

Advances in Project Management Series¹

The wisdom of teams revisited: Teamwork, teaming and working for the common good²

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One of the distinctions of project work is that it is done by dedicated teams of people, often acting outside the normal organizational structures associated with 'regular' work. Projects can thus be said to bring together collections of individuals who are focused on the achievement of specific objectives and targets. Teams can thus be viewed as the main way through which work gets done and value is delivered to organisations and societies. Such teams are often formed for the duration of the project and disbanded following the delivery of the objectives.

Yet, the terminology we use to describe such collections of individuals is frequently problematic and laden with different meanings: Indeed, the common interpretation of terms such as teams and groups can often be confusing.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a *team* as '*two or more people working together*'. It further elaborates that to *team up* is to '*come together as a team to achieve a common goal*'. The Cambridge English Dictionary describes the verb *team* as '*to act together to achieve something*'. The definitions chime with the view of US industrialist, Henry Ford who asserted that '*coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.*'

In contrast, the Oxford English Dictionary views a *group* as '*a number of people or things that are located, gathered or classed together*'. The Cambridge English Dictionary views a group as '*a number of people or things that are put together or considered as a unit*'. The Collins English Dictionary offers a much wider set of definitions, including: '*a number of people or things which are together in one place at one time; a set of people who have the same interests or aims... who organize themselves to work or act together; or a set of people, organizations, or things which are considered together because they have something in common*'. Confusingly, it also designates the verb form of *grouping together*

¹The PMWJ *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK and by Routledge publishers worldwide. 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 see [project management books published by Gower and other Routledge publishers, click here](#). Prof Dalcher's article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ.

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as 'a number of things or people... that are together in one place or within one organization or system'.

The Merriam-Webster English Dictionary offers a more comprehensive definition of a group encompassing: *'two or more figures forming a complete unit of composition; a number of individuals assembled together or having some unifying relationship; an assemblage of related organisms—often used to avoid taxonomic connotation when the kind of degree of relationship is not clearly defined.'*

The terms team and group are often used interchangeably. So, are the terms really exchangeable or is there a fundamental distinction between them?

The difference between groups and teams

In reality there are some subtle, as well as many clear distinctions. In a nutshell, individuals in groups work independently addressing their own agenda and priorities, whilst teams tend to collaborate on a single purpose or overarching goal. Groups may coordinate the individual efforts, whilst teams collaborate on achieving their common purpose often displaying mutual commitment. Teams bring together a range of expertise and capabilities needed to combine and deliver meaningful results and often extend beyond organisational silos or functional structures. Teams are also more likely to be employed on temporary endeavours, providing a focused and cross-functional orientation supplemented by closer relationships and a sense of community. The result can be viewed as the ability to emphasise communal performance rather than celebrate individual achievements (Dalcher, 2016a; p. 2).

Teams often develop a collective identity and a greater responsibility for one another whilst supporting the wider group. Members are interdependent acting out of collective interest and maximising the greater good by focusing on the main goal and key objectives. Team members develop a deeper mutual understanding that enables them to maximise the interest of the collective, with high performing teams benefitting from the synergistic impacts of the assembled team.

Scottish-American philanthropist and industrialist, Andrew Carnegie determined that *'Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.'*

Katzenbach and Smith (2015) conclude that teams should be the basic unit of organisation for most businesses to enable them to achieve highest levels of performance, especially as teamwork integrates performance and learning. In their best seller that has sold over half a million copies, Katzenbach and Smith further confirm that commitment to performance goals and common purpose is more important to team success than team building and establish that real teams are the most important spearheads of change at all levels.

Teams take time to form and learn to perform together. As each team is made of a collection of individuals, it is subject to their relationships, internal dynamics and willingness to co-operate and collaborate. Katzenbach and Smith (2015) note that all teams must shape their own purpose, performance goals and approach. Groups don't become teams just because that is what someone calls them: The best teams invest a large amount of time in shaping their own purpose that they can own and translate that purpose into specific performance goals so that members can become accountable with and to their own teammates (Katzenbach and Smith, 2008).

The dynamic dysfunctions of teams

Ultimately, an effective team is worth more than the sum of its parts; yet, not all teams succeed all the time. According to Scoro (2017), 75% of cross-functional teams are dysfunctional. In the book, *the five dysfunctions of a team*, which has sold over two million copies, Lencioni (2006) highlights the root causes of politics, inability to deliver and dysfunctions of teams as the key problems plaguing teams that underperform—slightly paraphrased below—as:

Absence of trust: The fear of vulnerability in front of other team members prevents the building of trust within the team

Fear of conflict: Productive conflict is avoided in order to preserve an artificial harmony

Lack of commitment: The absence of buy-in from the team, or the lack of clarity about objectives, prevents team members from making crucial decisions needed to support and deliver the mission

Avoidance of accountability: In order to avoid interpersonal discomfort team members do not hold each other accountable

Inattention to results: The pursuit of individual goals, agendas and personal status erodes the focus on collective and ultimate success

Teamwork has the potential to become a sustainable competitive advantage that organisations can control. Indeed, overcoming the dysfunctions is possible. Teams are designed to achieve the results they set out to achieve. Improving team performance requires attention and effort to address the key dysfunctions. Teams that perform well display a more advanced set of teamwork characteristics. In particular, Lencioni (2005; p. 7) notes the following (summarised and slightly paraphrased) aspects:

- Team members trust one another and are comfortable being vulnerable with each other about their weaknesses, mistakes, fears, concerns and behaviours; they are also happy to tap into each other's skills, expertise and experience
- Because they trust each other, team members can engage in passionate dialogue around critical issues and decisions

- By being open and engaging in dialogue, they are able to achieve genuine buy-in, even following initial disagreements
- As they commit to making decisions, team members are comfortable holding each other accountable, instead of relying on the team leader as the main source of accountability
- They are therefore more likely to set aside their individual agendas and needs, and focus instead on doing what is needed to secure team success

Lencioni suggests that the first key question to ask is '*are we really a team?*':
'Sometimes a team improvement effort is doomed from the start because the group going through it isn't really a team at all... You see a team is a relatively small number of people that shares common goals as well as rewards and responsibilities for achieving them. Team members readily set aside their individual or personal needs for the greater good of the group.' (Lencioni, 2005; p. 9)

The second question is; '*are we ready for the heavy lifting?*'.
Teams have great advantages, but they can only be achieved through commitment and investment from the individual members.

In subsequent work, Lencioni (2016) concludes that the ideal team player has three major traits or virtues that impact the team's success: humility, hunger and people smarts. This combination of traits distinguishes individuals capable of contributing to a team effort and accelerates the process of building high performing teams.

The return of trust

From the early cave dwellers and hunter-gatherers, humans have long understood the value of collaboration. Collaboration emphasises the purposeful nature of a partnership where all parties strategically elect to cooperate in order to attain a mutually desirable outcome or a particular benefit (Dalcher, 2016b; p. 1). However, the design of the ideal, or the perfect team, requires deeper consideration of the qualities of participants.

Improving the performance of teams is a life-long mission for many organisations. Google has invested a small fortune in trying to optimise their internal teams. Their working assumption was that creating the best teams would require bringing together the best individuals and matching their skills. Google measures most aspects of their employees' lives. In 2012 they launched Project Aristotle, interviewing hundreds of individuals working in over 200 teams across the organisation. While they recorded individual traits, skills and team habits, the results did not yield any insights regarding the perfect mix required to underpin the best teams. Having discovered no discernible patterns, the group turned to group norms, the traditions, behavioural standards and unspoken rules that are used by teams. Yet, even the group norms seemed inconsistent across the different teams, until the researchers stumbled upon the concept of *psychological safety* identified by Professor Amy Edmondson from Harvard Business School. Psychological safety refers to the shared belief that the team provides a safe environment for interpersonal risk taking; a team climate characterised by

interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which team members feel empowered to speak, question decisions and participate without fear of being judged or punished.

Psychological safety allows team members to share personal insights as well as feelings, thoughts and concerns. Psychological safety relies on trust between team members as the most fundamental ingredient in collective endeavours (Dalcher, 2017; p. 1). When revisiting the data, Google discovered that the best teams provided a safe space for members to talk to each other, listen and share.

Google now defines psychological safety as the most important factor in building a successful team. It is less to do with how the team is put together, or the identity of the members, and more with how the members interact with and relate to one another and is viewed as making the greatest difference to team dynamics.

The five key dynamics identified as essential to team performance by the Google research team are described below (Rozovsky, 2015):

Psychological safety: Team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other

Dependability: Team members count on each other to get things done

Structure & clarity: Team members have clear roles, goals, and execution plans

Meaning of work: Work is personally important to team members

Impact of work: Team members believe their work is significant and creates change

While all factors are viewed as important, psychological safety underpins the other four and is essential in enabling the team to perform effectively and succeed.

'A team is not a group of people who work together. A team is a group of people who trust each other.' – Simon Sinek

Robbins & Finley (2000; p. 156) used the metaphor of blood to represent the critical importance of trust in teams: *'Trust is the blood of teams. The river that carries it along, that pulses with life, that brings thought and power to everything the team attempts.'*

Who is packing your parachute?

Trust is an essential to developing, growing and sustaining teams. Reflecting on his experience as the commander of the US forces in Afghanistan in the mid-2000s, General Stanley McChrystal devised the notion of Team of Teams (McChrystal et al., 2015). McChrystal discovered himself facing an enemy organised in flat networks that enabled it to regularly change, adapt and reconfigure itself. To combat the enemy, McChrystal investigated the ideas of complex systems and thereby recognised the need to transit

from a fixed and cumbersome traditional military hierarchy towards a set of dynamic teams operating as high performance teams.

McChrystal synthesised his (slightly paraphrased below) principles for creating high performing adaptive teams as having:

- A clear and common purpose
- The Freedom to speak your mind
- The ability and trust to make decisions
- A shared consciousness around value and what 'good' looks like
- Trust in the capabilities, knowledge and intentions of other members
- Leading like a gardener by focusing on the creation of a nurturing and supportive environment in which good work can take place, without the need to task-manage

The power of teams is also reflected in having the ability of different members of the team to deal responsibly with all the required aspects and prepare for the normal contingencies of any situation.

Joseph Charles Plumb was a US Navy jet pilot during the Vietnam War, who successfully completed 75 successful combat missions. On his next mission, he managed to bail out just before his plane was hit by a surface-to-air missile. He parachuted into enemy territory and was captured and held in a prisoner of war camp for over six years.

Years later he was dining in the US with his wife, when a man seated at another table came over and said ' *You're Plumb! You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You were shot down!*

Plumb was intrigued and asked '*how in the world, did you know that?*'

'I packed your parachute', the stranger replied.

Plumb jumped up in surprise and hugged the man.

'I guess it worked', the stranger continued.

Plumb was quick to reassure him: '*It sure did. If your chute hadn't worked I wouldn't be here today'*.

Plumb spent the next sleepless night reflecting on the stranger who saved his life. As a fighter pilot he would have ignored the mere sailor in a white uniform. The sailor must have spent many hours in the bowels of the ship folding the silk parachutes over wooden desks. Yet, Plumb was grateful for his dedication and ability to carry out his duties in a professional manner. Plumb also recognised that he needed many different parachutes to get through his ordeal, including his physical parachute, as well as a mental parachute, emotional parachute and spiritual parachute.

We all have team members, and indeed other support teams who provide specialist services acting for the greater good. We often take their presence and good will on trust. We never hear about them precisely because, things often work out as intended. If we get to know them, or hear about them, it is probably because some thing went wrong. Their success criteria may well be to 'never make the news' (i.e. always delivering a service that does not draw attention to itself through failure or absence).

We could look around us and try to reflect on all the teams and unsung heroes that silently provide uninterrupted and perfectly reliable parachute services. Indeed, it is a sobering thought to ask yourself periodically 'who is packing my parachute?'

Creative teams

What about the success of teams?

The work context is becoming increasingly more challenging as professionals and teams encounter a faster changing world replete with seemingly unprecedented levels of uncertainty, turbulence, novelty, and ambiguity. Moreover, the complexity of many undertakings is also on the increase requiring faster learning, skilful adaptation and well considered experimentation. The implication is that to operate successfully, teams would require greater flexibility, an expanding diversity of potential responses and amplified agility and resilience skills that underpin their abilities to explore, make sense of, respond to and benefit from variations, change and opportunities.

A recent article in the Harvard Business Review reasons that cognitive diversity in a team leads to speedier problem solving. Reynolds and Lewis (2017) have studied how well executive teams could complete a strategic execution task under time pressure. Their conclusion is that diversity in age, ethnicity and gender has little, if any, impact on a team's ability to navigate complex or novel situations. However, the cognitive diversity, which they define as the '*differences in perspective or information processing style*' (Ibid; p. 2) is critical to dictating how successful a given team would be at solving a problem.

The early results from the 12-year study indicate that diverse teams, involving a mix of thinking styles outperformed mentally homogenous teams. Indeed, some of the teams where all members had the same thinking style never finished the task. Reynolds and Lewis conclude that '*tackling new challenges requires a balance between applying what we know and discovering what we don't know that may be useful. It also requires individual application of specialised expertise and the ability to step back and look at the bigger picture.*' (ibid.; p. 4)

Homogenous teams will tend to apply similar logic and fail to identify and utilise alternative resolution approaches and diverse perspectives, which could be limiting, particularly in challenging contexts and novel situations. A high degree of cognitive diversity allows exploration of alternative routes and methods and the introduction of alternative perspectives and considerations whilst also generating accelerated learning and improved performance.

Peter Cook, our guest author is also concerned about the new dimensions of change in modern contexts. His contribution is developed from his recent book *Brain Based Enterprises: Harmonising the Head, Heart and Soul of Business*, published by Routledge. Cook draws upon his unique expertise as a leader of Human Dynamics, a creativity and innovation consultancy, his research career as the leader of global medical research teams and the creator of the Academy of Rock, fusing business leadership with music. With his unique background and reputation as an innovator and deep thinker, Cook is both an agent provocateur, constantly challenging the status quo, and the epitome of cognitive diversity enabled through the blending of different approaches and perspectives for viewing the world.

In an increasingly demanding world, Cook views intelligence, ideas and innovation as the three core currencies of sustainable progress which can be harnessed to encourage improvement. He identifies an unprecedented level of convergence between humanity and technology introducing a new level of man-machine dynamic. The convergence requires a rethinking of the relationship and adjustments to the practices we apply in the real world. His approach is to emphasise the role of brainy people, brainy teams and brainy enterprises, and his current contribution is focused on the role and impact of brainy teams. The distinction also allows Cook to address different levels of capability, which he positions as personal intelligence, collective intelligence and global intelligence. He thus offers a new level of diversity alongside a sensitivity to the abilities of people in teams and enterprises and a keen interest in augmenting and fusing capabilities with new technologies.

Cook addresses some of the key topics in teams including levels of connectedness, team diversity, team chemistry and team transparency often re-focusing attention around collaboration in innovative activities and novel contexts. Teams can make themselves more intelligent (and increase their diversity) through networking and leveraging their knowledge, expertise, connections and experiences. Leading teams in the age of intelligence requires new skills of facilitation, engagement and influencing (Cook, 2018; p. xiv). At the enterprise level there is also a greater need for improvisation, agility and responsiveness – and the liberation of the head, heart and soul, inspired by ideas from the art world.

Not surprisingly, Cook agitates for a more responsible agenda, both in terms of our interactions with machines and technology, as well as the social and sustainable dimensions of our actions. As part of his wider agenda he advocates the replacement of Michael Porter's notion of *competitive advantage* with the idea of *sustainable cooperative advantage* through the incorporation of aspects of cooperative behaviour and sustainability considerations. The idea of intelligent teams can thus be offered as a new foundation for considering the power and success of teams through encouraging a new emphasis on cooperation, collaboration, sharing and increased knowledge assets, perspectives and capabilities available for teams to utilise. The result may well be the creation and development of more effective and better-informed teams capable of delivering in and responding to our rapidly changing world.

Teaming for success

Harvard Business School professor, Amy Edmondson maintains that organisational success and failure is dependent on a team's ability to 'team' – to learn and adapt to the environment and each other. She offers the example of the Water Cube, the magnificent 340,000 square foot box framed in steel and covered with semi-transparent, eco-efficient blue bubbles, hosting the swimming and diving events at the Beijing 2012 Olympic Games. The water Cube won prestigious engineering and design awards and cost an estimated 10.2 billion Yuan.

'The goal was clear: Build an iconic structure to reflect Chinese culture, integrate with the site, and minimize energy consumption—on time and within budget. But how to do it all was less clear' (Edmondson, 2012; 72-74).

Increasingly demanding challenges call for new approaches and new levels of engagement. Tristram Carfrae, an Arup structural engineer based in Sydney brought together a team of experts from 20 disciplines and four countries to deliver the special building. However, the undertaking required new approaches to managing projects and teams.

'Success depended on bridging dramatically different national, organizational and occupational cultures to collaborate in fluid groupings that emerged and dissolved in response to needs that were identified as the work progressed' (Edmondson, 2012; 74).

Instead of using established teams, the strategy called for *teaming*; gathering experts in temporary groups as needed to solve problems as and when they emerge. The leader's job under such circumstances is not to manage the team, or support it, but to inspire and enable teaming in the right configurations needed to progress the joint purpose. Teaming can therefore emerge and evolve as members, specialists and stakeholders pull together and respond to what arises from the targeted pursuit of the intended purpose.

Teaming is not a noun but a new way of life, a continuous effort to undertake and complete a bigger and more complex undertaking that can only be understood as the details emerge and the opportunities are explored. Teaming implies a constantly shifting membership, albeit with a diversity of perspectives as necessitated by the conditions uncovered and the ideas being pursued.

Edmondson advocates a move from teams to 'teaming', replacing stable project teams with a flexible form of teamwork, by gathering diverse experts from different domains and specialisms into temporary groups to address emerging progress, problems and opportunities and enable a form of learning as we progress.

'Teaming helps individuals acquire knowledge, skills and networks. And it lets companies accelerate the delivery of current products and services while responding quickly to new opportunities, Teaming is a way to get work done while figuring out how to do it better; it's executing and learning at the same time.' (ibid.,; 74).

Teaming is ideal for complex, uncertain, novel and turbulent settings, where immense levels of learning and sense making are needed. It fosters diversity of perspectives and approaches by considering ideas from multiple domains and areas and enables better informed and more inclusive and intelligent solutions to be proposed, trialled and implemented.

The key challenges in teaming (paraphrased from, Edmondson, 2012; p. 78) are:

- Multiple functions must work together; so conflict may arise
- People are geographically dispersed; so communication difficulties and time zone differences present logistical difficulties
- Relationships are temporary; so there is little time to build trust and mutual understanding
- No two projects are alike; so no precedents exist
- The work can be uncertain and chaotic; so fluid situations are in need of constant communication and coordination

Nonetheless, the potential benefits are also enormous and include (ibid.):

- Innovation from combined skills and perspectives
- Boundary spanning solutions
- Developing an understanding of other disciplines
- Broader perspective
- Greater alignment across divisions
- Extensive networks of collaborations
- Ability to meet changing customer needs
- Flexibility and agility
- Ability to import ideas from other contexts
- Ability to manage unexpected events
- Experimentation

The key principles required for successful teaming would be quite familiar (adapted from, (ibid.; 80-81)):

Emphasising purpose: By articulating what is at stake, particularly for diverse and wide-ranging teaming arrangements

Building psychological safety: Required to enable rapid sharing and trust building

Embracing failure: Novelty courts failures as well as new learning opportunities

Putting conflict to work: Diversity will foster differences and conflict can be used to tease out new ideas and perspectives

TEAM = Together Everyone Achieves More

The value of teams and their key contribution can be summarised through a number of quotes:

'We talk a lot about hope, helping, and teamwork. Our whole message is that we are more powerful together.'
– Victoria Osteen

Reflecting a greater responsibility towards wider society is becoming an essential part of contemporary thinking:

'Cooperation is the thorough conviction that nobody can get there unless everybody gets there.'
– Virginia Burden

Looking back may enable us to develop a more enlightened and reliable path to a less certain future...

Teams have played a key part in enabling human achievement and collective development over our entire history. Ultimately, *teaming* may provide the next step by: offering a more intelligent and informed approach for drawing from a vastly superior pool of knowledge and perspectives; responding to opportunities and maximising the sustainable value of our engagements; and developing a more responsible and inclusive basis for making decisions, addressing concerns and driving our future endeavours, and thereby enabling sustainable and enduring progress.

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