
Advances in Project Management Series¹

Thinking Teams, performing teams and sustaining teams: Beginning the dialogue around working together

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When can we talk about teams?

Given that teams are central to effective project management, and indeed, to project work, do we spend enough time considering the role and impacts of teams? Do we take them for granted, or do they really offer us the best way of organising for project delivery?

It is about thirty years since the publication of *Peopleware—Productive Projects and Teams* by Tom DeMarco and Tim Lister. The book has had a profound influence on the management of software projects, as the neologism, the newly coined term, peopleware (also employed by Peter Neumann), gradually gained acceptance as the third core aspect of computer technology, alongside, the better established and more recognised aspects of hardware and software.

Peopleware has been utilised as a label referring to the role of people in development IT systems and grown to encompass teamwork, group dynamics, project management, organisational factors, the psychology of programming and the interface with people and users. The importance of the book was in drawing attention to the significance of managing project teams; reminding readers that the major problems encountered in projects were not technical, but sociological or political issues that needed to be considered, understood, practiced and taught within the canon of software development.

DeMarco and Lister assert that software managers are prone to a tendency to manage people as if they were components. It may not be surprising as technicians and developers who are used to organising resources into modular pieces, such as software routines or circuits, get promoted to managerial positions. The black-box approach that works for hardware and software systems, allowing developers to ignore internal idiosyncrasies, and the tendency to work with a standard interface, does not apply to

¹The PMWJ *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books previously published by Gower in the UK and now by Routledge. Each month an introduction to the current article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower/Routledge *Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. To learn more about the book series, go to <https://www.routledge.com/Advances-in-Project-Management/book-series/APM>. Prof Dalcher's article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ.

teams of developers and project workers. Managers of software teams thus need to learn to overcome a new set of challenges related to the performance and characteristics of individual members and the wider project team.

Project teams

Given that projects, by the very nature, require the use of teams, one would expect to find a plethora of ideas and insights about organising teams within the standard literature.

Yet, at first glance through the tables of contents, the various bodies of knowledge do not address the team concept as a main area of interest. This is a little surprising, as it would seem to impact the operational side of project organisation.

A more detailed search of the 5th edition of the PMI Guide to the Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) identifies teams within the Project Human Resource Management knowledge area. The chapter makes it abundantly clear that the project manager is responsible for the team. Subsequent guidance addresses the development of team competencies, facilitation of team interaction and the creation of a team environment that is likely to enhance project performance. Team formation is discussed under the standard steps of forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning, indicating that the responsibility for guiding the team lies with the project manager. In the earlier part of the Guide, under organisational influences, the project team is described as being made up of the project manager and other project workers.

The sixth edition of the APM Body of Knowledge (APM BOK) does a little better and covers teams under the interpersonal skill of ‘teamwork’, included in the people section (there are three sections overall focused on context, people and delivery). Teamwork is defined as “a group of people working in collaboration or by cooperation towards a common goal”.

The general guidance elaborates that teams consist of groups of people, committed to a common goal that no one individual can achieve alone. The resulting focus of teams and teamwork is on mutual accountability and performance.

What makes teams special?

The essential question is: ‘when does a group of people become an effective team?’ The concept of teamwork described by the APM BOK, or the team structure offered in the Guide to the PMI BoK do not offer sufficient authoritative guidance on the makeup, dynamics or effectiveness of teams.

McKinsey partners, Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith maintain that the essence of a team is the shared commitment. The best teams invest effort in shaping a common purpose in which individuals can believe, which allows them to emphasise communal performance rather than a collection of individual achievements.

The book *A discipline of teams* by Katzenbach and Smith has become the bestseller on teams at work, having sold over 500,000 copies. In contrast with work groups that have a strong, clearly focused leader, teams display shared leadership roles. They amalgamate individual and mutual accountability towards collective work products and emphasise collectiveness and togetherness in terms of discussing, deciding and doing things. Katzenbach and Smith recognise that the most successful teams shape their purposes in response to a demand or opportunity placed in their path, thereby broadly framing the performance expectation.

The contrast between a (project) manager running the team and the dynamic nature of the engagement and re-alignment displayed by effective teams, reflects the observations of DeMarco and Lister in *Peopleware*. The major problems and failures in projects are still not technical, but more often relate to sociological, political, organisational, individual and motivational aspects.

Project teams are often managed rather than led. The result is that the managed projects may reflect the fact that they are being built and delivered by groups rather than teams. Advocates of agile working will recognise the focus and autonomy given to teams in an effort to improve their performance and ensure that opportunities are acknowledged and embraced during development. Working in teams can truly enhance flexibility and resilience, and also offer a reduced risk of underachievement, if the principles for building high performing teams are applied.

High-performance teams

High-performance teams (HPT) were first described by the UK's Tavistock Institute in the 1950s. The concept originates in organisational development to refer to highly focused groups that continuously achieve high-performance results. HPT was popularised by organisations such as Boeing, General Electric, Digital Equipment Corporation and other defence and governmental organisations in the US. The initial implementation led to many successful teams delivering effective and influential results and products as HPT became a major way of organising successful manufacturing and production projects.

Later attempts to implement similar structures often ignored the dynamics of teams and the social and political realities of the organisations leading to patchy results. The concept of High-Performance Teams is becoming increasingly popular once again, but effective utilisation would require a strategic understanding of the context and purpose and operational recognition of the underlying dynamics and emergent benefits.

Emergence teams

Situational awareness and recognition of context remain crucial. Coupled with a growing level of uncertainty and turbulence in political, economic, national and business systems they introduce a need to engage with the teams of developers and creators in order to leverage greater value from assets, projects, products, services and other undertakings.

This month's article "VUCA and the Power of Emergence Teams" by Tom Cockburn and Peter Smith offers guidance for project teams operating in an uncertain world. The authors recognise that the business landscape within which most organisations operate requires greater variety and diversity to benefit from new emerging opportunities. Different situations can be characterised as simple, complicated, complex or chaotic requiring matching diversity and capability in order to perform and operate.

To successfully address the emerging opportunities, organisations need to develop and foster emergence teams: High-trust teams capable of exceptional affinity for knowledge sharing, sense making and consensus building needed to accurately define the business environment and recommend appropriate action. The article was sourced from the authors' recent book *Developing and Leading Emergence Teams: A new approach for identifying and resolving complex business problems* published by Routledge. The book offers a theoretically grounded, yet practical guide for thriving in a world of uncertainty and complexity and benefitting from emergent opportunities through thoughtful organisation.

Emergence teams provide a basis for responding to emerging challenges and opportunities by abandoning old structures and embracing the uncertainty and complexity of new configurations and trials faced by organisations. Such teams can deliver open and collaborative ways of engaging with challenging new types of problems. They offer new ways of responding to and thriving in the face of uncertainty and complexity. The authors do a wonderful job in re-focusing attention to what can be achieved through dedicated and focused teams, intimating enhanced approaches for dealing with reality by embracing the powers, skills and capability of team members liberated from more conventional thinking and loyalty structures and responsive to the contextual details and identifying features that apply in a given situation.

In teams we trust

Teams offer ways of embracing and benefitting from the collective power of a focused group emphasising fun, teamwork and a shared purpose. In this way, the emergence within the team itself can account for more than the sum of individuals. Yet, many organisations overlook the power of teams to innovate, improve and sustain achievements.

Indeed, the team architecture can be used to embrace the potential to develop great work in a collective setting. Moreover, the team concept provides the context and essence for dedicated and purposeful project work. Teams offer the promise for greater achievement, but only when their potential is recognised and realised, and when the individuals are valued and involved, thus benefitting from the shared higher purpose.

Focusing on the organisation, architecture and value of the collected wisdom and capability can begin to enhance the power of team. As we endeavour to complete more distributed projects; bring in trans-disciplinary collaborators with different interests, priorities and values; and summon the power of crowdsourcing, we need to grasp and embrace the potential of teams as an organising structure, architecture, organisation and framework for higher achievement and sustained performance.

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Editor's note: Editor's note: Prof Darren Dalcher, is the editor of the Gower/Routledge Advances in Project Management series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. To learn more about the book series, go to <https://www.routledge.com/Advances-in-Project-Management/book-series/APM>. The above article is an introduction to the invited paper this month by another Gower author. You can find previously published articles by Prof Dalcher and Gower authors at www.peworldlibrary.net.

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