

Borglum stresses that the region’s progression with teams did not happen serendipitously. Both market managers have strong operational backgrounds with the company, and both invested many hours in attending seminars on teams prior to any implementation efforts. The clearness of their company’s mission is also integral to the success of the teams. As Feinman relates, “Everyone in this region wants to accomplish the same thing: to become the dominant leader in the convenience food industry.”

It is apparent that there are many pieces of effective teaming for Taco Bell: the position of the market managers as role models, the proper selection of team members, the importance placed on professional development, the technical tools available, clear objectives, and definite standards. Both Feinman and Borglum note that their region’s progression with teaming has not followed a straight line but, instead, has involved periods of resistance and hesitancy. Borglum states, “You can’t let go of too much too soon. Delegation is really crucial to the team’s success but members have to be prepared.”

Two of the region’s most profitable restaurants are run by self-led teams. These two locations also have the lowest turnover rates in the region. Cross-functional teams are another dimension of teaming evident in this Taco Bell region. Functional teams, composed of members from different restaurant locations, have had impressive results. The recruiting team hires even the general managers for the region. The team on capital expenditures, with some initial guidelines, made decisions on how to spend \$300,000. The human resources team handles all investigations of reported employee problems. Feinman and Borglum ultimately see potential for the cross-functional teams across the Taco Bell company. Eventually teams could cross state lines, (and perhaps even nations), and maximize employee communication and synergistic possibilities.²⁷

Are work teams here to stay, or will the concept eventually fade, as do so many organizational models? No less a luminary than Tom Peters has stated, “The self-managing team should become the basic

organizational block if we are to win out against other world economic powers."²⁸ Teams can be difficult to form and mobilize because of the numerous complexities involved. The price paid for implementing team-building may be fairly steep; the payoffs can be amazing, including the successful progression of hospitality organizations into the next century.

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William E. Kent is an associate professor in the Hotel, Restaurant and Management Program at Auburn University and **Debra F. Cannon** is an assistant professor at Cecil B. Day School of Hospitality Administration at Georgia State University.