

What makes teams work?

A review of Managers' and Chair persons' ideas of how a team can contribute to the success of an organisation



Ray Oglethorpe

President, AOL Technologies

What's the secret to a great team? Think small. Ideally, your team should have 7 to 9 people. If you have more than 15 or 20, you're dead: The connections between team members are too hard to make.

Two and a half years ago, AOL was feeling hamstrung at the technologies level. There was a bottleneck at the top. We decided to make that division team based, and created core teams that were empowered to make decisions about products.

It was the best thing that we could have done. The core teams spun off satellite teams (also made up of small groups of people) that focused on specific projects, with specific goals and expectations.

The management challenge is to understand that the people who report to you may get most of their direction from another person or from several other people: their team leaders. And people can be on more than one team, of course. It's the manager's job to think about whether this person is being stretched too thin, or whether that person needs some special training.

Size is the key. Have the smallest number of people possible on each team. Another rule: no delegates. You don't want people who have to take the team's ideas back to someone else to get authorisation. You want the decision makers.

Jon Katzenbach

Senior partner

Katzenbach Partners LCC

New York

Teams work when they are created for the right reasons, and when they are created in the right way. The organisation that I think does the best job of meeting these requirements is the U.S. Marine Corps. Most people think of the USMC as a command-and-control organisation. But when they put a team together, it's in the right place for the right reasons. The corps is extremely disciplined about assessing whether it really needs a team for the task at hand. The notion that a team is always better is misleading, yet all too often, that's the path that managers choose.

The critical decision for any manager or leader who wants to get higher performance from a small group of people is determining whether the group should try to work as a team, or whether they should be satisfied with what I call "single-leader unit" discipline. Single-leader units are intrinsically faster and more efficient than teams. Tasks are more clearly defined by one leader, and members work on their own much of the time.

Most organisations proliferate with groups that call themselves teams but aren't. It's too common for single-leader units to be labelled as teams, and it's disturbing how many managers and leaders assume that being a team is what a group effort is all about. That's a confusing, frustrating, and costly assumption. And it causes big problems in the workplace. If a group tries to become a team when the performance challenge requires a single-leader approach, performance and morale suffer. The opposite is equally true. In fact, both miscues produce the dreaded "compromise-unit syndrome": weak leadership, low levels of commitment, wasted time, and poor performance results.

Martha Rogers

Partner

Peppers and Rogers Group

You can't say, "teams work because of this" or "teams don't work because of that" -- because it depends. But if you're looking for one quality that most good teams share, I'd have to say that it's the culture of the company in which the team exists. Is the culture one that rewards groups? Is it one that rewards individuals? Or is it a culture where no one gets rewarded? Look around. Watch how people act and interact, regardless of whether they're on a team. Do people do things for one another? Do they pick up coffee for others when they're going out? If the culture is full of give and take -- if it's supportive and trusting -- there's a good chance that you'll see successful teams at work.

It's also important that the leaders and the members of good teams have realistic expectations of motive. Sometimes I work with teams that are made up of people from all different areas of a company, with leaders who expect that each team member is going to put aside his or her own personal goals and work selflessly for the common good. Not realistic.

People from different parts of a company are going to have disparate styles, expectations, and reward systems. The best teams have leaders who recognise those differences. Communism has fallen all over the world, and it doesn't work for teams either.

Tony DiCicco

Former head coach

U.S. Women's World Cup Champion Soccer Team,
and gold-medal winning 1996 U.S. Women's Olympic Soccer Team
Wethersfield, Connecticut

To have a successful team, you must have a shared culture. My team's culture is largely built on fitness, intensity in training, individual respect, and respect for the group -- both on and off the field. You know you have a good team member when she arrives at training camp fit and ready to play. That kind of preparation shows respect -- for herself and for her fellow team members.

I'd also put an emphasis on leadership. When Brandi Chastain scored a devastating goal for the other team last summer, team captain Carla Overbeck walked right up to her and told her, "Brandi, we have 85 minutes to get that goal back. We need you focused and fully into the game. Let's play."

A long-term team must have a way for new people to join in successfully. To survive, new players have to buy into the team's culture. However, your current team members can't be afraid of new talent or new ideas.

The natural inclination is to protect what you have and not allow a new star to rise to the top. Team members have to fight against that. The bottom line is that new talent can force everyone to play at a higher level.

One time, Michelle Akers was telling someone what happens when a new player joins the team. She said, "Tony wants us to be real nice to her. And we are. But then the next day we kick the shit out of her on the field. We want to show her what we're made of."

When I retired, I told the team, "First, never forget how it felt in the final against China last summer when you regained your world-champion status. Second, never forget how it felt in 1996 when the Olympic Gold Medal was placed around your neck. Third, never forget hearing the final whistle blow in Sweden in 1995, when you knew you had been beaten by Norway. Remember all three situations, because each offers incredible motivation."

Janine Bay

Director of vehicle personalisation for automotive consumer-services group
Ford Motor Co.
Dearborn, Michigan

A team should be made up of people who have different opinions about things, people who approach their work in different ways. Diversity is one of the keys to a successful team. But I'm sure that on every good team, a member has gone home at the end of a day thinking, "This isn't going to work."

So my advice is this: Bring in a facilitator. Someone from the outside -- an unbiased third party -- may have insights about what's working, what's not, and why you are just too close to the project to see clearly. A facilitator may be just what team members need to make the most of their diversity, and to help them overcome any personal agendas or conflicts.

At Ford, we always have team-effectiveness coaches on hand. It's an unusual skill set for Ford, but the coaches are available and invaluable. I'd recommend that you get some.

Thomas C. Leppert

Chairman and CEO
Turner Corp.
Dallas, Texas

A successful team boils down to two things: mutual respect among team members and a common vision about where the team is going.

At Turner, we are completely dependent on teams -- not only on teams that exist within the organisation, but also on teams that are made up of all sorts of people from the outside, such as architects, designers, and suppliers.

We put teams together to build stadiums and commercial high-rises. Sometimes those teams are easier to manage because there's a clear sense of what the outcome should be. But we also put internal teams together to work on smaller-scale projects, such as figuring out what our new operating system should look like. Those sorts of teams can be more difficult to create and sustain, because the expected results aren't as clear. But in the end, it boils down to those two elements. Respect. A common vision. That's what you need.

Michael Schrage

Codirector
MIT Media Labs eMarkets Initiative
Executive director
Merrill Lynch's Innovation Grants Competition
Cambridge, Massachusetts

I view teams sceptically, because so many organisations treat them cynically. Teamwork has become a euphemism for organisational politics. Guess what? People sense the dishonesty there. People aren't stupid. They know when they're being used.

The tough question that managers need to answer isn't, "How do we build better teams?" The question is "What kind of conversations and interactions do we want to create?" Innovative managers understand that they must do more than manage people. They need to manage the interactions between people. That's not a subtle distinction. The best managers get their people to interact in creative ways.

H. David Aycock

Former chairman, CEO, and president
Nucor Corp.

There are seven key ingredients to building a successful team.

Number one, the mission must be clearly defined and articulated, and everybody has to understand it. That includes an understanding of the project's purpose, the strategy for getting the work accomplished, the ultimate goal, the benefits people will receive if the goal is met, the measurement system that's going to be used, and how differences of opinion (or other conflicts) are going to be handled.

Number two, all team members have to be positive thinkers. A team just can't function with an excuse-driven, "no-can-do" member on board.

Number three, selfish people spell doom for a team effort.

Number four, each team member must have enough self-confidence and self-respect to respect other team members.

Number five, the team leader must always be on the lookout for distractions, tangents, and unproductive or ancillary issues. If the leader spots the project going astray, it's his or her responsibility to get it back on track -- fast.

Number six, each member must trust the motives of the other members.

Number seven, the team has to be as small as possible. If you have more people than are absolutely necessary on a team, members will start functioning like a committee.

Millard Fuller

Founder and president
Habitat for Humanity International

The most essential ingredient of a successful team is a cause that everyone agrees on. In our case, it's providing housing for low-income families -- people who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford a home. We operate with what we call the "theology of the hammer." People may differ religiously or politically, but we can all agree on a hammer as a way to help people in need.

The second essential ingredient is preparation. In our case, that means doing all of the background work: having all of the materials, plumbers, electricians, and so forth scheduled to be on-site. That way, the work goes smoothly, because as soon as the volunteers arrive, they have something productive to do and someone there who is qualified to show them how to do it.

We've had so many different types of people working together to build Habitat houses as part of one team or another. A company's CEO and janitor can be on the same team. And you know what? It's good for both of them.

Nobody works for nothing. Some people work for money, and some people work for recognition. But I'll tell you this: People will stick out an unpleasant assignment, but they won't do it again. We have a great record because it's a good experience. Everyone who works on a Habitat house gets something of value out of it. That's an important part of building a lasting team.

Jonathan Roberts

Managing director and partner
Ignition Corp.
Bellevue, Washington

Teams mostly come down to the classic "good guy" question: If everyone on the team is able to say "I can work with this person" about everyone else on the team, then you've got a good thing going.

Generally, a good fit starts with shared values. Are the team members passionate about the work that they're going to be doing together? Are they going to try to game one another in some way? Are they political animals? Or are they straight and true? Are they humble when it's appropriate to be humble? There's going to be contention on any team. That's to be expected. But at the end of the day, team members have to like one another -- and they have to like what they're doing.

When I'm assessing a team, I use my "three 'P' " test. The "P"s stand for people, process, and product. If everyone on the team isn't clear about the product (whatever it is that you're trying to create) and the process (how you're going to get where you need to be, who drives what, who is the ultimate decision maker), then there are going to be people problems. Whenever I go into a tumultuous situation, I always step back and ask, "What are we trying to build here?" Then I ask, "How are we trying to build it?" Usually, debugging those two issues will clarify what the people problem is all about. If not, you've got a fit problem.

Mike Maerz

Cofounder, chairman, and CEO
Retrieve Inc.
Hillsboro, Oregon

Four things characterise a great team. One, the team members must be galvanised by a common goal. That's what spurs people on and drives them to excel. Two, the members need to be driven by the team's results, not by individual results. For that to happen, you have to deal with the whole compensation issue. People must be able to subordinate their own goals -- realistically -- in favour of team goals. Three, the team has to be diverse. The team should be made up of people who think differently too -- intuitive thinkers as well as logical thinkers. Four, on the best teams, no one hesitates to act out of a fear that what they're about to do isn't in their area of responsibility. Good team players take action. They don't stew about whether it's their job or about whether they're going to offend someone.

There are some common pitfalls in team building. But they're mostly the inverse of the characteristics that I just mentioned. The biggest one is not having a well-defined common goal. A lot of work environments are so fast-paced that people don't take the time that they should to agree on common goals. They get lost in the tactics before they figure out what they're trying to accomplish. Then the team runs like an engine that's totally out of whack. The pieces don't operate together the way that they should, and eventually -- usually pretty quickly -- the whole thing just breaks down.

Aaron Cohen

CEO

Concrete Inc.

New York, New York

This moment in history is about individual collaborative thinking. That's almost an oxymoron. But it means that people need to be fiercely independent and intensely collaborative at the same time.

Teamwork is at the heart of the creative energy of the Internet industry. It's important to take advantage of each player's best insights, but we'll all get farther, faster, if we work together to solve problems.

Today's companies need lots of aspiring leaders. That doesn't mean that a company needs to have 15 chief executives, but it does mean that the top manager has to know how to check his or her ego and encourage everyone else to do what he or she does best.

Great teams operate without their members knowing what's going to happen to them in the future. The key is that each individual has a belief in the others that enables him or her to carry through. Members need to believe that everyone is working toward a common goal.

Frank Jones

Chairman

Jones & Di Meo

Cambridge, England

Given a group of talented people and a project that is worthy, it's the leader who makes a team succeed.

In theatre and in sports, teams get a chance to practice a lot before the main event takes place. It should be the same in the corporate world. A good team leader will create an environment in which people can practice and make mistakes before they're pressured to produce.

A skilled leader will also focus on managing the interactions between people, as opposed to managing individual behavior. That allows individuals to manage their own behavior.

A good leader recognises that everyone is competitive to some degree. He or she is careful to accentuate people's different strengths, rather than stigmatise them for their weaknesses. There's no need to stop people from competing, but that rivalry has to be channelled into cooperative competitiveness.

The idea is for the team leader to be at the service of the group. It should be clear that the team members own the outcome. The leader is there to bring intellectual, emotional, and spiritual resources to the team. Through his or her actions, the leader should be able to show the others how to think about the work that they're doing in the context of their lives. It's a tall order, but the best teams have such leaders.