Yet again, in the third edition of this deservedly popular pocket book, Michael West has produced a masterly digest of knowledge from a sprawling literature on this vitally important topic. Insights, examples, and learning points emerge from first page to last, including, new to this edition, the very latest research on virtual and top management teams. It is unusual for books to successfully bridge the academic and practical divide, but this one has equal appeal for scholars wanting the lowdown on the state of the field, and for practitioners managing trying to figure out what goes right and what goes wrong with teams in their organizations. You will not find a finer, more concise, authoritative and clearer assembly of available knowledge on teams anywhere.

Nigel Nicholson, Professor of Organisational Behavior, London Business School, UK; author of Managing the Human Animal and Family Wars

This new edition of Michael West’s book helps us understand what a team is and what we can do to improve teams’ functioning. The book covers the most important factors impacting on teams’ operation and outcomes. It is based on solid scientific knowledge and the author’s extensive applied experience in the field. It provides readers with useful tools that can be implemented to help managers lead and develop their teams. Based on my own experience as director of a university service, I can tell that these tools, and the knowledge on which they are based, really work.

Vicente González-Romá, Director of the Observatory of Job Insertion and Occupational Guidance, University of Valencia, Spain; Editor of the European Journal of Work & Organizational Psychology

Once again Michael has brought together the great management and leadership concepts of this decade to provide a practical, well evidenced contribution to leading successful organisations. With a clear and insightful understanding of organisation realities, Michael’s understanding of team work, staff engagement and health and well being are combined to provide an extremely helpful practitioner and leadership guide supported by all the research, evidence and exercise material we’ve come to expect. In a world where the focus of personal and organisational psychology is often remedial, this book engages us in using positive psychology to enhance the quality of life for staff through the achievement of shared goals.

Dean Royles, Director, NHS Employers, UK

Imagine seven billion individuals on earth...most of whom at some time experience life as members of teams, especially at work but elsewhere as well...and imagine the calculable combinations of people and situations that make for teams. Where can we possibly look for advice on how to get so many different teams to be effective? Look first to Michael West’s new book. It maintains a laser focus on what it really means for a team to be effective. It embraces the complexity of things that matter – leadership, goals, support, technology to name just a few – and it consistently delivers evidence-based advice on the surest ways of making teamwork effective.

Rick Guzzo, Principal and Worldwide Partner, Mercer Human Resources Consulting

More organizations than ever before have come to the realization that effective teamwork is essential to success. Yet businesses still find that the reality of working in teams is fraught with psychological barriers and practical difficulties. Utilising the most up-to-date research evidence, the third edition of Effective Teamwork provides business managers with the necessary tools to build and maintain effective teamwork strategies in order to maximize efficiencies and further their organizational objectives.

Psychologist and business expert Michael West provides an in-depth examination of the range of positive and negative factors that can affect team functioning. Reflecting the newest developments in the field, the third edition features new chapters on top management teams and virtual team working, as well as increased coverage of such areas as team appraisal rationale, training for team working, ‘shared mental models,’ dealing with typical failures, and contributions of positive psychology to effective teamwork. Consideration of ethics and values in team functioning – a theme that emerged during the recent financial crisis – is also incorporated into all chapters.

With its clear insights and careful balance of rigorous science with organizational practicalities, Effective Teamwork is an invaluable guide to the establishment and maintenance of effective management teams today.

Michael A. West is Professor of Organizational Psychology at Lancaster University Management School, UK. Previously Executive Dean of Aston Business School, he has authored, edited or co-edited seventeen books. He has also published over 200 articles for scientific and practitioner publications, and numerous chapters in scholarly books. He is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society (BPS), the American Psychological Association (APA), the Society for Industrial & Organizational Psychology (SIOP), the British Academy of Management (BAM) and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).

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Effective Teamwork

Practical Lessons from Organizational Research

Third Edition

Michael A. West

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Effective Teamwork
Effective Teamwork

*Practical Lessons from Organizational Research*

Third Edition

Michael A. West
Lancaster University Management School
Bailrigg, Lancaster

and

The Work Foundation
London

BPS BLACKWELL
To: Rosa Hardy

for being a wonderful example of the supportiveness, courage and creativity that are essential for great teamwork
Contents

Acknowledgements xi

Part 1 Team Effectiveness 1
1 Creating Effective Teams 3
  Task and Social Elements of Team Functioning 6
  Team Effectiveness 7
  Key Revision Points 12
  Further Reading 12
  Web Resources 12
2 Real Teams Work 13
  Why Work in Teams? 17
  Barriers to Effective Teamwork 21
  What is a Team? 27
  What do Teams do? 29
  How can we build Effective Teams? 31
  Conclusions 35
  Key Revision Points 37
  Further Reading 37
  Web Resources 38

Part 2 Developing Teams 39
3 Creating Teams 41
  Personality and Ability 43
  Teamwork Skills 49
  Diversity of Team Members 52
  Benefiting from Team Diversity 57
  Implications of Diversity 58
  Key Revision Points 59
4 Leading Teams 60
The Three Team Leadership Tasks 61
The Three Elements of Leading Teams 63
Tripwires for Team Leaders 77
Developing Team Leadership Skills 79
Self-managing or Shared Leadership Work Teams 84
Key Revision Points 85
Further Reading 85
Web Resources 86

5 Team Training 87
The Stages of Team Development 89
Types of Team Training Interventions 91
Conclusions 101
Key Revision Points 102
Further Reading 102
Web Resources 102

Part 3 Team Working 105

6 Setting Team Direction 107
Team Objectives 107
The Elements of Team Vision 113
Strategy for Teams 115
Key Revision Points 117
Further Reading 117
Web Resources 118

7 Team Playing 119
Interaction 120
Information Sharing 124
Influencing and Decision Making 125
Creating Safety in Teams 131
Key Revision Points 133
Further Reading 134
Web Resources 134

8 Team Quality Management 135
Groupthink 136
Team Pressures to Conform 138
Obedience to Authority 139
Team Defence Mechanisms 139
Commitment to Quality 141
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task Focus/Constructive Controversy</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging Constructive Controversy in Teams</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Revision Points</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Reading</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Resources</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Creative Team Problem Solving</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Innovation</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Problem Solving in Teams</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techniques for Promoting Creativity within a Team</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using Creativity Techniques in Team Meetings</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Influences on Team Innovation</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Revision Points</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Reading</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Resources</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Team Support</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Emotional Life of Teams</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for Team Member Growth and Development</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance between Home and Work Life</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Climate</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Revision Points</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Reading</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Resources</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Conflict in Teams</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Conflicts</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of Team Conflict</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolving Team Conflicts</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Causes of Conflict</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Conflicts</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult Team Members</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Revision Points</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Reading</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Resources</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 4  Teams in Organizations</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Teams in Organizations</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introducing Team-based Working (TBW)</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Relationship between Teams and their Organizations</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do Teams need from their Organizations?</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Human Resource Management (HRM)</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
x Contents

What do Organizations require from Teams? 213
Bridging across Teams 216
Conclusions 219
Key Revision Points 219
Further Reading 220
Web Resources 220

13 Virtual Team Working 221
What is Virtual Team Working? 225
Advantages and Disadvantages of Virtual Teams 227
How to Develop Effective Virtual Team Working 228
Lifecycle of Virtual Teams 235
Conclusion 238
Key Revision Points 239
Further Reading 239
Web Resources 240

14 Top Management Teams 241
Task Design 243
Team Effort and Skills 245
Organizational Supports 248
Top Management Team Processes 251
Top Team Participation 254
Corporate Social Responsibility 255
Top Team Meetings 257
Conflict 262
CEO Leadership 263
Conclusions 266
Key Revision Points 268
Further Reading 268
Web Resources 268

References 269
Author Index 286
Subject Index 292
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*Michael West*
*Lancaster University Management School,*  
*and The Work Foundation*  
*May 2011*
Part 1

Team Effectiveness

In this first section of the book, we examine what effective teamwork means. The first chapter looks at what is required for effective teamwork, identifying two themes that run through the book. These are team task functioning and team socio-emotional climate. The chapter explains how effective teams take time to review their performance in these areas and to adapt accordingly. Ensuring the team is functioning well both as a task group and as a social group is vital to ensuring team effectiveness. Reflecting on these areas of teamwork regularly and making changes in objectives, strategies and team processes as necessary are vital for the long-term effectiveness of the team.

The second chapter focuses on the research evidence about whether teams work or not. Are teams effective in getting work done and does teamwork in organizations lead to improved organizational performance? Effectiveness includes the well-being and development of team members as well as the level of innovation in the team. The chapter reviews the research on the problems of team working to show the circumstances in which teams perform badly. However, the chapter also shows that teams outperform the aggregate of individuals working alone and are essential for the performance of many tasks in organizations. The key is knowing how to create the conditions for teams to work effectively – the subject of this book.
1
Creating Effective Teams

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. (Margaret Mead)

Key Learning Points

● The basic conditions for effective teamwork
● The conditions for outstanding teamwork
● Team reflexivity and its importance in team functioning
● The two dimensions of team functioning – task and social reflexivity
● The five elements of team effectiveness
● The relationship of team reflexivity to team effectiveness
● The application of the reflexivity questionnaire to real teams

Our societies and communities face the fundamental challenge of how to enable people to combine their efforts and imaginations to work in ways that enhance quality of life through the achievement of our shared goals. The major challenges that face our species today require us to cooperate effectively in order to maximize the quality of life for all people while, at the same time, sustaining the resources offered by the planet? For thousands of years the most potent solution we have found has been teamwork. So why
the need for a book on teamwork if we have been working in teams successfully for so long? Because the landscape of teamwork has changed fundamentally in the last 200 years. The growth of modern organizations has created a context in which teams no longer work in isolation. Teams must work together with other teams and with organizational systems and processes to achieve the goals we aspire to and overcome the challenges we face. This book offers guidelines for this new context, largely based on research evidence, for how to ensure effective teamwork and how to enable multi-team systems to operate in an integrated and effective way. More than that what the book offers is insights into how to create outstandingly effective teams – dream teams – teams that achieve more than their members imagined possible and which enable and inspire the success of other teams within their organizations. The book describes both the basic conditions for effective team working and the conditions that will produce dream teams.

The basic conditions for effective teamwork include having a real team whose membership is clear, which is of the right size, relatively stable in membership and working on a task that requires teamwork. The team must have an overall purpose that adds value and which is translated into clear, challenging team objectives. And the team needs the right people as team members with the required skills in the right roles. They must be enablers not derailers – people who support effective team working through their behaviours, not people who sabotage, undermine or obstruct team functioning.

In addition to these basic conditions, dream teams are characterized by transformational leadership that reinforces an inspiring and motivating team purpose focused sharply on the needs of the team’s stakeholders (clients, customers, patients); that encourages all team members to value the diversity of its membership. Members have opportunities to grow and learn in their roles and there is a strong sense of continuous growth and development as a team. Dream teams have a high level of positivity, characterized by optimism and a healthy balance of positive and negative interactions. Members are open, appreciative, kind and genuine in their interactions with each other and eager to learn from each other. Team members believe in the team’s ability to be successful and effective in their work (team potency). They are secure in their team membership and attached to the team because of the level of trust and support they encounter – and the fact that members appropriately back each other up in crises. And the team’s relationship with the wider organization is engaged and supportive. The team actively builds effective inter-team relationships and members identify enthusiastically, not just with their team, but with the wider organization of which they are a part. Such dream teams, and teams of dream teams, enable effective communication and fruitful collaborations in which new ideas are shared and integrated, work load is shared, mutual support is provided and
opportunities are exploited to their full potential. Later in the book, the reader will discover how to create these conditions.

Creating and sustaining effective teams requires persistent renewal and discovery of good practice. Moreover, teams vary in the tasks they undertake, the contexts they work in and their membership. And change is a constant: so teams must adapt to the changes that confront them within and outside their organizations. Both the variation between teams and the changing context of all teams requires flexible team members, flexible team processes and flexible organizations. And we have a wondrous capacity to encourage such flexibility. What we are able to do – and no other animal can – is to reflect upon our experiences and consciously adapt what we do to adjust to changing circumstances. And we can use this ability to learn to dance the dance of teamwork ever more effectively. Applied at team level, this is termed team reflexivity.

Team reflexivity involves:

- regular team reviews of the team’s objectives including an assessment of their continuing relevance and appropriateness, as well as progress towards their fulfilment;
- team member vigilance for external changes that could affect the team’s work;
- awareness, review and discussion of the team’s functioning with a view to improving performance;
- creativity, flexibility and adaptability;
- tolerance of uncertainty;
- team members valuing the different perspectives, knowledge bases, skills and experience of team members.

Teams operate in varied organizational settings – as diverse as multinational oil companies, voluntary organizations, healthcare organizations and the military – so we need to be cautious about offering one-size-fits-all prescriptions for effective teamwork. Within organizations too, teams differ markedly. Teams are often composed of people with very different cultural backgrounds, ages, functional expertise and personalities. Teams may span national boundaries, including members located in several countries. Differences in work patterns such as part-time, flextime, contract working and home working all add further mixes to the heterogeneity of teams. As teams become more diverse in their constitution and functioning, team members must learn to reflect upon, and intelligently adapt to the constantly changing circumstances in order to be effective. In this book, it is proposed that, to the extent that team members collectively reflect on the team’s objectives, strategies, processes and performance and make changes accordingly (team reflexivity) (West, 2000; Widmer, Schippers, and West, 2009), teams will be more productive, effective and innovative.
Part 1: Team Effectiveness

Task and Social Elements of Team Functioning

There are two fundamental dimensions of team functioning: the task the team is required to carry out, and the social factors that influence how members work together as a social unit. The basic reason for the creation of teams in work organizations is the expectation that they will carry out some tasks more effectively than individuals and so further organizational objectives overall. In fact, some tasks can only be undertaken by teams of people working together rather than individuals working alone – think of open-heart surgery, the construction of a car, catching an antelope on the savannah without the benefit of modern technology or weapons. Consideration of the content of the task, and the strategies and processes employed by team members to carry out that task, is therefore important for understanding how to work in teams. At the same time, teams are composed of people who have a variety of emotional, social and other human needs that the team as a whole can either help to meet or frustrate. Feeling valued, respected and supported by other team members will be a prerequisite for people offering their ideas for new and improved ways of ensuring team effectiveness. If we ignore either dimension in trying to achieve team effectiveness, we will fail to achieve the potential of team performance.

Research evidence now shows convincingly how important positive emotions, such as hope, pleasure, happiness, humour, excitement, joy, pride and involvement, are as a source of human strength (Fredrickson, 2009). When we feel positive emotions we think in a more flexible, open-minded way, and consider a much wider range of possibilities than if we feel anxious, depressed or angry. This enables us to accomplish tasks and make the most of the situations we find ourselves in. We are also more likely to see challenges as opportunities rather than threats. When we feel positive we exercise greater self-control, cope more effectively and are less likely to react defensively in workplace situations. The litany of benefits does not stop there. It spills over too into what is called ‘pro-social behaviour’ – cooperation and altruism. When we feel positive emotion we are more likely to be helpful, generous and to exercise a sense of social responsibility (for a review, see Fredrickson, 2009). The implications for teams are that by developing a team environment where people feel positive, we can encourage organizational citizenship – in other words the tendency of people at work to help each other and those in other departments; to do that bit extra which is not part of their job. And such citizenship makes a major difference between the most effective teams and the rest. The idea that we can create effective teams by focusing simply on performance and ignoring the role of our emotions is based on the false premise that emotions can be ignored at
work. Positive relationships and a sense of community are the product and cause of positive emotions. We must work with human needs and capacities and potentials rather than against them if we are to create positive teams that succeed and at the same time, foster the health and well-being of those who work within them.

In order to function effectively, team members must actively focus upon their objectives, regularly reviewing ways of achieving them and the team’s methods of working – ‘task reflexivity’. At the same time, in order to promote the well-being of its members, the team must reflect upon the ways in which it provides support to members, how conflicts are resolved and what is the overall social and emotional climate of the team – or its ‘social reflexivity’. The purpose of these reviews should be to inform the next steps by changing as appropriate the team’s objectives, ways of working or social functioning, in order to promote effectiveness.

### Team Effectiveness

So what does ‘team effectiveness’ mean? Team effectiveness can be seen as constituting five main components:

1. **Task effectiveness** is the extent to which the team is successful in achieving its task-related objectives.
2. **Team member well-being** refers to factors such as the well-being or mental health (e.g., stress), growth and development of team members.
3. **Team viability** is the likelihood that a team will continue to work together and function effectively.
4. **Team innovation** is the extent to which the team develops and implements new and improved processes, products and procedures.
5. **Inter-team cooperation** is the effectiveness of the team in working with other teams in the organization with which it has to work in order to deliver products or services.

Table 1 shows the two elements of teams, the task and social elements, drawn together in a two-by-two model to illustrate four extreme types of team functioning and the likely effects upon the five principle outcomes of team functioning: task effectiveness, team members’ mental health, team viability, innovation and inter-team cooperation (such models are a simplification of reality but for our immediate purposes this model serves to illustrate some important points).

Type A, the *Resilient team*, represents a team which is high in both task and social reflexivity, that is, the extent to which the team reflects on and
part 1: team effectiveness

Table 1 Four types of teams and their outcomes.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Task Reflexivity</th>
<th>Low Task Reflexivity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type D: Driven team</strong></td>
<td><strong>Type C: Dysfunctional team</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>High short-term task effectiveness</td>
<td>Poor task effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor team member well-being</td>
<td>Poor team member well-being</td>
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<tr>
<td>Short-term viability</td>
<td>Very low team viability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moderate innovation</td>
<td>Low innovation</td>
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<tr>
<td>High inter-team conflict</td>
<td>High inter-team conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type A: Resilient team</strong></td>
<td><strong>Type B: Complacent team</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High task effectiveness</td>
<td>Poor task effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good team member well-being</td>
<td>Average team member well-being</td>
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<tr>
<td>Long-term viability</td>
<td>Short-term viability</td>
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<tr>
<td>High innovation</td>
<td>Low innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High inter-team cooperation</td>
<td>Moderate inter-team conflict</td>
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</table>

modifies its objectives, processes, task and social support strategies appropriately in changing circumstances. Such teams are likely to have good levels of well-being amongst team members, high task effectiveness, and sustained viability, that is, they have the capacity and desire to continue to work together. Because of the high levels of both task and social reflexivity they are able to adapt to changing circumstances and ensure sustained high performance. Consequently, they are also more likely to innovate and have the capacity to work effectively with other teams within the organization with which they have to work in order to deliver goods or services.

Type B, the Complacent team, is high in social reflexivity and low in task reflexivity. This is a team where there is a good deal of warmth, support and cohesion amongst team members, but where the ability to get the task done effectively is low. Team members do not dedicate time to reflecting upon the team’s task objectives, strategies and processes and therefore do not confront their performance problems, learn from mistakes or adapt their task performance to ensure effectiveness. Therefore, while team members’ well-being is good and they value their colleagues, the organization’s satisfaction with team performance is low and team members experience the disappointment of membership of a failing or at best poorly performing team. As a result its
viability is threatened. Even if team members wish to continue to work together over a period of time, the organization is likely to break the team up. In the longer term team members’ well-being will be adversely affected by the low levels of competence experienced by team members in a team which is minimally task effective. We like to be successful and effective in our work. Staying in a poorly functioning team corrodes job satisfaction. Such a team, with a lack of performance focus, is unlikely to have the motivation to innovate. Despite their warmth, they will create a degree of irritation and dissatisfaction in the other teams they have to work with, because of their ineffectiveness.

Type C, the Dysfunctional team, is the worst scenario – a team that is low on both task and social reflexivity. Such teams fail to reflect on and change their functioning in either domain. They will not be viable in the long term since team members leaders will be dissatisfied with both the interpersonal relationships and with the team’s failures to achieve. Frustration with the team’s poor performance will cause organization leaders to intervene or disband the team. Interventions to promote both task and social reflexivity in the team should be immediate and sustained since team members will learn to function effectively both in the team of which they are currently members and in teams they are part of in the future. The lack of safety and effectiveness combine to mitigate against innovation and the team’s performance creates high levels of conflict with the other teams that rely on them, because of their failure to deliver.

Finally team type D, the Driven team, is a team in which task reflexivity is high, but where the social functioning of the team is poor. Members are driven to focus on achieving task objectives as quickly as possible with minimum distractions. Task performance is generally good in the short term, but poor social functioning damages team viability and the well-being of members. Team members do not enjoy working in a team that they perceive as providing little social support and which has a poor social climate. Moreover, because the team does not feel safe, levels of innovation are low. The team fails to reflect on its health as a social entity, so little progress is made in improving the team’s functioning as a social unit. In the long term, the team will fail to achieve its potential. Without a positive, supportive climate, levels of cooperation will be low and the team’s capacity for creativity and innovation will be limited. In some circumstances (such as a short-term crisis) focusing on the task to the exclusion of all else might make sense but at some point there must be healthy reviews of social functioning. Support, backing up, enabling and coaching are vital team member behaviours in any team. Moreover, because they are driven, they are likely to come into conflict with the other teams with which they need to work, either because they become frustrated by the
speed of delivery from other teams or because they are too concerned with their own team’s performance and less concerned with findings ways of helping other teams.

These two aspects of team functioning, namely task and social reflexivity, have a direct impact upon the three principal outcomes of team functioning – task effectiveness, team members’ well-being and team viability. In this book we examine these elements of team functioning and describe practical ways in which team reflexivity can be enhanced.

Research evidence drives the content of the book. We will challenge many assumptions about teamwork that the research evidence does not support by informing the reader on what research reveals about effective teamwork, rather than on what consultants and pundits guess makes for effective teamwork. I also offer examples from my experience of working with teams in a wide variety of settings and across many different countries.

Throughout the book, we will focus on answering the question: ‘what makes teams effective?’ in a way that will prove practically useful to you in working in or with teams, and will help you to develop them into fully functioning teams which are high in both task and social reflexivity.

---

**Exercise 1  The team reflexivity questionnaire**

**How effectively does your team function?**

To measure levels of task and social reflexivity in your team, ask all team members to complete this questionnaire without consulting each other about the answers. Add the scores for task reflexivity and social reflexivity separately, that is, add all team members’ scores for the task element and then all team members’ scores for the social element. Divide both totals by the number of people completing the questionnaire. At the bottom of this box are values against which you can determine whether your team’s scores are high, low or average compared with the scores of other teams.

**Instructions for completion:**

Indicate how far each statement is an accurate or inaccurate description of your team by writing a number in the box beside each statement, based on the following scale of 1 to 7:
Creating Effective Teams

Very inaccurate

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Task reflexivity</td>
<td>1 The team often reviews its objectives.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>2 We regularly discuss whether the team is working together effectively.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 The methods used by the team to get the job done are often discussed</td>
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<td>4 In this team we modify our objectives in the light of changing circumstances.</td>
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<td>5 Team strategies are often changed.</td>
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<td>6 How well we communicate information is often discussed.</td>
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<td>7 This team often reviews its approach to getting the job done.</td>
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<td>8 The way decisions are made in this team is often reviewed.</td>
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<td>(b) Social reflexivity</td>
<td>1 Team members provide each other with support when times are difficult.</td>
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<td>2 When things at work are stressful the team is very supportive.</td>
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<td>3 Conflict does not linger in this team.</td>
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<td>4 People in this team often teach each other new skills.</td>
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<td>5 When things at work are stressful, we pull together as a team.</td>
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<td>6 Team members are always friendly.</td>
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<td>7 Conflicts are constructively dealt with in this team.</td>
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<td>8 People in this team are quick to resolve arguments.</td>
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High scores 42–56 42–56
Average scores 34–41 34–41
Low scores 0–33 0–33
Part 1: Team Effectiveness

As a team, you can discuss how to improve your functioning where it seems low for no good reason. Such a discussion can be a first step towards improving the extent to which the team reflects on its objectives, strategies, processes and social functioning in order to ensure it is a fully functional team.

Key Revision Points

- What are the basic conditions for effective teamwork?
- What are the conditions necessary for outstanding or ‘dream’ teams?
- What is team reflexivity and what is the difference between task and social reflexivity?
- What are the main elements of team effectiveness?
- How do task and social reflexivity affect team effectiveness?

Further Reading


Web Resources

2
Real Teams Work

There is no hope for creating a better world without a deeper scientific insight in the function of leadership and culture, and of other essentials of group life … (Kurt Lewin, 1943)

Key Learning Points

● The difference between pseudo teams and real teams
● The organizational benefits of team working
● The drawbacks of working in teams – weaker effort, decision making and creativity
● Teams defined and types of teams
● Tasks for teams
● How to build an effective team
● How to measure team performance
Case Study

18 carat or fool’s gold: Team work and patient mortality in health care

The United Kingdom National Health Service employs in the region of 1.4 million staff whose responsibility is to provide high-quality and safe patient care. Every year a staff survey is carried out to elicit their views about their working conditions, their management and leadership, the quality of care they provide and the environment within which they work. They are asked ‘Do you work in a team?’ and typically each year around 90% of staff say ‘yes’ in response. Given the evidence on the importance of teamwork in health care for better patient outcomes, this might seem very encouraging. However, the survey asks three follow-up questions of those who indicate they work in a team: ‘Does your team have clear objectives? Do you work closely together to achieve those objectives? Do you meet regularly to review your performance and how it can be improved?’ These three questions tap the very basic dimensions of team working – shared objectives, interdependence and review meetings. Staff who answer ‘no’ to one or more of these questions are categorized as belonging to a pseudo team (around 50% of staff). Those who answer ‘yes’ to all three questions are classified as working in a real team (around 40%). There are therefore three groups: those who indicate they do not work in a team; those who work in real teams; and those who work in pseudo teams. The data reveal that the greater percentage of staff working in pseudo teams within a hospital or other healthcare organization, the higher the levels of injuries to staff at work (typically from needles, lifting and falls); the higher the level of witnessed errors that could harm patients or staff; the higher the levels of violent assaults from patients or their carers, relatives and friends; and the higher the levels of bullying, harassment and abuse from those same groups. The opposite relationships is observed in relation to the percentage of staff in the hospital working in real teams – fewer injuries, errors, violent assaults and cases of harassment, bullying and abuse. Moreover absenteeism is lower the greater the percentage of staff working in real teams. Most strikingly, there is a strong relationship with patient mortality. Having more real teams is associated with lower patient mortality and more pseudo teams are independently associated with higher mortality. The data show that 5% more staff working in real teams would be
associated with a decrease of 3.3% in patient mortality (typically 40 deaths per year in each hospital). With 50% working in pseudo teams, the opportunities for improvement in mortality figures (assuming a causal relationship) are enormous and added across the entire National Health Service, truly staggering. (Further details of this work are available from the author at m.a.west@lancaster.ac.uk)

This case study reveals the importance of being clear about what we mean by teamwork – a topic we will explore in more depth in this chapter. Before we do that, we will consider the role of teamwork in human society and evolutionary history.

To live, work, and play in human society is to cooperate with others. We express both our collective identity and our individuality in groups and organizations (De Cremer, van Dick and Murnighan, 2011). Our identity comes from the groups of which we are a part – clubs, voluntary societies, professions, sports teams (playing or supporting), work organizations and political affiliations. We have, throughout our history, lived, loved, raised our young, and worked together in groups (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Our common experiences of living and working together bind us with each other and with our predecessors. It is precisely because human beings have learned to work cooperatively together that we have made such astonishing progress as a species. By mapping the human genome we have discovered the underlying biochemical processes that make us what we are. And we have explored the beginnings and the outer limits of our universe. These extraordinary accomplishments have been accomplished largely by teams, and by teams of teams. When we work cooperatively we accomplish infinitely more than if we work individually. This is the principle of group synergy – that the contribution of the whole group is greater than the sum of its individual members’ contributions. To push a large boulder up a hill is not manageable when we work alone – but we can achieve this when we work together. Throughout our history, we have worked in small groups and teams. It is only in the last 200 years that people have begun to work in the larger collectives we call organizations (prior to that only the religious and military were of any substantial size).

The growth of the modern organization, with its complex structures and competing goals of fostering innovation while exerting control over relatively large numbers of employees, has been astonishing in its rapidity. Yet most of us now take these entities for granted. In fact, they pose real challenges to us in our working lives. When we worked in small teams over very long periods of time in agricultural or craft settings, co-workers were
Part 1: Team Effectiveness

intimately acquainted with each other’s knowledge, skills and abilities. Team working was finely honed and developed over many years. Many of us today are members of multiple teams, interacting with other teams, and seeing a constant flux in team membership. Such conditions pose real challenges to effective working. And yet teamwork survives as an ideal way of working in organizations, partly because it is the way we have always worked successfully. But team working in many organizations is poorly developed – more fool’s gold than 18 carat.

We face new demands in modern organizations that make cooperative work in teams both more vital and more challenging. To meet the pressures of the global marketplace, organizations are moving away from rigid, hierarchical structures towards more organic, flexible forms. Teams are developing and marketing products, solving production problems, and creating corporate strategy. Managers are experimenting with participation, high-commitment organizations, self-managing work teams, employee-management cooperation, and ‘gainsharing’ programmes (where employees have a share of the gains made as a result of the innovations they have implemented). These innovations involve the explicit use of teams to accomplish central organizational tasks. The team rather than the individual is increasingly considered the basic building block of organizations.

Teamwork is spilling out across organizational and national boundaries. Many manufacturers form teams with suppliers to boost quality, reduce costs and ensure continuous improvement. International alliances are becoming the accepted way to participate in the global marketplace. American and Japanese automakers and other traditional competitors have developed a wide variety of cooperative strategies. Increasingly, people with different organizational and national loyalties from diverse cultural backgrounds and with unequal status are asked to work together. And teams from commercial organizations are linking with those from universities to develop exciting, useful and radical innovations (West, Tjosvold and Smith, 2003). So why do we work in teams? Put simply it is because teams enable us to accomplish what would otherwise be impossible. Catching antelopes on the savannah 200,000 years ago or taking stones from the Preseli mountains in Wales to Stonehenge in southern England and erecting them in the famous circle required sophisticated teamwork; heart by-pass operations require tight interdependent working between surgeons, anaesthetists, surgical nurses and administrators; airline passengers rely on cockpit teams to deliver them safely to their destination. Every task that cannot be accomplished without people working interdependently in small groups is a compelling example of the value of teamwork (West, Brodbeck and Richter, 2004).

In hard-rock mining the introduction of team goals leads to a greater quantity of rocks mined. In work safety studies, the introduction of team