



When is a Team a Team?

Teams are here to stay. Teams can bring many benefits to a project, an organization, and to individual team members. Teams have become a very effective structure for getting work done. The use of teams is so widespread that many organizations have found new uses for teams. Consider companies like Proctor & Gamble and IBM that are both highly dependent on research and development activities. In the past several years companies have discovered that using teams comprised of team members with very diverse skill sets and backgrounds, fuels innovation. As a result many companies dependent on new product development are using highly diverse teams to conduct research.

Teams in vogue: Not only has teamwork proved widely beneficial in meeting business objectives, teamwork has definitely become a vogue way to do work. As a result of this great affection for the use of teams, organizations do try to force the use of teams where they are not warranted. This does not typically result in disaster, but it does become a very frustrating experience for team members and managers. Alternatively, there are a number of situations where workgroups use the title team because of the collegiate connotation of the term, team.

When is a Team a Team? The challenge is to determine when a team is a team or when the use of a team is warranted. One of the inherent problems with doing any type of organizational diagnosis is that if it takes too long to accomplish, managers or team leaders have moved on to some other item of work, and the diagnosis loses any meaning or usefulness it might have had. In considering the use of teams, it would be helpful to be able to have a simple checklist to use to determine if a team is needed or if a team exists. The drawback to a checklist approach is a lack of thoroughness; however, the great advantage is speed. Ideally, the approach would be simple but elegant.

Team literature: Scanning team literature will yield a number of different models that are comprised of many elements that determine team composition. This article deals with a rapid, bare essentials approach to diagnosing teams. Teams require a specific set of characteristics. First, and possibly most important, a team must have a common purpose or common goal to achieve. Secondly, the work must be of such a nature that it produces an interdependency between members of the team. Third, the work must be complex. Last, the stakes must be high.

Common purpose: Without a common purpose people working together are just that, people working together. In order to constitute a team all the members of the team must have become enmeshed in accomplishing a common objective or attaining a common goal. This common purpose is also referred to as the team's mission or *raison d'être* (reason to be). This common purpose gives meaning to the team. The members of the team may be physically dispersed or they may have no day to day contact. Having a common purpose allows the team to work on different areas of the project, and sometimes in different locations, but at the same time work towards achieving the goal of the overarching project.

Interdependency: In order for a team to be required, the tasks or activities that comprise the work, or the project, itself, have to have an interrelated nature. The tasks are not all discrete. If the nature of the tasks makes them discrete then there is no requirement for a team. Consider a small technical project based on a customer request that involves development and delivery of



an enhancement to a current application. A project manager is assigned. Typically some analysis work has to be done, followed by some solution definition. The solution definition is translated into technical requirements followed by coding, documentation, integration, testing, and delivery into the customer's production environment. Several people are assigned to this project. Clearly all aspects of the work have close interdependencies to each other. Optimally, this work requires a team-structured approach to deliver the project.

Complex: Typically the work of teams deals with complex work. Teams bring together certain sets of specialized skills that provide expertise in the solution space of the problem to be solved. The team structure optimizes the use of specialized skills to solve complex problems. The complexity of the problem normally spans interdependencies between product functions or organizational boundaries. If the work were simple it would not necessarily require the use of a team. Consider the situation in which interdependencies exist, but the nature of the work is not complex. Based on skill level and learning aptitude of the team members, it is conceivable that single team members can perform multiple simple tasks, which of course obviates the need for a team approach.

Stakes: Teams tend to jell when the stakes are high. The stakes that the team is dealing with for a particular project, activity, or event are an external influence. Stakes deal with the business drivers or rewards or consequences associated with the project that the team is working on. In many cases, groups of people, with interdependent and complex tasks, come together with a common purpose, but the stakes are not high; the results produced are often unpredictable and tend to be mediocre. High-stakes tend to increase team performance. Although stakes are an external driver, they deal directly with the concepts of accountability and commitment. And team performance is directly influenced by individual team member's commitment and accountability.

Summary: 1. Teams are used as effective work structures in all aspects of our personal and professional lives. 2. Because of the overuse of the term "team" it is sometimes important to determine if team work is warranted. 3. For a team to be a team, at least four elements should be present:

1. Common purpose or mission
2. Interdependency
3. Complexity
4. Stakes

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