



Team working

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Although team working is increasingly important, we should **not assume that simply grouping people together makes them into a team**. There has been a great deal of research on teams and their dynamics and from this we can pick out some useful lessons on how to build and run successful teams.

The first point is to recognise that teams have **two sets of responsibilities** - those concerned with getting the job done (task) and those concerned with working well together (process). Unless we pay attention to both there is a good chance that the team simply performs like a collection of individuals. Imagine a football team with eleven strikers or goalkeepers - even if the combined merits of Beckham, Zidane and Ronaldo were there, there is no guarantee that the team would be effective. Instead there is a need for different roles and a mix of skills. So we need to have people who can carry out specific tasks well, and, depending on the job, have a spread across the range of task skills.

But that same football team also depends on their ability **to work together as a team** - to share, to anticipate, to sustain each other - and to celebrate when things go well and to support each other when they don't. All of these elements contribute to the sense of being a team and to being a unit that faces things together. This doesn't come about by accident but results from attention to 'process' issues, not so much about what the team does, or the individuals in it, as the ways in which they work together. There are roles associated with this - for example, it is often the captain's particular contribution to hold the team together, but there may also be particular characters, like the team's comedian or joker, who do things that help bind people together.

Research shows that the **balance of roles is a very important element** in teamworking, so one important skill is to try and make sure you have a good balance of roles. There are various psychological tests that can help spot which roles people are more suited to, and, if you are fortunate, you can use them to pick a balanced team. In most cases though, you need to work with what you have and to use the understanding of team roles to try and identify where you have gaps or weaknesses, and make sure the team understands this and tries to compensate. One helpful and simple approach to team roles is the one developed in the UK by Meredith Belbin and widely used throughout the world.

Picking team members and understanding their roles is only part of the story. There is much that can be done to **build** and work with the key elements of team process, such as developing trust or creativity. Many different approaches have been used - for example, some firms send people on outdoor activities where they can share the challenges of building rafts or bridges to cross rivers, or accomplishing some other physically challenging task as a group. The purpose is not to get bridges built or to cross the river, so much as to learn how to work together and to trust and listen to each other when trying to tackle open-ended problems that require collective action and creativity to solve.

There are plenty of less physically demanding ways of getting the same effect, ranging from simple exercises where the team has to solve problems quickly and creatively, to more analytical approaches where they discuss and explore ways of working better together.

Just as with sports teams, there is also scope for the role of **team coach** - someone who helps them think about and develop their skills and teamworking. Facilitators and coaches can come from inside the organisation or be external consultants, and they are helpful when it is important to build high performance teams - for example, in major change management projects.

In similar fashion, teams get better at teamworking through practice, so the **regular opportunity to work together**, and the introduction of new tools and techniques to help reinforce creativity, is an important component of successful teambuilding.

One of the most powerful resources for enabling rapid development, is the use of **cross-functional teams** that contain representatives of all the disciplines involved in the innovation and which has the autonomy to progress the project. Teams of this kind are not formed simply by grouping people together; successful practice involves extensive investments in team-building, providing them with the necessary training to solve problems, to manage conflict, to interact with other parts of the organisation and with outside stakeholders, etc.

For more details on Belbin's approach and examples, videos and tools, follow this link: <http://www.belbin.com/>.