



A Note on Team Process

In the current competitive environment, people find themselves doing more and more of their work in groups. Individuals can make higher quality decisions in shorter periods of time when they have the necessary expertise and the tasks are relatively simple.¹ But when tasks are highly complex, demand a diversity of skills, or require commitment and buy-in from the involved parties, teams are usually more effective. Indeed, research shows that by combining the expertise and experience of several individuals, a team working together can produce more and provide better quality results than an individual acting alone.²

However, groups are often inefficient and ineffective. Team management is frequently derided as management by committee – compromising individual accountability and creativity by pulling decision-making to the lowest common denominator. The purpose of this note is to make teamwork less difficult by helping you better understand how teams work, and how you can work better on teams. By paying attention to team process – *how* the team goes about achieving its formal task – you can begin to fully realize the potential of teams.

In this note, we will address the process skills that help team members build highly effective teams. First, we will introduce four aspects of effective team process. Then, we will examine group development to demonstrate how you can proactively go about creating an effective team. While our discussion will be brief, it should provide you with the basic tools to observe how these aspects of process are unfolding in your own teams, and what you can do to improve their functioning. Finally, we will address two challenges presented by the current global work environment: global teams and virtual teams.

Effective Team Process

A group of people working together does not automatically equal a team. Through hard work, time spent together, and attention to team process, groups can evolve into high performing teams.³ Teams are composed of unique individuals, each bringing particular expectations, assumptions, and feelings to the team. As the team develops, relationships among team members can prove either beneficial or detrimental to the team's purpose. Being able to observe and diagnose a team's process will enable you to understand what is taking place both overtly and covertly in the team's behavior. It can also provide you with insights on how to intervene when necessary. Assessing process is not easy; it requires playing detective: developing hypotheses about people's feelings and intentions based on their behavior, reading both visible and invisible clues, and paying as much attention to what doesn't happen as to what does. Because you are part of the team, and maybe even part of the team's problems, it is very hard to be objective. With experience and practice your observation skills

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and judgment about group process will improve and enable you to spot potential difficulties early and act on them to improve the team's effectiveness.

As mentioned above, we will focus our attention on four aspects of team process that have a profound influence on team effectiveness and that all team members can impact — decision-making, participation, influence, and conflict. We will begin by discussing the process of decision-making. While there are many different kinds of teams assembled to accomplish a multitude of tasks, they all have to make decisions. Our examination of the decision-making process will provide the context with which we will next explore participation, influence, and conflict.

A Purposeful and Rigorous Decision-Making Process

Most teams convene to solve problems or capitalize on opportunities – this involves making decisions. Knowing how to effectively handle the process of problem-solving is key to the success of a team. There are many traps to be avoided. One of the most insidious is the trap of being solution-minded.⁴ When faced with a problem, the team immediately begins to look for a solution, and frequently accepts the first reasonable sounding solution that emerges. Research shows that groups tend to select the first solution that receives favorable support from opinion leaders in the group, even when technically better solutions are introduced subsequently.⁵ Following such a process can result in simplistic solutions that do not address the real problems facing the team.

A team decision-making process that encourages critical thinking and debate will include these four steps:

1. **Identify and explore the problem.** Too often, teams assume they know the problem they face, when they really know only the symptoms of the problem. For example, a task force may convene to address the problem of slumping sales. If they simply focus on increasing sales to meet year-end goals, they will have missed the opportunity to learn that customers are turning away due to inferior customer support. This is a good time to challenge the group's assumptions and collect data to accurately frame and define the problem. The team must also spend time analyzing the degree of importance of the problem and the timetable by which it must be solved.⁶
2. **Generate possible solutions.** This is another facet of problem-solving that solution-oriented groups overlook. Team members should feel free to put forth all of their ideas without fear of censure or criticism. Consequently, it is vital to create an atmosphere of inquiry and openness – one of psychological safety.⁷ There are many techniques that can be used here – the most popular of which are brainstorming and nominal group technique.⁸ The key here is to spend plenty of time on this step before moving on to refining and critiquing the possible solutions.
3. **Refine and critique possible solutions.** Once everyone has had an opportunity to share their ideas, the team must meet the difficult challenge of crafting one solution out of the many options. Throughout the process of decision-making, emerging data and information must be incorporated into the team's understanding of the problem. If new data are uncovered that seriously changes the situation, the team should revisit steps one and two. The ideal is to achieve consensus – an agreement that meets the team's performance objectives and with which everyone is comfortable even if it is not their first choice. Consensus cannot always be achieved, however, and teams must carefully manage the tradeoff between consensus and team member satisfaction and performance.⁹ Another common trap at this juncture is conflict avoidance. Optimally, the decision-making process

has, up to this point, occurred in a relatively non-judgmental, open environment. Team members' ideas and different values are now evaluated, and conflict is natural. The challenge is to keep the conflict constructive.

4. **Implement the solution.** As long as each team member feels that his or her opinions were carefully considered during the decision-making process, each member should be committed to implementation. However, that alone is not enough to see the chosen solution come to fruition. Teams need to actively manage implementation, determining what tasks need to be done and who has responsibility for each of those tasks. This is a crucial step, and one that frequently does not receive enough attention.

Avoiding the impulse to rush to a solution by taking time to work through each of these four steps, teams can best leverage the varied competencies and unique experiences of each group member. We now turn our attention to *how* team members interact in order to accomplish the team's work.

*Participation*¹⁰

Participation – who participates, how often, when and to what effect – is the easiest aspect of group process to observe. Some disparity in levels of participation is normal, but when large disparities exist, it is usually a clue that the process is not effective. Several factors contribute to uneven participation. Typically, people who are higher in status, more knowledgeable, or simply more talkative by nature, tend to participate more actively. People who care the most about a given issue (and may therefore be the least objective) are more motivated to participate than others who may have better ideas to offer.

Cultural and gender differences can also affect participation. Linguistic style includes such features as directness or indirectness, pacing and pausing, turn-taking, word choice, tone, rate of speed, degree of loudness, questions, humor, and apologies. It is a set of culturally learned signals by which we not only communicate what we mean, but also interpret others' meaning. For example, research shows that women are likely to wait for recognition to speak, link what they are saying to the previous speaker's statement, and require longer pauses in conversation before offering a comment. These style preferences may lead women to participate less and to be accorded less authority when they do speak.¹¹ (**Important Note:** When discussing demographic differences we are always referring to average differences across groups. As we know, there is variation around the average within any group. Thus, we do not know where a particular individual of a particular group falls on the normal distribution. For example, there are some men who wait for recognition to speak, and there are some women who do not.)

Imbalance in participation can be a problem because substantial research shows that the most frequently stated ideas tend to be adopted by the group, regardless of their quality.¹² Thus, large imbalances in participation can result in potentially good ideas being underrepresented in the discussion, or perhaps not even expressed. Another negative consequence of uneven participation is that low participators are likely to pay less attention, lose commitment to the task, or become frustrated and angry – especially if they have tried to enter the discussion but had been ignored or cut off by high participators. These negative attitudes result not only in poorer quality decisions but also in less commitment to implementing the group's decision.

Some questions to consider in observing participation include the following:

1. Who are the high participators? Why? To what effect? Who are the low participators? Why? To what effect?
2. Are there any shifts in participation, such as an active participator suddenly becoming silent? Do you see any reason for this in the group's interaction, such as criticism from a higher status person, or a shift in topic? Is it a sign of withdrawal?
3. How are silent people treated? Is their silence taken by others to mean consent? Disagreement? Disinterest? Why do you think they are silent?
4. Who talks to whom? Who responds to whom? Do participation patterns reflect coalitions that impede or control the discussion? Are the interaction patterns consistently excluding certain people who need to be supported or brought into the discussion?

Interventions. Members can act as gate keepers, insuring that all members who want to make a contribution have the opportunity to do so, or by being encouraging and helping to create a culture of acceptance. One way this can be done is to try to *clarify* a point that someone had made earlier that seemed to receive too little consideration - going back to that person's point by saying something like, "Tom, let me see if I understand what you said a moment ago." A related technique is simply to *reinforce* a prior point by asking the person to elaborate on it- "Teri, I was interested in what you were saying earlier; can you elaborate on it?" Similarly, a very direct technique for bringing out silent people is to simply *query* them- "Jamal, you haven't said a word during this discussion; what are your ideas?"

*Influence*¹³

Influence and participation are not the same thing. Some people may speak very little, yet capture the attention of the whole group when they do speak. Others may talk frequently but go unheard. Influence, like participation, is often a function of status, experience, competence, and to some degree personal style. It is normal for some people to have more influence on a group's process than others, and this fact is not necessarily a sign that a group is ineffective. However, when one individual or subgroup has so much influence on a discussion that others' ideas are rejected out of hand, the group's effectiveness will usually suffer as alternatives fail to be probed fully. Imbalance in influence is particularly dangerous when those with the most influence are the highest ranking or loudest team members, rather than the ones with the most expertise.

One way of checking relative influence is to watch the reactions of the other group members. Someone who has influence is not only likely to have others listening attentively, but is also less likely to be interrupted or challenged by the others. He or she may be physically seated at or near the head of the table or near the center of a subgroup. Those who feel isolated and less influential also may begin to move physically in and out of the group – for example, lean forward or backward in their chairs, or arrive late or leave early for most meetings.

In assessing influence patterns within a group, you may find the following questions useful:

1. Which members are listened to when they speak? What ideas are they expressing?
2. Which members are ignored when they speak? Why? What are their ideas? Is the group losing valuable inputs simply because some are not being heard?
3. Are there any shifts in influence? If so, whose influence is shifting? Why?

4. Is there any rivalry within the group? Are there struggles among individuals or subgroups for leadership? Sometimes two or three members may consistently agree and support each other or consistently disagree and oppose one another.
5. Who interrupts whom? Does this reflect relative power within the group?
6. Are minority views consistently ignored regardless of possible merit?

Interventions. If some individuals or sub-groups are dominating group discussions, one strategy is simply to *support or reinforce* the views of those members whose positions are not being considered – “I think that we’re not giving enough thought to Andrea’s and Miguel’s position, and I think we should explore it further before dropping it.” Another intervention is to actually *say* that the opinions of certain people are dominating the discussion – “Mie-Jin, you’ve made your point quite forcefully and clearly, but I’d also like to hear the other side of the question before we go further.” Similarly, another technique is to ask the group to *broaden* the discussion – “The managers seem to agree strongly on what needs to be done, but I’d like to hear more about what the customer representatives think are the problems.”

Conflict

If a team is to become highly productive, their ability to have constructive conflict and creative abrasion is vital.¹⁴ The need to facilitate conflict within a diverse team embodies one of the core paradoxes of teamwork – team members must embrace individual differences to take full advantage of each member’s talents while celebrating the team’s collective identity and goals to create a safe environment in which to have conflict.¹⁵ An honest discussion of team members’ different points of view and frank questioning of underlying assumptions results in stronger, more creative decisions. This kind of conflict, known as task conflict because it relates to the work of the team, is healthy and essential to a high-producing team.¹⁶ Conflict, however, is not always constructive. Escalating task conflict can create stress, strained emotions, and tense relationships among team members. This kind of conflict, known as affective or interpersonal conflict, can quickly undermine the effectiveness of teams. These negative emotions can lead team members to personalize substantive debates and develop cycles of negative attributions about the motives and capabilities of other team members.

In contrast, some teams suffer from a lack of task conflict called groupthink. In teams experiencing groupthink, members not only voluntarily restrict voicing the criticisms and concerns they have about other members’ ideas, they also begin to have fewer objections because they cease to rigorously critique the proposals.¹⁷ Homogenous teams and time pressure further exacerbate the predilection for groupthink.

Effective teams seek to engage in task conflict while minimizing affective conflict.¹⁸ As David Hume, a philosopher, put it, “truth springs from arguments amongst friends.” This is easier said than done because of the conscious and unconscious concerns team members bring to the table. Team members are grappling with three loaded questions, “Am I accepted? Do I have value? And do I have influence?”¹⁹ Because members often seek the answers to these questions in the interaction of the group, they can take task conflict personally. One of the main benefits of teamwork is the diversity of viewpoints team members bring to bear on their task. If conflict is a problem in the team (either the lack of task conflict or the presence of affective conflict), then it is very unlikely that all those points of view will be heard. It is also less likely that team members will share sensitive information or feel comfortable pointing out inconsistencies in others’ thinking.

Once affective conflict has emerged, it is important not to ignore its existence. Unfortunately, many groups in business develop norms that allow only for the expression of positive feelings or feelings of disagreement, but not anger. The problem with suppressing strong negative feelings is that they usually resurface later. For example, a person who is angry about what someone said in an earlier meeting might actually be unknowingly retaliating later in the discussion when he or she disagrees with that person or criticizes his or her idea regardless of its merit. Retaliation is usually disguised in terms of substantive matters and often has only a hint of irrationality to it. For example, as individuals pursue their personal agendas or jockey for power and status in the team, problem-solving meetings can degenerate into speech-making sessions or polemic debates in which antagonists strive to win arguments rather than address problems. Dealing with such disruptive and inappropriate behavior is especially difficult for self-managed teams to cope with.²⁰ As a rule, it is better to address such behavior as soon as possible; the longer it is allowed to go on, the harder it will be for the team to discuss the problem as frustrations and anger rise.

Teams with high levels of affective conflict are usually aware of it. Whether a team has a problem with task conflict is less obvious and often involves paying attention to nonverbal behavior. Some questions for assessing conflict patterns in teams are:

1. Does the team tend to consider only a few alternatives when problem-solving? Are areas of agreement overemphasized while leaving areas of disagreement unexplored? What is done if people disagree?
2. What criteria are used to establish agreement (e.g., majority vote, consensus, no opposition interpreted as agreement)?
3. Do team members advocate more than they inquire? Do they actively listen to each other? Is the team open to external views?
4. How do team members feel about their participation in the team? How do they react in team meetings (e.g. apathetic, frustrated, defensive, warm, enthusiastic)?
5. Are team members overly competitive with each other? Are team members overly nice or polite to each other? Are only positive feelings expressed? Do members agree with each other too readily? What happens when members disagree?

Interventions. When the level of conflict in a team is so high that effective communication is impaired, it is usually time for the team to suspend the task discussion and examine its own processes in an attempt to define and solve the conflicts. Teams trying to minimize affective conflict and encourage task conflict can try these measures: Be clear in the beginning about what is appropriate behavior between members. Reinforce and support desirable behavior, while making sure to raise the issue of inappropriate behavior directly (perhaps off-line if that would be more effective).²¹ Ground discussions in current data to minimize the personal nature of the discussion.²² Generate several meaningful alternatives for the team to consider. Create a sense of fairness by empowering or sharing power across team members. And make sure team goals are commonly held – a great deal of conflict is rooted in dissent about the direction the team has taken.²³

To combat groupthink, teams can assign a team member to play devil's advocate for important deliberations. The team leader, if there is one, should also demonstrate the value of criticism by making sure to spend time exploring criticism of proposals or ideas. When a group is smoothing over and avoiding important problems, for example, a useful intervention might be, "We seem to have a lot of agreement, but I wonder if we have really tackled some of the tougher underlying issues" or "Could we be looking at the problem too narrowly? It might be useful to consider X which isn't on

our agenda but seems to be related to what we have been talking about.” Finally, outsiders can be consulted to provide alternative points of view.

Team Development

As we are sure you have experienced, teams do not just meet and begin working together effectively. Extensive research shows that teams tend to go through phases as they mature. Rather than review the complex findings of that research here, we will present an overview of the key prescriptions for building an effective team that emerge from that work. Needless to say, there are all kinds of teams with varying mandates. The nature of the team’s task dictates to a large extent how that team should organize and go about its work. There is not one right way to engage in teamwork. That said, through their lifecycles teams grapple with the challenges of the following three phases: getting started, getting the work done, and monitoring the work.

Getting Started

The early meetings are critical - the patterns and norms established in the first few meetings are potent and will affect the team for the rest of its time together. Consequently, it is vital to prepare as much as possible before the team first convenes to build a solid foundation which can survive the vicissitudes of team life.

Crafting the Team Team effectiveness is, of course, impacted by the ability and motivation of the team members. The first concerns are the size and composition of the team. As a general rule, smaller is always better than larger. The ideal size for a problem-solving team seems to be between five and ten. As size increases, it is more difficult to build team member coordination and commitment and to have optimal participation or meaningful dialogue and debate.

Team members can and do learn new knowledge and competencies as the team develops, but the majority of the key competencies should be present when the team convenes. Technical, conceptual, and interpersonal competencies should be considered. Too frequently, we assume that people know how to be effective team members. Yet, more and more research is demonstrating that many workers could benefit greatly from team-skills training. This includes learning about process skills, effective means of communication, active listening, and constructive ways in which to handle conflict and solve problems. To some extent, this knowledge can be modeled by experienced team players within the team, but, in some situations, outside training will be beneficial.

The context within which a team does its work can have a profound impact on its effectiveness. It is beyond the purview of this note to discuss these matters in detail, but it is important to note that a team does not work in isolation. The team is generally part of a larger organization from which the team must derive its mandate and resources and/or the work of the team will be utilized by others in the parent organization.²⁴ In selecting team members, these realities should be kept in mind. Does the team as a whole possess organizational credibility and members with influence related to the problem? Are the functional areas affected by the team’s work represented? The exclusion of important stakeholders will not only generate resentment, but also reduce the probability that the team’s recommendations will be implemented.

Building Commitment A major concern for group members is their degree of acceptance or inclusion in the team. Individuals are determining their level of commitment, sizing up the other team members, deciding how to position and involve themselves in team activities. Unless people identify with and feel a part of the team, they will not feel jointly responsible for the team and its

goals. It is especially important to pay attention to feelings of membership and engagement in teams with work style or demographic diversity. To capitalize on the potential synergy of talents and perspectives, teams must avoid evolving into cliques of in-groups and out-groups, tendencies that can be exacerbated by diversity. For instance, team members may have different cognitive styles such as those measured by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI™), which assesses how people prefer to gather and process data.²⁵

As you might imagine, diversity in cognitive style can be of potential benefit to teams.²⁶ But two things can prevent teams from realizing that benefit. One: because homogeneity “smooths interaction” and “increases comfort levels,” people have the tendency (of which they are generally not conscious) to assemble teams composed of members with cognition patterns similar to themselves.²⁷ Two: when a cognitively diverse team is assembled, they may have a difficult time working with each other in the beginning. By definition, cognitively diverse teams are composed of members who approach decisions differently. While this can be beneficial for the range and creativity of decisions the team makes, it makes team process more difficult. As with multinational teams, cognitively diverse teams need to be aware of their differences in approach, appreciate the benefits other team members’ styles bring to the discussion, and discuss ways in which they can adapt to each other.

Leadership Some teams convene with an appointed leader. Other teams, such as self-managed teams (which are the most challenging kinds of teams), are left to determine on their own how leadership will work. Some self-managed teams choose to elect a formal leader, and others decide to continue without formal leadership or with rotating leadership. In virtually all teams – traditional teams with appointed leaders, self-managed teams with elected leaders, and teams without formal leadership – informal leadership often emerges. Research shows that self-managed teams without some sort of leader (of which members are aware) perform worse than those with a leader.²⁸ (See **Exhibit 1** for a description of key leadership functions that can be fulfilled by an appointed or emergent leader or leaders.)

Getting to Work

Setting Goals Setting demanding performance goals might be the most important thing a team does.²⁹ Team purpose and team goals are two different matters. The team purpose is usually imposed from above (e.g. a task force may convene to improve customer satisfaction), while the specific goals that will constitute the team’s work are developed within the team itself (e.g. cutting response time to customer complaints in half and establishing a program that brings key customers to visit the company on a quarterly basis). In a study of dozens of teams in different organizations, researchers learned that meaningful performance challenges were key to the eventual development of teams. In fact, in their sample, each of the groups who lacked a common meaningful performance challenge failed to develop into a team.³⁰ By defining a measurable endpoint, concrete performance goals help build momentum and commitment and give the team a framework in which to work. Although the importance of performance goals may seem obvious, many teams do not take enough time to formulate performance goals and insure they are commonly held. As the team progresses, an action plan with specific milestones, timetables, and monitoring activities should be established to keep the team focused and create an appropriate sense of urgency.

Establishing a Working Approach Developing a mutually agreed upon working approach is just as important as having a purpose and performance goals held in common. Basic logistics (attendance, participation, confidentiality, and preparation expectations) can be a major source of conflict, so they should be agreed upon in advance. The team also needs to determine the steps they

will take to achieve their goals (making sure to build in some quick wins along the way), and figure out how to apportion the work equitably amongst the team's members. Determining roles and responsibilities is key to doing work most efficiently. Some subgrouping is often the most constructive way for a large team to get its work done. But if subgrouping is necessary, it is important to also introduce integrative mechanisms to keep all members aligned. In successful teams, every member does his or her fair share of work and contributes in a concrete way to the collective work product.³¹ Finding the right approach is particularly difficult on teams where members must continue with their regular responsibilities, as each team member may not have equal time to contribute to the work of the team.³²

Similarly, over time different team members may develop varied levels of commitment to the team's task. Some may become disengaged and freeloader off the work of others. Social loafing, as this tendency is called, is attributed to a number of factors: loss of personal accountability, motivational loss due to the sharing of rewards, coordination loss as more people perform the task. Social loafing can beget more social loafing as team members perceive inequities of effort.³³ It is a hard problem to fix once it starts to happen. Prevention is the best policy; perceived inequities of work is one of the key sources of team conflict. Discuss work expectations up front. Hold individual members personally responsible for some aspect of the team task. Make sure everyone is involved in meaningful high relevance tasks, and not simply the high status members of the team.

Influencing Team Culture As the team spends time together, the culture – the basic assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors that are “taken for granted” by team members – will begin to emerge.³⁴ The team's culture is influenced in large measure by the team's task, the assumptions each team member brings with him or her about how teams should operate, and the broader context within which the team resides (especially the larger organizational culture). Because culture is an emergent phenomenon, team members can only indirectly influence it. Efforts can be made to indirectly shape the culture by setting clear rules of behavior ranging from ‘we will all be on time for meetings’ to ‘nothing leaves this room unless the team agrees to make it public.’ It is worth taking the time to discuss what kind of culture that team hopes to develop and define clear rules of engagement, rather than leaving it to chance. When teams feel time pressure, they often leave this step out, only to run into avoidable difficulties later. Of course, setting rules will only affect the norms if they are enforced. Teams usually develop norms about (1) distribution of power and influence; (2) communication patterns in the group (e.g. are interruptions okay?); (3) what topics are considered legitimate for discussion (e.g. can emotions be expressed; are topics dropped when the leader expresses hesitance?); and (4) how conflicts are managed.³⁵

Once a team has established basic working structures, team members must get on with the work the team has assigned for itself. As that happens, shared concerns, thoughts and approaches will emerge among individuals on the team. As team members find allies within the group, it becomes safer for them to participate in discussions and engage in conflict. This step in group development is vital; it will eventually allow members to reveal more of their individual expertise and experience to the team, resulting in increased participation, and with that, maximum utilization of skills. Note, however, that this emergent subgrouping can also have an adverse impact on team development. Cliques and coalitions can develop which undermine the performance of the team as a whole.

Reviewing/monitoring the work

Self-Examination Processes for Continuous Learning Effective teams set up rules and norms that allow for continuous reflection on team process. It is important that team members believe it is appropriate to talk about how the team is doing within the team (instead of in just one-on-one conversations outside of meetings). One method of facilitating these discussions is to allot

twenty or thirty minutes at the end of every third or fourth meeting to go around the room and gather members' observations about how the team is doing. When paired with less-frequent, but more in-depth examinations into process, these discussions allow the team to stop unhealthy and ineffective norms and behaviors before they become entrenched or interfere with the effectiveness of the team.

Actively Managing the Midpoint A team's culture, once evolved, can serve as an effective means of coordinating and regulating the team members' behavior. However, the team's norms, roles, and subgroups can also come to inhibit creativity and adaptability. If the team has always done something one way, it will be less likely to think of more efficient or creative methods to accomplish the same task.³⁶ Research on what is referred to as punctuated equilibrium³⁷, tells us that the most potent time to change the rules and norms of a team is around the midpoint of their activities. At the midpoint between a team's first meeting and the deadline for its work, a "revolution" often occurs where the team challenges and changes the working approach they have been using. By this point, members will have had enough experience working together to reflect on their activities, while still having enough time left to make significant changes to their climate and process. They are usually eager to begin seriously working on the task. Consequently, the midpoint serves as the ideal time for teams to examine their process and culture and determine what needs to be changed. It can be helpful at this critical juncture to bring in outside observers who are able to look at the team with fresh eyes. When change is needed, explicit discussion about what needs to be changed and how that change will occur is vital. Some groups even find it helpful to write up contracts stating how things will change.

Evaluating the Team's Effectiveness When the team has finished its work, it is important to do a thorough evaluation of team outcomes. Effective teams meet the following three outcome criteria: (1) they *perform*, that is, the team's product meets the expectations of those who use it; (2) individual team members are *satisfied*, that is, each team member's experience contributes to his or her personal well-being and development; and (3) they *adapt*, that is, the team experience enhances each member's capability to work and learn together in the future.³⁸ While the experience is fresh in team members' minds, they should sit down and debrief their time together finding out what did and did not work, and asking how the process could be improved in the future. This review process will serve not only as a powerful learning tool, but also as an opportunity for team members to have closure on their team experience. It is a time to celebrate and exploit the power of positive feedback and recognition.

Teamwork and Globalization

Teamwork is always difficult. As we mentioned at the outset, two current challenges deserve special mention: global teams and working in virtual teams.

Global Teams

In our global economy, it is likely that you will be asked to serve on a team with members of different nationalities. With diversity comes an increase in the potential for both conflict and creativity. Teams working on tasks requiring creativity benefit the most from demographic diversity, teams working on computational tasks benefit a little, and coordinative teams (working on tasks requiring elaborate, well-coordinated interaction amongst team members) benefit the least, and very well may be harmed.³⁹ The increased difficulty a multinational team can face will be somewhat mitigated if many of its members are 'internationalists'.⁴⁰ Individuals with experience living in other

countries, or with parents or spouses of other nationalities tend to more easily manage differences associated with nationality diversity.

Nationality can influence both visible individual characteristics, such as appearance, language, and demeanor, and invisible characteristics, such as values and cognitive schema (what one knows, assumes, or perceives about the world). Differences in demeanor – characteristics such as eye contact, interruption patterns, punctuality, and conversational style – can result in stereotyping. These differences also frequently lead to affective conflict as a consequence of misunderstandings and miscommunication.⁴¹ In fact, scholars believe that large variance in demeanor across individual team members can adversely impact most aspects of team functioning. But, in many instances, the benefits multinational teams derive from their diversity of values and life experiences more than make up for the process losses that can be caused by the differences in demeanor.

Diversity in a team also has consequences for subgrouping. Considerable research shows that individuals are more likely to communicate and be comfortable with others who are similar to them. This is a particular danger in teams with a few small groups of people from different nations where it is very easy to fall into competing coalitions along national lines, especially when there are differences in language. In contrast, teams with individual members from many countries do not have these pre-existing, natural subgroups and, instead, are more likely to form their own group identity.⁴² In conclusion, however, there is growing evidence that in the long-term, as teams with diverse members recognize and work through the complexities outlined above, they demonstrate more problem-solving prowess and creativity than do homogeneous teams.⁴³

Virtual Teams

Another reality of organizational life today is that many teams are virtual. Process skills become even more important in a virtual team where trust is simply harder to develop. The vast majority of communication in virtual teams is not face-to-face communication. This adversely impacts trust development because people rely so heavily on contextual cues and nonverbal communication to help them make judgments about the character and competence of others and to decipher communications. For example, when some of the members of a virtual team are physically located together (as frequently occurs), they are likely to trust and get along with each other far more than with team members located elsewhere.⁴⁴

Virtual teams must rely heavily on electronic tools such as email, fax, voicemail, telephone, videoconferencing, and “virtual workspaces.” These are adequate when the parties communicating already know each other well. For example, when communicating through email, individuals are less likely to share information and more likely to escalate conflict.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, teams using solely digital communication are much less likely to share background information – an important antecedent to trust.⁴⁶ There are, however, some advantages to using electronic communication (or distance technology tools) that should be leveraged (see **Exhibit 2** for a summary of advantages and disadvantages of email). For example, for many communicating in a second language, writing is preferable to speaking.

Communication and process problems in virtual teams are amplified when they are composed of members of many different nationalities. People of different nationalities can have different orientations toward communication. In some countries, such as the U.S., Canada, and northern European nations, the verbal content of communication is much more important than the medium through which it is delivered. In other countries, including some in Asia and the Middle East, the context in which communication occurs (e.g. the setting, physical exchanges) greatly augments the

meaning of verbal communication. In virtual teams with members who rely heavily on context for meaning, decisions about communication tools should reflect the need for higher levels of context.

If you have observed that your virtual team is having difficulty with participation, influence, conflict, or decision-making, these suggestions may help. If team members are not going to meet each other face-to-face, invest in spending time at the beginning by having each member provide pertinent biographical information - even though it can be awkward using distance technologies. Individuals determine if they can trust others by assessing their integrity, ability, and benevolence. Thus, without key background information, trust is unlikely to develop. Do not assume understandings that have not been explicitly stated - misunderstandings are more likely to occur in non face-to-face interaction. When the virtual team is also a culturally diverse team, members should consider taking the time in the beginning to discuss each other's differences and how that will affect the working of the team. Research demonstrates that virtual teams who neglect this step do so at their own peril. They are less likely to ever rise above mediocrity.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Collaboration in teams with diverse individuals, near and far, has become ubiquitous in today's organizations. As we have seen, teamwork requires a great deal of skill and versatility. It is hard to create a team culture of inquiry and psychological safety that enables individuals to share and build on their unique perspectives and expertise. We have reviewed a lot, and it is unlikely that all of these process skills will be relevant to your team at a given point in time, or that you can attend to them all simultaneously. To help you think about the effectiveness of your team process, the following list summarizes the hallmarks of effective team process:

- Clear performance goals
- Maximum utilization of talents and points of view
- Diversity with integration
- Mutual accountability
- Purposeful and rigorous decision-making strategies
- Conflict resolution processes
- Self-examination processes for continuous learning

Prevention is the easiest kind of process intervention. So, if possible, invest time in the earliest days of the team to build a strong foundation. No matter how strong your foundation, however, challenges will still emerge to be addressed as well as opportunities to be capitalized on. With self-reflection and practice, your expertise in wielding teamwork tools can, and will improve. Excellent team members are made, not born.

Exhibit 1 A Checklist for Team Leaders**Have you put conditions in place for team effectiveness?**

- ✓ Does the team have a clear mandate or purpose?
- ✓ Are the right people on the team?
- ✓ Has the team structured itself so that work can be done efficiently?

Has your team agreed upon a common, meaningful performance goal?

- ✓ Have you clarified performance expectations and deliverables?
- ✓ Do you revisit the goal frequently to insure the team is still committed to it, and it remains meaningful?

Do you facilitate communication within the team? Do other team members?

- ✓ Do you keep track of who is participating, and encourage those who are not?
- ✓ Do you make space for different conversational and participation styles?
- ✓ Do you encourage active listening? Does your team concentrate on what is meant rather than how it is said?
- ✓ Is influence based on task-relevant knowledge and skill rather than external status and personal dominance?

Do you have a rigorous decision-making process?

- ✓ Does the team spend sufficient time identifying and framing the problem?
- ✓ Are information and alternatives identified and examined thoroughly?
- ✓ How does the team ultimately make decisions? Is the team aware of and comfortable with the process that is used?

Do you facilitate the development of appropriate norms and rules of engagement?

- ✓ Do you encourage and support task conflict?
- ✓ Do you encourage collaboration and make the team a safe place in which to share sensitive information?
- ✓ Do you encourage frequent process reflections?
- ✓ Do you treat mistakes as a source of learning rather than a reason to punish?
- ✓ Do you think about and describe your role in team terms instead of individual or hierarchical terms?

Are you sensitive to team diversity?

- ✓ Do team members make an effort to understand and adapt to each other's working styles?
- ✓ Do team members understand how demographic differences might impact members' participation and influence?
- ✓ Has the team discussed process strategies for fully utilizing and embracing diversity?

Do you manage the team's context?

- ✓ Do you act to remove barriers for the team, such as political roadblocks?
- ✓ Do you fight for the resources the team needs and promote the team's interests with key stakeholders in the organization?

Exhibit 2 Advantages and Disadvantages of Email in Communication

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Email	Efficient Sequential exchange/no interruptions Record of exchanges More democratic Less susceptibility to social pressure Often freer expression of true feelings	Limited contextual information (especially social and non-verbal clues) Limited feedback and learning in real time – makes timely corrections or repairs more difficult Takes longer to forge consensus Negotiations more likely to result in impasse: “tit for tat” Conflicts can escalate as views become more divergent

¹ David L Bradford, “Building High-Performance Teams,” *The Portable MBA in Management*, Allan R. Cohen (ed.), New York: Wiley, 1993: 38 - 70.

² Mary Rowland found, for example, that the average returns of team-managed mutual funds were consistently higher than the returns of individually managed funds, while their average risk levels and expenses were the same. “Power Play,” *Bloomberg Personal*, November/December 1996: 85 – 90.

³ Whether or not a team is effective is dependent principally upon four factors: (1) the context in which the team is doing its work; (2) the effort the team exerts on the task; (3) the abilities the team brings to bear on the task; and (4) the process used by the team. The context is usually not something the team members have any or much control over. Effort is primarily a function of team member motivation, and ability is, for the most part, determined by the composition of the team.

⁴ For an exploration of the related issue of team member’s likelihood to contribute mainly shared information, see Gwen M. Wittenbaum and Ernest S. Park, “The Collective Preference for Shared Information,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 10 (2): 70 – 73.

⁵ See for example the classic: Norman R.F. Maier, “Assets and Liabilities in Group Problem Solving: The Need for an Integrative Function,” *Psychological Review*, 74 (4), (July 1967): 239-248.

⁶ Ancona, Kochan, Scully, Van Maanen, Westney, "Team Processes," *Organizational Behavior and Processes*, New York: South-Western College Publishing, 1998: M-5, 17.

⁷ Amy Edmondson, Richard Bohmer, and Gary Pisano, "Speeding up Team Learning," *Harvard Business Review*, October, 2001: 125 – 132.

⁸ Nominal group technique is a structured form of brainstorming in which after a problem has been stated, team members are asked to write down as many alternative solutions as they can and to report their ideas in a round-robin fashion while a scribe records them. Eventually members are asked to vote for the alternatives they prefer. For example, each member might be given ten points to divide among all the options, or each might cast two or three votes.

⁹ Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, Jean L. Kahwajy, and L.J. Bourgeois III, "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight," *Harvard Business Review*, July / August 1997: 77 - 85.

¹⁰ Excerpted and adapted from John J. Gabarro and Anne Harlan, *A Note on Process Observation*, 1986, HBS No. 477-029.

¹¹ For a more thorough discussion of gender differences in conversation look at Deborah Tannen, "The Power of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why," *Harvard Business Review*, September 1995: 138 – 148.

¹² In his classic article, Maier referred to this as the valence effect. Norman R.F. Maier, "Assets and Liabilities in Group Problem Solving: The Need for an Integrative Function," *Psychological Review*, 74 (4), July 1967: 239-248.

¹³ Excerpted and adapted from John J. Gabarro and Anne Harlan, *A Note on Process Observation*, 1986, HBS No. 477-029.

¹⁴ See for example, Dorothy Leanord and Walter Swap, *When Sparks Fly: Igniting Creativity in Groups*, Boston: HBS Press, 1999, or Warren Bennis and Patricia Ward Biederman, *Organizing Genius: The Secrets of Creative Collaboration*, New York: Addison-Wesley, 1997.

¹⁵ Linda A. Hill, *Managing Your Team*, Boston: HBS No. 494-081.

¹⁶ David L. Bradford and Allan R. Cohen, *Power Up: Transforming Organizations Through Shared Leadership*, New York: Wiley, 1998.

¹⁷ Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.

¹⁸ David A. Garvin and Michael A. Roberto, "What You Don't Know About Making Decisions," *The Harvard Business Review*, September 2001: 108 – 116.

¹⁹ David L. Bradford, "Building High Performing Teams," *The Portable MBA in Management*, New York: Wiley, 1993: 38 – 70.

²⁰ For advice on how to approach these situations, see for example, Linda A. Hill, *Building Effective One-on-One Working Relationships*, 1996, HBS No. 497-028; Holly Weeks, "Taking the Stress out of Stressful Conversations," *Harvard Business Review*, July, 2001: 113 – 11; and Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen, Roger Fisher, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, New York: Viking, 1999.

²¹ See for example, John J. Gabarro and Linda A. Hill, *Managing Performance*, 1996, HBS No. 496-022 for suggestions on giving and receiving feedback.

²² One scholar suggests physically arranging the room so that the facts are the focal point (e.g. a semicircle of chairs around a whiteboard). For more suggestions look at Jim Kling, "Tension in Teams," *Harvard Management Communication Letter*, 2000.

²³ Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, Jean L. Kahwajy, and L.J. Bourgeois III, "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight," *Harvard Business Review*, July/August 1997: 77 - 85.

²⁴ Linda A. Hill, *Power Dynamics in Organizations*, 1995, HBS No. 494-083.

²⁵ For a discussion of the use of the MBTI across cultures, look at David A. Thomas, *International Use of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator*, 1998, HBS No. 498-038.

²⁶ See, for example, Levesque in which she outlines how teams composed of individuals with different MBTI profiles can unleash both individual and team creativity and work most effectively with each other. Lynne C. Levesque, *Breakthrough Creativity: Achieving Top Performance Using the Eight Creative Talents*, Palo Alto: Davies-Black, 2001.

²⁷ Ancona, Kochan, Scully, Van Maanen, Westney, "Class Note: Diverse Cognition Style in Teams," *Organizational Behavior and Processes*, New York: South-Western College Publishing, 1998: M-4, 17 - 36.

²⁸ J. Keith Murnighan and Donald E. Conlon, "The Dynamics of Intense Work Groups: A Study of British String Quartets," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36, 1991: 165 - 186.

²⁹ J. Katzenbach and D. Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1993.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, "The Discipline of Teams," *Harvard Business Review*, March 1993: 111 - 120.

³² For a discussion of the special challenges of temporary working teams such as task forces see *Managing a Task Force*, HBS No. 478-0002 by James Ware.

³³ B. Latane, K. Williams, S. Harkins, "Many Hands Make Light of the Work: The Causes and Consequences of Social Loafing," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, June 1979: 822 - 32.

³⁴ Linda A. Hill, *A Note for Analyzing Work Groups*, 1998, HBS No. 496-026.

³⁵ Linda A. Hill, *Managing Your Team*, 1994, HBS No. 494-081.

³⁶ Gregroy B. Northcraft, "Behavior in Groups," *Organizational Behavior: A Management Challenge*, The Dryden Press, 1994: 240.

³⁷ For the classic article on punctuated equilibrium, see Connie Gersick, "Time and Transition in Work Teams: Toward a New Model of Growth," *Academy of Management Journal*, 31 (1): 9 - 42. For examples of other group development models see Tuckman's work on forming, storming, norming, and performing (Tuckman, 1965) and Ancona's examination of the temporal role of context (Ancona, 1999).

³⁸ See for example, David A. Nadler, J. Richard Hackman, Edward E. Lawler, *Managing Organizational Behavior*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1979: 136-7. For more on how to achieve this third criterion, see David A. Garvin, *Learning in Action*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000.

³⁹ Donald C. Hambrick, Sue Canney Davison, Scott A. Snell, Charles C. Snow, "When Groups Consist of Multiple Nationalities: Towards a New Understanding of the Implications," *Organization Studies*, Berlin, 1998, pp. 181 - 205.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² P. Cristopher Earley and Elaine Mosakowski, "Creating Hybrid Team Cultures: An Empirical Test of Transnational Team Functioning," *Academy of Management Journal*, 43(1), 26 – 49.

⁴³ J. Distefano and M. Maznevski, "Creating Value with Diverse Teams in Global Management," *Organizational Dynamics*, 29 (1): 45 – 63.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey T. Polzer, C. Brad Crisp, Sirkka L. Jarvenpaa, and Won-Yong Kim, "Geographic Fault Lines in Global Virtual Teams," work in progress.

⁴⁵ See for example, "The Electronic Negotiator," *Harvard Business Review*, January/February 2000: 2 – 3. For a reflection on the potential and pitfalls of "virtual workspaces" look at "Communicating with Virtual Project Teams," *Harvard Management Communication Letter*, HBS No. C00-12E.

⁴⁶ Sirkka I. Jarvenpaa, Kathleen Knoll, Dorothy E. Leidner, "Is Anybody Out There? Antecedents of Trust in Global Virtual Teams," *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 14 (4): 29 – 64.

⁴⁷ For ideas to improve the effectiveness of virtual teams, look at C. Wardell, "The Art of Managing Virtual Teams: Eight Key Lessons," *Harvard Management Update*, November, 1998; J. Distefano, M. Maznevski, "Creating Value with Diverse Teams in Global Management," *Organizational Dynamics*, 29(1), 2000: 45 – 63; or D. Duarte and N. Snyder, *Mastering Virtual Teams*, San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2001.