



## A Vital Role for Teams

**A Resurgence of Teams:** After World War II, the use of teams fell out of vogue as the era of the rugged individualist took a prominent role in this country. However, the last decade saw an increased emphasis on teams. This resurgence of teams was due in large part to the re-engineering boom of the early nineties. One of the promises of business process reengineering was that organizations could do more with less. The technique promoted a radical approach of gutting organizations of legacy processes and organizational structures.

**Re-engineering Removed Management Layers:** The executive vision included drastic reduction in costs and enormous efficiency gains. In addition to employee downsizing, rightsizing, optimizing, the reengineering reformation also set its sights directly on the ranks of middle management. This did not always involve a gentle process of de-layering; it often involved the wholesale removal of layers of middle management. However, executive management did not always account for the aftermath of the management-ectomy.

**Communications Vacuum:** Consider the following unexpected results.

1. The elimination of a layer of management left a void between two layers of management who did not interact on a frequent basis.
2. Communication between the subordinate layer of managers and the upper layer of managers evaporated. The middle layer of management no longer acted as the communications conduit between the upper and lower levels of management.
3. Span of control (i.e. the number of direct reports a manager has) tripled and quadrupled overnight.
4. Roles and responsibilities were no longer clear.
5. The resulting reporting structures became extremely complicated, and at the same time most people also feared for their jobs.

**Teams Offer a Solution:** One of the most effective and efficient ways to solve the two pending problems was the use of teams. Combining members from both layers of management into teams appeared to be a viable solution. The collaborative teams were able to stitch together the void in the knowledge gaps. Teams became effective at handling complex situations and were able to meet the business demands of the newly right-sized organization. One of the drawbacks of teams that was quickly realized was that team work did not give a lot of opportunities to recognize individual heroes. But as team productivity outstripped comparable productivity of non-team based workers, the use of teams became an optimized way to do work.

**Synergy:** Team building, as a technology, is not new. Most organizations are less hierarchical and more participative than they once were, both in composition and in operating philosophy. Since the resurgence of teams in the early nineties, most organizations are keenly aware of the phenomenon of synergy, that a team can accomplish much more than its individual members



can by working alone. In innovative organizations, the team is replacing the individual as the primary unit of focus. This emphasis on teams has been accompanied by the realization that teams take on lives of their own. And just as individual employees need feedback and development, teams also need care and feeding.

**SUMMARY:** 1. Teams fell out of favor after WW II yielding to the importance of the individual, 2. Teams returned to popularity during the re-engineering era, early '90s, as a way to facilitate management communications, 3. Most companies rely on teams as a vital work structure. 4. Innovative companies are using teams to gain competitive advantage.

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