

The Importance of Teaming

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Managers need to stop thinking of teams as static groups of individuals who have ample time to practice interacting successfully and efficiently, says Amy Edmondson in her new book, *Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy*. The reason: Today's corporate teams band and disband by the minute, requiring a more dynamic approach to how teams absorb knowledge.

***Editor's note:** Many managers are taught to think of teams as carefully designed, static groups of individuals who, like a baseball team or improv comedy troupe, have ample time to practice interacting successfully and efficiently. The truth is, most corporate project teams don't have the temporal luxury. Teams are often disbanded before they have a chance to gel, as individual members are delegated to new projects—and therefore new teams—on a hectic as-need basis.*

HBS Professor Amy Edmondson maintains that managers should think in terms of "teaming"—actively building and developing teams even as a project is in process, while realizing that a team's composition may change at any given moment. Teaming, she says, is essential to organizational learning. She elaborates on this concept in her new book, "Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy."

"Teaming calls for developing both affective (feeling) and cognitive (thinking) skills," she writes. "Enabled by distributed leadership, the purpose of teaming is to expand knowledge and expertise so that organizations and their customers can capture the value."

In the following excerpt, Edmondson describes the concept of teaming and explains its importance to today's corporate environment.



In today's complex and volatile business environment, corporations and organizations also win or lose by creating wholes that are greater than the sum of their parts. Intense competition, rampant unpredictability, and a constant need for innovation are giving rise to even greater interdependence and thus demand even greater levels of collaboration and communication than ever before. Teaming is essential to an organization's ability to respond to opportunities and to improve internal processes. This chapter aims to deepen your understanding of why teaming and the behaviors it requires are so crucial for organizational success in today's environment. To help illuminate the teaming process and its benefits, the chapter defines teaming, places it within a historical context, and presents a new framework for understanding organizational learning and process knowledge, and explains why these are important concepts for today's leaders.

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TEAMING IS A VERB

Sports teams and musical groups are both bounded, static collections of individuals. Like most work teams in the past, they are physically located in the same place while practicing or performing together. Members of these teams learn how to interact. They've developed trust and know each other's roles. Advocating stable boundaries, well-designed tasks, and thoughtfully composed membership, many seminal theories of organizational effectiveness explained how to design and manage just these types of static performance teams.

“Teaming is a verb. It is a dynamic activity, not a bounded, static entity.” Harvard psychologist Richard Hackman, a preeminent scholar of team effectiveness, established the power of team structures in enabling team performance. According to this influential perspective, well-designed teams are those with clear goals, well-designed tasks that are conducive to teamwork, team members with the right skills and experiences for the task, adequate resources, and access to coaching and support. Get the design right, the theory says, and the performance will take care of itself. This model focused on the team as an entity, looking largely within the well-defined bounds of a team to explain its performance. Other research, notably conducted by MIT Professor Deborah Ancona, showed that how much a team's members interact with people outside the team boundaries was also an important factor in team performance. Both perspectives worked well in guiding the design and management of effective teams, at least in contexts where managers had the lead-time and the run-time to invest in composing stable, well-designed teams.

In these prior treatments, team is a noun. A team is an established, fixed group of people cooperating in pursuit of a common goal. But what if a team disbands almost as quickly as it was assembled? For example, what if you work in an emergency services facility where the staffing changes every shift, and the team changes completely for every case or client? What if you're a member of a temporary project team formed to solve a unique production problem? Or you're part of a group of managers with a mix of individual and shared responsibilities? How do you create synergy when you lack the advantages offered by the frequent drilling and practice sessions of static performance teams like those in sports and music?

The answer lies in **teaming**.

Teaming is a verb. It is a dynamic activity, not a bounded, static entity. It is largely determined by the mindset and practices of teamwork, not by the design and structures of effective teams. Teaming is teamwork on the fly. It involves coordinating and collaborating without the benefit of stable team structures, because many operations like hospitals, power plants, and military installations require a level of staffing flexibility that makes stable team composition rare. In a growing number of organizations, the constantly shifting nature of work means that many teams disband almost as soon as they've formed. You could be working on one team right now, but in a few days, or even a few minutes, you may be on another team.

Fast moving work environments need people who know how to team, people who have the skills and the flexibility to act in moments of potential collaboration when and where they appear. They must have the ability to move on, ready for the next such moments. Teaming still relies upon old-fashioned teamwork skills such as recognizing and clarifying interdependence, establishing trust, and figuring out how to coordinate. But

GROUPS AND TEAMS

MANAGEMENT TEAMS

PERFORMANCE EFFECTIVENESS

there usually isn't time to build a foundation of familiarity through the careful sharing of personal history and prior experience, or the development of shared experiences through practice working together. Instead, people need to develop and use new capabilities for sharing crucial knowledge quickly. They must learn to ask questions clearly and frequently. They must make the small adjustments through which different skills and knowledge are woven together into timely products and services.

Why should managers care about teaming? The answer is simple. Teaming is the engine of organizational learning. By now, everyone knows that organizations need to learn how to thrive in a world of continuous change. But *how* organizations learn is not as well understood. As discussed later in this chapter, organizations are complex entities; many are globally distributed, most encompass multiple areas of expertise, and nearly all engage in a variety of activities. What does it mean for such a complex entity to "learn"? An organization cannot engage in a learning process in any meaningful sense—not in the way an individual can. Yet, when individuals learn, this does not always create change in the ways the organization delivers products and services to customers. This is a conundrum that has long fascinated academics.

This book offers a practical answer to the question of how organizational learning really happens: Through teaming. Products and services are provided to customers by interdependent people and processes. Crucial learning activities must take place, within those smaller, focused units of action, for organizations to improve and innovate. In spite of the obvious need for change, most large enterprises are still managed according to a powerful mindset I call organizing to execute.

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COMMENTS

GERARD BREMAULT CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, THE CENTRE FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Resonates strongly, especially with my experience around new and dynamic projects such as the establishment of our "Sophie's Place" Child Advocacy Centre that brings together multiple parties in a new configuration. Strongly agree with your assertions that, "Teaming is a verb. It is a dynamic activity, not a bounded, static entity" and that, "people who have the skills and the flexibility to act in moments of potential collaboration when and where they appear". Thank you as always Professor Edmondson for the valuable insights!

ANONYMOUS

First I must state I only read the article about the book not the book, so my comments are incomplete & possibly off-base. I am very interested in many of the concepts presented and appreciate the forum that allows the sharing of these information topics.

While I agree with many of the concepts & justifications given that drive an organization to form teams, however, I disagree with the notion that successful teams can be "dynamic", or the notion of "teaming on the fly" as viable concepts. I think these ideas lack the psychological foundation of what makes a team and develops trust between the "players". Fundamental to the formation of a team is "identity". Whether it is the "Sharks" vs. the "Jets" in Westside Story or any other. There is the psychological need to belong to something. Then there is the aspect of trust. Each player needs to know their role and trust that the other will perform theirs. Trust is built on familiarity and a developed respect for each player to do their part and I might add self-sacrifice to help or pick-up the slack when your teammate falters.

Failure to recognize these facts can be traced to many things. I would offer the comparison to modern medical teams that operate this way, however, these are the recreational equivalent of a pick-up game of basketball at the park. The participants know medicine and how to do their particular function, just as the players know how to dribble & shoot, but because they are not together all the time they don't know their tendencies. There is no trust factor that is developed. Their responsibility is only to their own objective, that is, do their job and hand it off to the next.

You can call any group of things a team and they can set goals, etc., but the ability of that group to function effectively is a factor of many intangibles.

Therefore, I would claim that teams built "on the fly" have no real investment in team success but intrinsically have only their personal performance-outcome at risk. Certainly, not the patient's or big-picture outcome.

PEDRO SANCHEZ DIRECTOR, CONSTRUCTION COMPANY

This article is too interesting for organizations, the main problem inside them is always the specialization of their powerful to realize one activity. It is not always the best way to manage an organization specially when we are depending on the rule of just one person. It sounds difficult to have a team where everyone had the same resources and abilities to execute every kind of tasks that organization is needing, but in theory a good enterprise would have. It would let it to improve, innovate and work in a team where everyone was worried about looking for new options to improve their work and walk on the same goal.

Regards

KAPIL KUMAR SOPORY COMPANY SECRETARY, SMEC(INDIA) PRIVATE LIMITED

The importance of teaming assumes great relevance as we recognise that projects and tasks cannot be completed single-handedly. A workable group-ideally cohesive-is put on the job which then progresses and rushes to the finale. A prudent management applies due thought to selection of team members who need to be possessing appropriate knowledge and skills with a good level of team spirit. The goal of the team has to be only to hit the target without diverting attention to matters not of direct relevance.

At times, there may arise unavoidable need to shift/change one or more team mates but it should be ensured that proper replacements are provided without delay so that the tasks do not suffer. Asking some from the team to shoulder more (additional) responsibility to cover the gap must be for a very short duration for otherwise performance will be substandard and delayed. Team leaders and the top management have to shoulder due responsibilities to see that teams deliver properly.

ALBERTO ZUIGA UNLA

This article gives a brief overview of what the team leaders and management have to do with the responsibilities owed to the company, briefly run the actions correctly.

The power workers will combine a practical enrichment which will take you to be versatile and not rely on one person for a position or activity.

Unfortunately, some companies do not perform and those that do come do not value the worker's performance, which must find a financial offer that suits you and loses the human capital of the company. But we must also take into account that the 1005 of the workers may combine in other areas, managers will have to see the profiles so you can make an informed choice.

OSWY GAYLE UNIVERSITY LECTURER, UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, JAMAICA

Excellent idea that teaming is a verb. This new assertion can help organizations understand that all those team costs will go to waste unless the nature of teams are understood. The future of organization will definitely be team-based as it helps with innovation, learning and overall growth. This new book by Professor Amy C. Edmondson can only add to our understanding of teams in organizations.

HARI GURU PROJECT MANAGER, KRAFT FOODS

On reading your article teaming in organisation only seems to happen with context of change i.e change management, continuous improvement, or EFQM excellence framework quality models. Traditional style of management needs breakthrough management in the fight to survive for profit, sales, funding and resource management to achieve world class status. Some world class organisation exist today due to policy development frameworks building on team culture, shared resources, global companies require strong communication leadership and teaming top down to keep pace of change, shared knowledge in teaming and learning. Myers Briggs MBTI requires teams to succeed based on indicators. When we talk about Quality frameworks we need teams without organisation just cannot improve performance or be world class a culture change have to happen

SACHIN CHAVAN STUDENT, VIDYALANKAR INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY MUMBAI

it was really a good article n it helps to the upcoming leaders.....
thank you...

**BABOLOKI REETSANG GENERAL MANAGER, BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, BOTSWANA
PUBLIC OFFICERS PENSION FUND**

I appreciate the points raised on the aspect of "teaming". I would like to make some comments on this topic as follows:

For teams to be effective and efficient, the speed at which knowledge is shared should be increased. This poses a challenge to both leaders and team members. For leaders they should learn how to impart the skill and knowledge to members of the team as fast as they can without compromising on the quality of the information. On the other hand, team members especially new members should be prepared to receive the information and internalize it as soon as possible. In a nutshell, increasing speed when imparting or digesting an idea and having an open mind will enhance team work.

**ULYSES U. PARDEY, MBA MANAGING DIRECTOR, AM-TECH, S.A., PANAMA, REP. OF
PANAMA**

The Importance of Teaming

Thank you for this article. It is very useful on a daily basis.

What I read in this article is what really happens very often when dealing with a business-project in the real world of corporations.

Thank you for the opportunity.



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