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Leadership and Teaming

In a world where most problems faced by organizations are too complex for a single individual to tackle alone, teams have become the building blocks of organizations.¹ Yet teams are fickle. Even as teams become more common²—from top management teams to project teams to crowdsourced ‘flash’ teams³—a shocking number fail to live up to their potential, or even to deliver at all.

Enter leadership. Small differences in the leadership of teams can have large consequences for the success of their efforts. But as the stable teams of the past have evolved into the fluid, diverse, cross-functional, global, virtual collaboration (“teaming”⁴) environments of today, their leadership needs have evolved as well. Most notably, effective leadership of teaming is not limited to a designated “leader,” but instead requires all team members to alternate between leading and following, much as jazz band members alternate between soloing and supporting.⁵ Therefore, this note focuses not on training designated team “leaders,” but rather, on training all team members to contribute *acts of leadership*.

What can you do to create the conditions for your teams to generate more effective and higher-quality acts of leadership, which will translate into greater performance? This note provides a framework for three core responsibilities of leaders: *team design*, *team launch*, and *team process management*.

This note first defines the criteria for effective teaming. It then highlights the most common barriers to achieving effectiveness—the hidden traps that undermine our best attempts at teaming. Simply being aware of what effectiveness looks like, and why teams most frequently fail to achieve it, is half of the battle. The note then provides a detailed roadmap (see **Exhibit 1** for summary) of how leaders can be effective *architects* and *coaches* of teams, in order to proactively design, launch, and manage teaming for success.

What Does Effective Teaming Look Like?⁶

Leaders should apply three interrelated criteria in assessing the overall effectiveness of teaming:

1. **The team delivers.** The most obvious criteria for success is that the team’s output (e.g., decisions, products, services) meets or exceeds the quantity, quality, and timeliness standards of the team’s clients. Except in the rare circumstance where the team is its own client, it is not enough that

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the team itself is pleased with its output or that the output meets some objective measure. After all, the various constituencies (internal and external) relying on the team's output may require different standards (e.g., quality, profitability, innovativeness). Outcomes must be the primary objective in choosing a team approach. Trying to "become a team" without stating a clear output imperative remains the least likely way to do so.

2. **The team itself adapts and learns through effective teamwork.** Over the life of an effective team, members learn to anticipate one another's moves and to support those moves as they occur. They learn to revitalize and regenerate themselves (e.g., adapt their agenda and operating guidelines) in response to new demands the organization or competitive environment places on them, and they may even institutionalize their capabilities beyond team boundaries. They learn to detect and correct errors before serious damage is done, or they trigger a "restart" –resetting the team's trajectory, throwing away baggage from the past, and effectively starting over. In short, a well-functioning team is more capable when it finishes a task than when it begins, such that if the group ever works together again, it should be more effective than it was the first time. Less effective teams, to the contrary, function in ways that lead members to distrust one another, resulting in the team finding it more difficult to work together on future initiatives.

3. **Individual team members are satisfied and learn.** Teaming environments can serve as greenhouses for learning and satisfying interpersonal relationships. The team is the school. The teaming experience can contribute positively to the personal well-being of individuals on the team, creating not just great performances but also great health. But teams can also operate in ways that frustrate the satisfaction of team members, thwart their development, and cause individuals to alienate one another.

Three Easy Paths to Team Failure

Given how often teams deliver less-than-ideal performance, it should not be surprising that there are many ways for a team to fail. Nonetheless, three dysfunctions – which map directly to the three criteria for effectiveness above – are most common.⁷

First, since delivering the desired output to relevant audiences is key to effectiveness, the simplest way to set up a team for failure is to ask it to deliver *results* it is unqualified to achieve. If a team's capabilities, authority, and resources are insufficient to produce its required output, the team is predisposed to poor performance and frustration.

Second, a common path to failure is to neglect the affective, individually-driven *relationship* aspects of the team in favor of overemphasizing the cognitive team experience. Too often team leaders rely solely on output when evaluating team effectiveness. If a team's output is poor or negatively impacts key constituencies, it is hard to imagine that individual team members will find the experience satisfying or that they will look forward to working together again. But even before the results are in, negative affect can set the stage for suboptimal performance: if team members do not feel their emotional needs are being met, engagement, motivation, and even retention can prove difficult.

Third, the *process* of teamwork matters too. Teaming promises a number of effort and knowledge-based process gains (which make a team operate better than the sum of its parts), but teaming can also suffer from process losses (which make a team operate less effectively than individuals alone). The most common gains and losses are captured in **Table A**. Pay particular attention to the different ways teams lose their way. Process losses are often unavoidable – working in teams is hard – but if process losses balloon without commensurate process gains, the net productivity benefits from teaming (as opposed to individual work) can easily turn negative.

Table A Common Process Gains and Process Losses from Teaming

	Type	Description
Effort Process Gains	Stimulation from Interaction	Working as a team may stimulate and encourage individuals to perform better due to heightened engagement, peer pressure, and even simple observation.
	Collective Climate	Emergence of a collective climate privileging certain priorities (innovation climate, service climate, safety climate, etc.) may enhance performance.
Effort Process Losses	Social Loafing / Free Riding	Opportunity to sit back and let others do the work can reduce motivation to perform.
	Coordination Problems	Difficulty integrating members' contributions because the group does not have a shared approach, which can lead to dysfunctional cycling or incomplete discussions resulting in premature decisions.
	Social Facilitation Losses	Performance on tasks that require experimentation and unpracticed behavior may suffer due to heightened perceived risk of being wrong in front of peers.
	Paralysis from Faultlines / Dysfunctional Conflict	Politicized subgroups (cliques) lose sight of the overarching goal of the group and instead push subgroup's agenda.
Knowledge and Skills Process Gains	More Information / Expertise	Team as a whole has more information collectively than any one member individually.
	Better Use of Information	One team member may use information in a way that the original holder of the information did not, because that member has different information or skills.
	More Objective Evaluation	Teams may be better at catching errors than the individuals who proposed or supported the ideas.
	Role Modeling	Members may learn from and imitate more skilled members to improve overall team performance.
	Shared Mental Models / Transactive Memory	Cognitive maps shared by team members may enable more efficient organization and acquisition of information/knowledge, both shared (team mental models) and distributed (transactive memory).
Knowledge and Skills Process Losses	Failure to Surface All Ideas and Uniquely Held Information	Inadequate sharing of information; can result from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attenuation blocking (members who do not immediately share new ideas fail to share them later, because they decide their ideas are less original, relevant, or important than ideas heard from others). • Concentration blocking (members concentrate on remembering previous ideas, rather than generating new ones, until they can contribute them). • Attention blocking (new ideas are not generated because members must constantly listen to others speak and cannot pause to think).
	Getting Lost / Air Time Fragmentation	Imperfect division of attention across members due to domination by one or more members over others or simply a failure of the team to remember past contributions of one or more members.
	Self-Censorship / Groupthink	Lack of speaking up with a contrasting view; can result from evaluation apprehension, conformance pressure, cognitive inertia (hesitation to deviate from train of thought of discussion), or similar biases.
	Getting Sidetracked	Distraction or non-task discussion that wastes time or reduces task performance.
	Information Overload	Information is presented faster than it can be processed and, as a result, there is an incomplete use of information surfaced.
	Incomplete Task Analysis	Incomplete analysis and understanding of task resulting in superficial discussions and premature consensus when additional exploration and interpretation of information would be beneficial.

Sources: Nunamaker, J. F., et al. "Electronic Meeting Systems to Support Group Work." *Communications of the ACM* 34 (July 1991): 46; Gino, F. *Sidetracked: Why Our Decisions Get Derailed, and How We Can Stick to the Plan*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2013; Kaplan, R. E. "The Conspicuous Absence of Evidence That Process Consultation Enhances Task Performance." *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 15 (1979): 346-360; Steiner, I. D., *Group Process and Productivity*. New York: Academic Press, 1972; and Kozlowski, S. W. J., & Ilgen, D. R. "Enhancing the Effectiveness of Work Groups and Teams." *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 7(3) (2006): 77-124.

Design, Launch, and Process Management: A Users Guide to Teaming

How does one lead successful teaming? Theory and research point to three key levers that leaders have at their disposal to enhance team effectiveness:

1. Design: How does a leader design the shell – the what, who, when, and how of teaming – to set the conditions that maximize the team’s chances of success?
2. Launch: How does a leader breathe life into the shell, such that team members come to terms with their task, with each other, and with their understanding of the norms?
3. Process Management: How does a leader sustain a supportive context – managing awareness of progress and challenges, maintaining balance, and intervening at key points in teaming – to preserve positive trajectories and correct negative ones?

While each of these three components matter, they do not necessarily matter to the same degree for each teaming environment. For example, a leading scholar of teams concluded from four decades of research that design had the greatest effect on effectiveness, followed by team launch. Process management, while important, was never sufficient to make up for poor design and inadequate launch.⁸

The remainder of this note looks at the key decisions leaders that can make to get each responsibility – team design, team launch, and team process management – right.

Team Design

The most basic determinants of teaming effectiveness will be decided by its design--the what (a compelling team purpose), who (the right team structure and composition), when (a reasonable team timeline), and how (the alignment of team rewards and proper access to resources) of the team. Great leaders, as architects of teaming environments, use their judgment to “stack the deck” and increase the probability of success.

What: Compelling Team Purpose Successful leadership of teaming starts with a *raison d’être*.⁹ Three attributes contribute to effective purpose:¹⁰

	<u>Question to Answer</u>	<u>Function</u>	<u>Benefit</u>
1. <i>Clear</i>	Where are we going (and how will we know when we get there)?	Orients	Alignment
2. <i>Challenging</i>	What is challenging about this task?	Energizes	Motivation
3. <i>Consequential</i>	Why is it important that we achieve this goal?	Engages	Full Utilization of Knowledge and Skills

Source: Based on Hackman (2002)

But not all clear, challenging, and consequential purposes are appropriate for teaming. A purpose must be a compelling *team* purpose, well-suited to teamwork as opposed to individual work. It must involve performing *interdependent* tasks: complex, meaningful, tightly-coupled tasks for which members feel collectively responsible, and about which members receive accurate, regular feedback on performance.¹¹ **Exhibit 2** provides examples of the three most common forms of workplace interdependence – action, expertise, and learning – that create fertile ground for teaming.

Who: Right Team Structure and Composition In fluid teaming environments, who is on the team and what roles they play can both be moving targets. Given that complexity, the coordination of teaming is easier when teams are properly sized, members have clearly defined and differentiated roles (at least for some given period of time), and team composition takes into account diversity and familiarity.

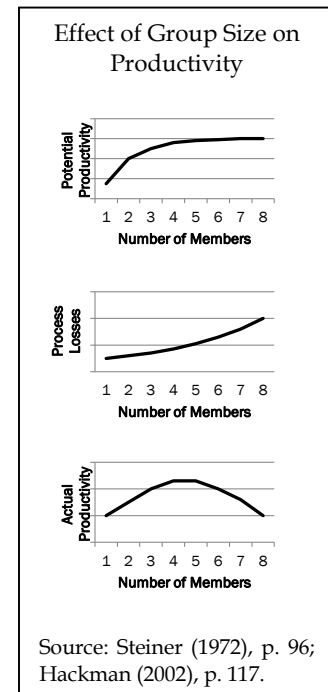
Team Size Size matters. The size of a team can be integral to its productivity and success. For a variety of reasons—from seeking a broad range of expertise, to fostering inclusivity, distributing responsibility, and sharing accountability (all forms of potential productivity)—teams have a tendency to be larger than needed. While leaders often view inclusivity as a virtue, research on teaming is unequivocal that keeping team size to the minimum is best, as long as the team’s resources are matched to the challenge. A bigger team rarely translates into a better team, because of the process losses inherent in the complexity of coordinating larger teams. Consider the addition of just one new member to a six-person team. The number of unique relationship dyads (pairs) the leader must manage increases from 15 to 21—a 40% increase—along with a commensurate intensification of the process losses discussed above.

What is the ideal team size? Optimal size is highly contextual and contingent on the team’s task. Although scientific research on optimal size is thin, estimates of the *maximum* ideal team size range from five to twelve.¹² Consistent with that range, Jeff Bezos enforces the “two-pizza rule” for teams at Amazon: teams shouldn’t be larger than what two pizzas can feed. Fluid teaming may offer an interesting alternative to larger team size by exchanging members into a set number of roles at various stages in a team’s life.

Nature of Roles In traditional teams, role definition and differentiation was often accomplished by the person designing the team, who envisioned which member might be best suited for each role and assigned it accordingly. In today’s more fluid teams, allocation and re-allocation of roles is a more continuous process. Rather than a brilliant designer, successful teaming today requires a shared, continuously updated understanding of the nature of the team’s tasks (see **Exhibit 2** for one common typology) and collective agreement about how to dynamically match those tasks to the expertise, knowledge, resources, and rewards structure of the team.

Scope of the Roles As the team irons out who does what, keep in mind the large role that the allocation of work plays in determining the level of members’ motivation throughout the team’s life. When the team’s work is designed to provide skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and job-based feedback, members will be more likely to find the teamwork meaningful and intrinsically rewarding (see **Exhibit 3**).¹³

Role Representation One important and often overlooked factor in successful teaming is clarity around whom the individual members of a team are intended to represent. Individuals may conceive their role on a team as being ambassadors of the entire organization, of their own business unit, of individuals with similar functional expertise (e.g., an engineering perspective), or just their individual interests. The design of representation on the team determines the nature of challenges the team will be capable and incapable of tackling (see **Exhibit 4**).



Member Selection: Diversity Diversity is an essential component of team composition. When leaders assemble a team, they consider diversity on a number of dimensions—expertise, background, network, demographics, capabilities, opinions, values, personalities, preferences—to create a balanced, heterogeneous team in which different perspectives, priorities, and styles may emerge. In that sense, diversity extends beyond individual characteristics to include the external resources, knowledge, and expertise an individual can access.

On the one hand, diversity can breed creativity, inventiveness, and openness to a broader array of solutions—diverse teams may naturally be better able to avoid premature consensus, or groupthink, and therefore discover a better solution that yields distinctive results. On the other hand, diversity can breed conflict. Basic building blocks of successful teams, such as communication, trust, conflict management, and mutual understanding, can sometimes be more difficult with increased diversity.¹⁴ Even finding a common language can be challenging.¹⁵

Luckily, we know quite a bit about how leadership can improve the odds of successful teaming among diverse individuals:

1. Celebrate the benefits of *informational diversity*—task-oriented disagreements that produce innovation and increased performance—while avoiding the affective drawbacks from *value diversity*, which increases potential for relationship conflict or status conflict.¹⁶ Leaders who can leverage diversity for cognitive conflict (i.e., intellectual disagreements) while simultaneously building affective bonds across diverse individuals find themselves in the sweet spot of team effectiveness.¹⁷ Social science suggests that the likelihood of accomplishing that sweet spot is substantially improved by the degree to which diverse team members work interdependently, breaking individual stereotypes in the process.¹⁸
2. Set enabling norms to support diversity. Teams with norms that encourage diverse members to express, rather than suppress, the characteristics that make them unique early in a team’s life may be more successful.¹⁹ McKinsey, for example, proselytizes all employees’ “obligation to dissent” as a core value.
3. Leverage *subgroups* (either formal or informal).²⁰ Despite a widespread appreciation for diversity, most human beings have natural tendencies toward homophily, or the preference to establish ties with individuals who have something in common with them,²¹ thereby forming subgroups (also referred to as cliques or clusters) around one or more similar attributes (demographics, preferences, skills, personality, values, etc.).²² The so-called *faultlines*²³ that result can have both positive and negative effects on team effectiveness. On the one hand, similarity breeds comfort: team members with similarities can stimulate feelings of team psychological safety and with it increased openness, enhanced quality of input and discussion, more airtime for minority opinions, and therefore improved team learning behavior and effectiveness.²⁴ On the other hand, subgroup members may begin to share information only within the subgroups rather than with the broader team, leading to factions, political “us versus them” power struggles, and ultimately team conflict.²⁵

Whether the net effect of faultlines is positive or negative tends to turn on the strength of the faultlines themselves:²⁶ strong faultlines are much more likely than weak faultlines to produce negative outcomes. There are two ways to weaken faultlines. First, leaders can design teams to avoid strong faultlines by ensuring diverse teams have high levels of diversity (e.g., a “red/blue team” with individuals who neatly divide into two subgroups is more likely to experience a single strong faultline, whereas a “rainbow team” with an array of different

individuals is more likely to experience many weak faultlines).²⁷ Second, leaders can divide tasks across members of different subgroups, particularly subgroups that relate directly to the team’s task (e.g., salespeople versus engineers in a technology company), such that the act of teaming weakens rather than strengthens faultlines.²⁸ **Table B** below illustrates the conditions for a deep faultline: the AOL side has all 29–33 year old men with quantitative majors from large state schools, while the Time-Warner side has all of the gender diversity with humanities majors from liberal arts schools.

Table B Faultline Example: Product Integration Team in AOL-Time Warner Merger

Time-Warner Side				AOL Side		
Attribute	Member A	Member B	Member C	Member D	Member E	Member F
Age	39	42	40	33	32	29
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male
Undergraduate School	Wellesley College	Kenyon	Yale University	Ohio State	Texas A&M	Minnesota
Major	English	Comparative Literature	Philosophy	Electrical Engineering	Artificial Intelligence	Marketing

Source: Li, J. & Hambrick, D. C. “Factional Groups: A New Vantage on Demographic Faultlines, Conflict, and Disintegration in Work Teams.” *Academy of Management Journal* 48.5 (2005): 794-813.

In sum, effective team leaders use shared, mutually agreeable norms, team processes, and awareness of individual differences to shape a common team culture—a meta-level of commonality—across diverse individuals.

Member Selection: Familiarity Selecting team members who share prior positive experiences working together may provide a team with a head-start. Not only are team members already aware of “who knows what,” but they also typically demonstrate more willingness to engage in relationships, coordination, and knowledge sharing from the very start.²⁹ Familiarity also may represent an immediate sense of psychological safety and trust among new team members.³⁰

These effects of familiarity in a new team are indicative of a more general result: good teams tend to improve with time.³¹ As members develop increased familiarity with each other, their collective work, their roles, and the work setting, they are able to settle in and focus on working together rather than wasting time and energy getting oriented to new coworkers or circumstances. With shared experience comes shared mental models (as opposed to a collection of individual ones), a shared pool of knowledge (accessible to all), a shared understanding of who is knowledgeable about which aspects of the work (and thereby build the capability to use members’ unique know-how), a shared approach to developing less-skilled members (without disrupting team progress), and a shared commitment to the team and one another.³² This presents a challenge: to be effective, teaming environments need practices in place to ensure that the exchange of individuals on and off the team doesn’t undermine the benefits of familiarity.

When: Reasonable Team Timeline Teams are partially identified by the length of their intended lifespan. Timelines are closely tied to individual responsibilities and accountability, so teams should try to be explicit about timelines, even if the timeline is ambiguous. Mutual awareness of a shared timeline can be important in effective teaming.

How: Aligned Team Rewards and Resources A supportive context can be very helpful to team success. Two of the most important functions served by the context (the external environment in which the team operates, including the organization in which teaming occurs) are determining how the team will be rewarded and providing access to resources beyond the team's boundaries.

For rewards, the answer is simple: performance-contingent rewards and recognition must be given to the team as a whole. When rewards are purely given to individuals, it makes it nearly impossible for the team to work, and teaming feels more like constant negotiation. That does not mean that individual-level incentives cannot exist (e.g., for individual skill development), but team-level incentives (e.g., for demonstrated excellence as a team) must complement them to provide alignment between members of the team.

Similarly, alignment between the team and its context is very important, since teaming rarely happens in a bubble. Part of the team's task is to seek and secure resources—knowledge, capital, networks—from the context. Without access, the team can starve or, worse, lose its way. For success, the context needs to be just as committed to the team as the individuals within it.

Team Launch

The launch of a team is a key moment in its life. In teams from flight crews and orchestras to MBA learning teams and CIA intelligence teams, “what happens in the first few minutes of [members'] time together carries forward throughout a significant portion of the [team's] life,”³³ Even in fluid teaming environments, in which teams may experience many mini-launches over time as members come and go, launch can have lasting consequences for team effectiveness. Put differently, in the words of Ruth Wageman and her co-authors, “the majority of key leadership functions are fulfilled, for better or for worse, by the time a team is only a few *minutes* old.”³⁴

Approaches to Team Launch There are many approaches to leading a team launch. At McKinsey, where teams are frequently created and disbanded, team launch or “kickoff” traditionally consists of three interdependent discussions about what success looks like for each key stakeholder—the client, individual team members, and the team as a whole. As an example, the individual success portion is often called a “team learning” session in which members take turns answering five questions: (1) Where are you in your career? (2) What would you like to get out of this experience? (3) What types of skills would you like to learn? (4) How do you like to work? and (5) What other commitments would you like the team to be aware of and respect? At PepsiCo, team launch is also a carefully choreographed process that includes: (1) identifying and highlighting the core capabilities that each member will bring; (2) articulating the team purpose and inviting responses from team members; (3) creating a sense of shared identity, emphasizing what “we” share and what “our accountabilities” are; (4) identifying the resources the team will need for success and the approach to acquiring them; and (5) putting the norms and expectations for members on the table for the team to revise and ratify.³⁵

Regardless of the organization, a successful launch typically results in a shared understanding of purpose, a shared knowledge of the resources on the team, shared norms for collaboration, and a shared strategy for performance. The launch is not the time to iron out every detail—but rather to create sufficient commonality, agreement, and cohesion that the members' individual identities become integrated with the social identity of the team. In the presence of strong social identity, individuals work harder on collective goals, because how the team performs—both what it achieves and how smoothly it gets there—will play a greater role in how an individual member thinks and feels about herself or himself.³⁶

While there are many ways to launch a team, research suggests one generalizable lesson: teams often underinvest in launch and regret it later. There is a shortsighted tendency to rush launch in order to “get to work,” perhaps even without knowing what “finished” looks like. At launch, the team is putting the conditions in place for success, and it is hard to undo what is done (or not done) at launch.³⁷ Indeed, some teams that get into trouble later on feel the need to “relaunch,” starting over in order to undo difficulties stemming from a poor previous launch. But when done well, launch is a chance for the leader(s) of the team to begin shifting from the role of architect to coach.

“Clicking” at Launch: Collective Intelligence and Communication Patterns Starting with those first few minutes, some teams just seem to “click” – they have the “it” factor that makes them successful. It feels almost like falling in love at first sight (and is, unfortunately, probably equally rare). If one were to step back and observe such a team, would it be possible to deduce whatever “it” is – and then replicate it in other teams when one designs and launches them?

In 2010, researchers published a paper in *Science* demonstrating that teams exhibit collective intelligence (“c”): a battery of tests, completed early in a team’s life, can predict future team performance on a wide variety of future tasks. What defines “c”? Interestingly, it is *not* strongly correlated with the IQ or capacity of individual members of the team – as sports teams sometimes discover, playing well as a team can matter more than recruiting lots of individual stars.³⁸ Instead, “c” increases with three measurable team-level attributes:

- Team members’ average social sensitivity (ability to read emotions in another person’s face);
- Equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking; and
- Proportion of females on the team.³⁹

Several years later, they found the same results for purely virtual teams.⁴⁰

Using advanced sensing technologies, a group of researchers at the MIT Media Lab built on these findings to produce what they call the new science of teams, with clear implications for team leaders. They concluded that team effectiveness really comes down to norms set by team leaders at launch around communication patterns: “the best way to build a great team is not to select individuals for their smarts or accomplishments but to learn how they communicate and to shape and guide the team so that it follows successful communication patterns.”⁴¹ Specifically, the researchers found that successful teams share five defining characteristics:

1. Everyone on the team talks and listens in roughly equal measure, keeping contributions short and sweet;
2. Members face one another, and their conversations and gestures are energetic;
3. Members connect directly with one another – not just with the team leader;
4. Members carry on back-channel or side conversations within the team; and
5. Members periodically break, go exploring outside the team, and bring information back.⁴²

A key part of leading a team launch, therefore, is putting in place the norms and habits necessary to capture and sustain collective intelligence. That becomes harder in the fast-paced dynamic environments characteristic of organizations today, given that for some teams, every day feels like a re-launch. But that requires more diligence at launch, not less.

Team Process Management

What happens once teaming really gets started? Despite great variation in trajectories, all teams share some features and tendencies.

One common theme is that teaming dynamics coalesce quickly and change infrequently. Nonetheless, real-time coaching by leaders can be an important source of team effectiveness – once a team has launched, process management represents most of the impact a leader can have. Leaders wishing to increase team effectiveness through real-time coaching have three tools at their disposal: manage awareness, monitor/adjust balance, and directly intervene.

Managing Awareness of Team Process and Progress One simple action that leaders can use to improve teaming is to manage awareness of typical productive and unproductive patterns of teaming behavior.⁴³ Research suggests, for example, that most teams progress through five stages of development: forming – storming – norming – performing – adjourning.⁴⁴ A number of subsequent models have kept the same general pattern with different language,⁴⁵ and an attempt has been made to summarize all of these models into one (see **Exhibit 5**). Regardless of exactly how one describes the stages, members' awareness of progression through stages, and how collaboration routines evolve accordingly, may help increase the likelihood of team effectiveness and great team performance.⁴⁶

In addition to this sequence of developmental stages (or sometimes in place of them), teams commonly experience a “punctuated equilibrium” when they reach the *midpoint* of the team's lifecycle, driven by an often sudden recognition that half of the time has passed but more than half of the work remains.⁴⁷ That recognition arouses the team to get to work – and pushes the team toward execution, accelerating the stages of development in the process. Despite the great variation in teams, this effect is common to nearly all of them.⁴⁸ Because members are more open to change at that moment, the midpoint is a good time for leaders to intervene.

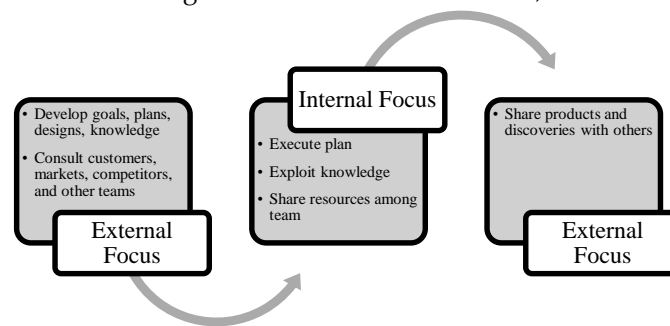
Monitoring and Adjusting Balance Leaders can also help teams maintain a proper balance on several key dimensions of team behavior.

Balance Focus on Process vs. Outcome Should the team, and its leaders, focus more on the process through which work is being accomplished (the means) or the early outcomes of the work (the ends)? Each focus has its strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, outcome-focused teaming is more adaptive to complex, changing environments and innovative approaches because it lacks the constraints of adhering to an established, myopic process.⁴⁹ On the other hand, teaming rooted in a process may outperform on less open-ended tasks, where an established process will predictably result in high performance and adds important stability and clarity to teaming efforts where membership on the team is fluid. The proper balance will ultimately be case-specific, but an awareness of that balance may keep a team from overemphasizing one focus over the other.

Meeting discipline is an area where process-focused leadership can be particularly effective. It is hard to feel like a high-performing team when meetings are unproductive or inefficient. In recognition of that, a key ingredient of the Boston Consulting Group's definition of a high-performing team involves implementing meeting disciplines such as: starting meetings by agreeing on explicit targeted outcomes; being physically and mentally present (e.g., no smartphones); enforcing disciplined time management (e.g., starting and ending on time and empowering a time cop to keep to the agenda); making sure the right people are invited; and explicitly conducting a short “check out” at the end of all meetings to reflect on how the team did on the meeting disciplines, whether it met the targeted outcomes, and what behaviors the team should try to keep, stop, or start going forward.

Balance Focus on Internal Dynamics vs. External Context Traditionally, teams that focused on internal dynamics—i.e., that put their collective heads down and focused on their teamwork—were expected to perform best. It was these inwardly focused teams that would build the most camaraderie, trust, and well-functioning interaction. Recently, however, our image of high-performing teams has come to look more like a hive than a bunker—incorporating an increasingly prominent external component to succeed in, and adapt to, rapidly changing environments.

For example, so-called “X-teams” alternate their focus between internal and external activity on a regular cadence.⁵⁰ First, members go outside the team boundaries to develop effective goals, plans, designs, and knowledge—learning from customers, markets, competitors, and other teams in a period of broad exploration. X-teams and their leaders appreciate that essential resources are rarely located solely within the team, but rather are distributed well beyond it, requiring them to cross the team boundary on a regular basis to acquire information, expertise, vision, innovation, synthesis, alignment, or coordination. Next, members shift their attention back to within the team for a period of extreme execution and exploitation of knowledge collected from the outside, combined with the resources contained within the team. Finally, the team members again shift their focus to external parties, this time sharing their products or discoveries with others in a period of exportation.⁵¹



Source: Based on Ancona, D. & Bresman, H. *X-Teams: How to Build Teams That Lead, Innovate, and Succeed*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2007.

Any team can be an X-team, and in fact many successful ones are. The work on X-teams reminds us that a leader’s job is not just to handle internal dynamics, but also to manage the team’s external connections and needs—a dual focus that outstanding teams consistently maintain.⁵² Particularly when the context for teaming is characterized by a lack of permanence, fluid membership, and environmental volatility, recent research has found an inverted U-shaped relationship between external activities and team effectiveness—i.e., a moderate amount of external activity is likely to result in better performance than very high or very low levels of external activity.⁵³ To thrive in such dynamic environments, leaders of teams need one eye focused on external dynamics and the other on internal dynamics.

Balance Focus on Exploration vs. Execution Team dynamics can also be impacted by the amount and type of pressure exerted on team members to perform. Performance pressure, common in high-risk or make-or-break projects, may encourage the team to adopt a narrow execution mindset rather than an exploration or learning orientation, undermining its ability to integrate novel domain-specific knowledge. The result can be an unfortunate overreliance on general expertise and existing routines, reducing team performance. In other words, as pressure mounts, teams often revert to what they perceive as tried-and-true methods even though those methods may lead to sub-optimal performance.⁵⁴ While it is typically not practical to alleviate performance pressure in these contexts, a leader can help by reframing learning (and not just output) as progress, encouraging each individual to achieve, and to reflect on, a little bit of learning-based progress made every day.⁵⁵

Intervening How do leaders most effectively intervene to improve teaming? Research suggests three predictors of effectiveness:

1. *Type*: Interventions that are *motivational* (increases effort), *consultative* (increases the fit between the team's strategy and its tasks), or *educational* (increases the knowledge and skills required for the tasks) are more effective than other forms of intervention, including those that focus on evaluation⁵⁶ or members' interpersonal relationships;⁵⁷
2. *Timing*: Teams are most predictably open to interventions at three distinct times: (a) at launch, when a group is engaging with its task (as described above); (b) at the midpoint, when half of the allotted time has passed and/or half of the work has been done; and (c) at the end, when the work is finished and new strategies related to team closure or reinvention arise.⁵⁸ These three natural punctuations in a team's existence—short bursts of change—are moments when readiness for leadership intervention is high.⁵⁹ Even teams that operate continuously, without any official beginnings, midpoints, or endings, usually experience them because the teams, or their leaders, create them, whether consciously or unconsciously. Teams with multiple tasks may have multiple beginnings, midpoints, and endings, and therefore multiple times when they are open to effective interventions.⁶⁰
3. *Matching Type and Timing*: For interventions to be effective, the right type needs to occur at the right time. While contingent on context, research on teams suggests that, on average, teams benefit most from motivational interventions at launch, consultative interventions at the midpoint, and educational interventions at the end.⁶¹

The above discussion does not imply that other leader interventions cannot be effective at other times in a team's life, but rather that there are predictable times when certain types of interventions can most influence a team's effectiveness. There are unpredictable times as well, although they will be far more dependent on context and the particular characteristics of a team.⁶²

What About Team Culture?

Some may find it surprising that this note has waited until the very end to discuss team culture. After all, one so often hears that teaming fails because "the team culture wasn't strong enough" or "we needed to be more of a team to succeed."

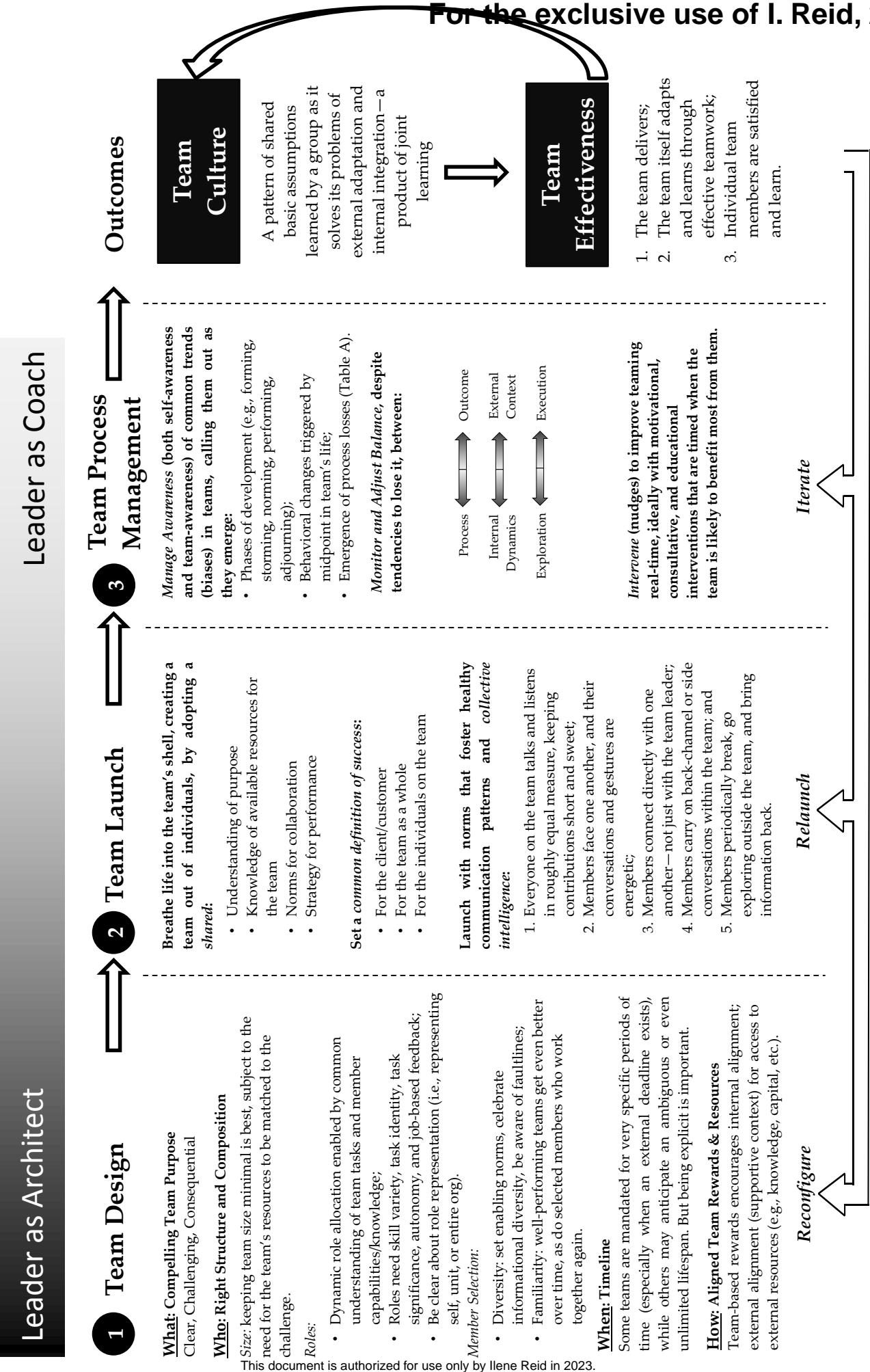
Nonetheless, team culture is better thought of as an outcome than an input (see **Exhibit 1**). Edgar Schein defined culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems."⁶³ Team culture, therefore, is the result of the team's operating system. Team design, launch, and process management are the levers that leaders can pull to improve the team's operating system. Culture then serves two functions: it acts like glue to keep the pieces in place, and it serves as an amplifier for how the team has performed so far. In that sense, the culture that emerges from design and the team's experience with launch and process management can be either a great asset, accelerating the team's trajectory of effectiveness over time, or a great liability, locking in a trajectory of deteriorating performance.

Conclusion: The Growing Importance of Leadership and Teaming

Interaction workers—“employees whose work requires complex interactions with other people and independent judgment”—are the fastest-growing category of employees in advanced economies.⁶⁴ They include professionals such as lawyers, engineers, managers, salespeople, and a range of other knowledge workers, all of whom work almost constantly in *teaming* environments. In today’s interconnected, multi-functional, multi-geography world, teams are being viewed as the fundamental building block of organizational design and execution. If that is true, teaming is likely to only become more important in the next decade.

Even as teaming grows in importance, from global project teams to top management teams, successful teamwork is not easy and may sometimes feel more like the exception than the rule. It becomes even more difficult as the world, and consequently organizations and teams, become more dynamic, adaptive, and flexible. This note is intended to help those who lead (and work) in teaming environments avoid common pitfalls that plague teams, and instead establish the conditions that can help teaming unfold to produce excellent results.

Exhibit 1 Leadership & Teaming: Leader as Architect and Coach



For the exclusive use of I. Reid, 2023.

Exhibit 2 Types of Workplace Team and Task Interdependence

Form of Team Interdependence	Outcome is...	Performance is defined by...	Examples
Action	Execution ⁶⁵	Effective cross-functional coordination to facilitate organization-wide change	Implementation Task Forces
Expertise	Decision-Making or Diagnosis (collect facts, interpret data, narrow alternatives, and make a call)	Finding the sweet spot between converging on an answer too early (suboptimal answer) and too late (right answer no longer useful)	CIA Intelligence Teams (or any problem-solving team)
Learning	Creativity / New Ideas (from perspectives too diverse to come from one individual alone)	Voicing of all ideas, leaving none unexplored or unsaid	New Product Introduction Teams

Source: Casewriter.

Form of Task Interdependence	Outcome is...	Performance is defined by...	Examples
Additive	...the sum of members' contributions	...cumulative performance of members	Sandbags; shoveling snow; call center
Compensatory	...the average of members' contributions	...average performance of members	Voting; estimating money in a jar
Disjunctive	...depends on the strongest members' contribution	...performance of the most competent member	Solving a math problem or brain teaser
Conjunctive	...depends on the weakest members' contribution	...performance of the least competent member	Assembly lines; rush hour parking ban

Source: Steiner, I. D. *Group Process and Productivity*. New York: Academic Press, 1972.

Exhibit 3 Elements of Good Job Design

Element of Job Design	Definition	Impact
Skill Variety	The degree to which the job requires a variety of different activities in carrying out the work, involving the use of a number of different skills and talents of the person	Degree to which individuals experience meaningfulness in the work
Task Identity	The degree to which the job requires doing a whole and identifiable piece of work from beginning to end	
Task Significance	The degree to which the job has a substantial impact on the lives of other people, whether those people are in the immediate organization or the world at large	
Autonomy	The degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out	Degree to which Individuals experience responsibility for the work
Job-Based Feedback	The degree to which carrying out the work activities required by the job provides the individual with direct and clear information about the effectiveness of his or her performance	Degree to which individuals have knowledge of the actual results of the work activities

Sources: Hackman, J. R., and Oldham, G. R. "Development of the Job Diagnostic Survey." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 60 (1975): 159-170; and Oldham, G. R., and Hackman, J. R. "Not What It Was and Not What It Will Be: The Future of Job Design Research." *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 31 (2010): 463-479.

Exhibit 4 Four Classifications of Representation on Teams

In their work on innovative product development, Steven Wheelwright and Kim Clark described four types of teams with different levels of representation—functional teams, lightweight teams, heavyweight teams, and autonomous teams:

- *Functional* teams collaborate within a functional expertise (e.g., finance, engineering, marketing, etc.) without interdependencies with other functional experts—and when their phase of the task is done, the “throw it over the wall” to another functional team. On functional teams, individual team members typically represent their immediate community or role.
- *Lightweight* teams operate in contexts with predictable interdependencies between different divisions, such that responsibility for the work—and authority to make it happen—remains with members of the individual divisions, and the team’s task is primarily to coordinate timing and interfaces in order to ensure the end product or service is delivered in unison and “fits” together. The primary function of lightweight teams is therefore communication across divisional boundaries. In lightweight teams, individual team members typically represent their unit or function.
- *Heavyweight* teams, in contrast to lightweight teams, actually receive authority to address tradeoffs between divisions on behalf of the entire organization. Heavyweight teams therefore allow individuals on the team to interact differently than they normally would in cross-divisional contexts. To function as intended, individual team members on heavyweight teams must never represent the interests of their own group, but instead collectively figure out the best way to “knit things together so that the overall project is success—whether the “knitting together” is to optimize product performance, quality, cost, customer convenience, or speed to market.”
- *Autonomous* teams sit outside of the existing organization altogether and are brought together, as if they were an entirely new organization, in a context where they can freely create a new business model. In autonomous teams, individual team members even leave their organizational affiliation behind and, unconstrained by business model or other organizational constraints, are meant to solely represent the best possible solution to the team’s task.

Central to Wheelwright and Clark’s theory of innovation was that representation on teams would determine the degree of innovation the team was permitted to develop.

Source: Wheelwright, S. C., and Clark, K. B. *Revolutionizing Product Development: Quantum Leaps in Speed, Efficiency, and Quality*. New York: Free Press, 1992; and Christensen, C. M., & Kaufman, S. P. “Assessing Your Organization’s Capabilities: Resources, Processes and Priorities,” HBS No. 607-014 (Boston: Harvard Business Publishing, August 21, 2008), 7.

Exhibit 5 A Synthesized, General Model of Group Development

STAGES	"LIVE" ISSUES IN THE GROUP FOR:				EMERGENT STRUCTURES
	<i>People</i>	<i>Relationships</i>	<i>Task Behavior</i>	<i>Other Groups</i>	
(1) INCLUSION	Membership, including place in group and commitment to group	Dependency, especially vis-à-vis external authority	Orientation: learning the particulars and expectations for the task	Differentiation from other groups: who we are and aren't; who is and isn't us	<i>Boundary structure, start of communication structure</i>
(2) CONTROL	Amount and direction of personal influence	Conflict around power and influence internally	Organization: deciding who does what when	Other groups mostly ignored at this stage; perhaps some modeling of "successful" groups	<i>Influence structure</i>
(3) AFFECTION	Acceptance as valued person in group	Cohesion: finding closeness that is neither too much nor too little	Execution: carrying out the task within the structures created	Competition with other groups	<i>Affect or sociometric structure</i>
(4) GROWTH	Experimentation with new beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors	Support and true interdependence among members	Adaptive (i.e., environment-responsive) problem solving	Coordination with other groups	<i>Demise of rigid and self-perpetuating structures</i>

Source: J. Richard Hackman, drawing on work by B. Tuckman, W. Bennis, W. C. Schutz, R. Mann, and others.

Other models include:

- Define the situation; develop new skills; develop appropriate roles; carry out the work (Hare)
- Orientation; dissatisfaction; resolution; production; termination (LaCoursiere)
- Generate plans, ideas, and goals; choose/agree on alternatives, goals, and policies; resolve conflicts and develop norms; perform action tasks and maintain cohesion (McGrath)

Source: Hare, A. P. *Handbook of Small Group Research*, 2nd ed. New York: Free Press, 1976; LaCoursiere, R. B. *The Life Cycle of Groups: Group Developmental Stage Theory*. New York: Human Sciences Press, 1980; and McGrath, J. E. *Groups: Interaction and Performance*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984.

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