

Cool teams are hot

by Stewart Forsyth

In a relay race, each member of the team has to balance running as fast as possible with the need to have some energy left in the tank to focus on a smooth baton handover.

Team members are motivated to meet their goals, and also motivated by meeting the needs of others in the team, and so contribute to the team achieving its goals *

Kiwis often use sporting metaphors when thinking of or discussing teams. They see teams as sharing a goal, as well as having close bonds.

Teams are 'hot', and not just for sports-mad Kiwis.

The late Peter Drucker, one of the clearest of management thinkers, pointed out that while there have been tremendous improvements in the productivity of factory workers, there was still significant variability in the productivity of what he called 'knowledge workers'.

He meant people who 'think for a living' – mobilising ideas and relationships for unique and innovative approaches to unique situations: the teacher who has to help a particular science class achieve the curriculum learning goals; the nurse who has to sift through a range of clues to ensure that the patient's treatment regime is optimising recovery; or the product developer who has to find a product that will make the competitor's customers go "Wow!"

Knowledge workers make up a growing proportion of the work force.

Recent research by McKinsey indicates that more than half of

hospital and financial services jobs are held by such knowledge workers. Such jobs made up 70 percent of the jobs created in the U.S. in the 1998-2004 period. Simpler jobs are being automated, but knowledge-intensive jobs can't be – they are too complex.

Part of the complexity derives from the way these jobs are embedded in a range of interactions. A vital component of these workers' effectiveness is the opportunity to collaborate inside and outside their organisations. After all, you can't know everything, but someone else can provide the vital knowledge or skills.

should be integrated with a range of work practices (including training, feedback of results and appropriate performance management) to deliver optimum results. More importantly, organising work in teams contributes to achieving some organisational strategies, but works against achieving others.

Using teams to deliver the work is more effective if your organisation is pursuing an innovation, rather than cost management strategy. If your business aims to compete on price, and to screw down all costs, especially labour, then 'high interaction/high involvement' people strategies are counterproductive.

Getting good people on the 'cool teams' can provide the hook to help keep them more cheaply than going for financial 'golden handcuffs'.

Studies of the interactions of such workers indicate the development of relationships, resulting in the evolution of groups of around 8-10 people...leading in some cases to teams.

Of course, not every group is a team. There is a difference between a community of practice, a short-term task force, a work team and an integrating or co-ordinating team.

Optimum results

Teams are not inevitable. Nor are they always the best way to design work. Research since the mid-90s in New Zealand indicates that teams

If you aim to compete on service or product innovation, then you are probably employing more, and more expensive, knowledge workers, and you are more likely to get great ideas better implemented, using teams.

Teams can contribute to the retention of talented knowledge workers. There are fewer jobs higher up in the hierarchy as more organisations are de-layered, so vertical promotion is less likely. Work motivation for knowledge workers includes development opportunities and the chance to work with talented people.



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Five success factors

Even if there are good reasons for using teams to do the work, good performance is not automatic. There are both internal and external dimensions to team success.

Inside the team there are five success factors.

Social. The factor is often summarised in terms of 'safety' – effective teams look out for and care about their members. Think of Shackleton at the point it became obvious the Antarctic expedition was a failure. His priority was the welfare of his people, and he didn't lose one man.

Task Orientation. All teams develop norms around outputs and productivity. Effective teams have an understanding about outputs that mesh with the organisation's strategy, and with their customers' expectations – whether these customers are external to the organisation or downstream in a work process.

Effective teams also review their processes and work on constant improvement (e.g. while the important Americas Cup races have yet to be sailed, it seems clear that Grant Dalton is capable of setting high performance standards, encouraging continuous improvement and getting consistently good results from his sailors).

Vision and Innovation. Two other critical internal dimensions to team effectiveness are vision and innovation. Teams, and particularly team leaders, need to establish the 'why' – the positive and motivating vision for the team. (Kate Sheppard was the leader and main figurehead of the suffragist movement in New

Zealand – the first country in the world to grant universal adult suffrage to men and women equally. Kate was a source of inspiration to campaigners for equality between the sexes, both in New Zealand and throughout the world.)

Teams need to be engines of innovation, adding to the capabilities of their organisations and giving them an ongoing source of growth and advantage. After all, if your team (and the organisation it is a part of) is not innovating and learning, it is dead, or soon will be. Consider Sam Morgan – creating and implementing a new business that changed the way Kiwis bought, sold and traded goods.

Connectors. Teams need 'connectors' to help manage external relationships. These

found a causal relationship between team effectiveness and patient mortality.

This approach is a step up from assessing each team member's personality (or 'type' or 'style') and then extrapolating from this to the possible team personality.

Ultimately it is how the team is working that is important. Team members want to know what to do that will make a difference not to their style, but to the team's contribution. Team members should be held accountable, as a team, for that improvement.

Trying to adjust the mix of personalities in a team is a bit rough and ready, and often just not practical – the talent in the team is often unique and hard to replace.

Teams need to be engines of innovation.

connectors plug the team into opportunities, access resources (including new team members), and catalyse new ideas. An example is Oscar Kightly – TV presenter (*Snatch Our Booty*), playwright (*Naked Samoans*), actor (*Sione's Wedding*), a producer (*Brotown*). Kightly is also connected in the music scene, Samoan networks, and politics as well as the media. If you want to get someone to sell your show – Oscar could be the best for the job.

Measuring productivity

These requirements for external and internal team effectiveness may seem a little idealised. It can be a challenge to measure team productivity. Recent developments enable organisations to check how their teams are doing.

Michael West has validated a Team Climate Inventory that gives team members the chance to assess the team's (internal) effectiveness. Working with teams in Britain's National Health Service, West has

Social Network Analysis is a technique developed by sociologists to analyse the patterning of relationships. SNA provides a picture of who is talking to whom, how often, and even the nature of the conversations. This enables identifying who is connecting, the nature of informal groups, who the connectors are, and who are isolated.

Again, this tells us what is really going on, and so helps guide more targeted interventions (removing communication barriers, developing the 'connecting' skills of those in such roles) than scatter-gun approaches such as awareness training or team building.

To assist the effectiveness of your organisation's teams, you can:

- determine if teams are the appropriate way to deliver results for your organisation and its strategy;
- design an appropriate context for teams – e.g. performance

and rewards should be measured and delivered respectively at the team level;

- help with selection of people onto teams – not only who has the needed talent, but also who is going to benefit from this development opportunity, and be more likely to stay with you as a result;
- help to develop teams, including trouble-shooting and resolving issues (such as developing effective conflict-management skills) – and ensure you are tracking issues (and improvements) using valid tools;
- develop team skills, particularly around the five team effectiveness areas, again evaluating progress.

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Consultants, specialists in creative approaches to lifting businesses' performance through improvements in their people's contribution. He has a range of articles available at www.fxc.co.nz

**(Thanks to Yves Morieux, quoted in the Economist, January 2006 for the team relay analogy.)*



Not all teams shower together

"There's no 'I' in Team". Just another cliché...

So much has been written, so many 'new' programmes produced, whole conferences devoted to the subject of 'teams'. I shudder every time I see or hear someone expounding the belief that work teams are just like sports teams, comparing the two as if what works with one will automatically work with the other.

For a start, I don't shower with my colleagues, my 'game' lasts between 10 and 12 hours, 5 or 6 days a week, and I would never use my index finger on a competitor in a place where the sun doesn't shine, simply to distract him in the ruck.

Some people are driven to take simple things that have been working fine in their simplicity for centuries, complicate the hell out of them, then create a matrix and some dinky little diagrams to simplify what they complicated. So many times I have seen these models, and as I look at them a cranial bell of familiarity starts to ring, and if I dig back far enough I'll come up with something produced in 1959 that has different labels but says much the same thing.

It was re-worked in 1984 with a different name and new labels, now here it is again with yet another new coat of paint.

Perhaps in our desire to research and find something new, we forget that unfortunately the 'chassis' that we're trying to mount this new 'engine' on is basically the same as existed 100,000 years ago - your basic Homo Sapiens.

The problems that a clan leader

had 20,000 years ago (in getting a bunch of individuals to work as one unit), still exist today in more or less the same form.

The motivators are admittedly different – they didn't have mortgages to make a 'bonus' worth working for, or microwaves to use as incentives, and to go against the Clan often involved a nasty little penalty called death – often accomplished simply by banishing them. Individuals couldn't hunt as effectively as a team and therefore often went hungry. Aren't we lucky...?

Another difference is in the social mores of modern 'civilised' teams – bashing other team members with a club to indicate displeasure - is simply not done. Running off with their mate still is, but these days we call it 'having an office affair', with far less risk of personal injury by way of reprisal.

So I had a look through our team-building stuff and found the basic, Mark One Rules for Team-building, in all it's glorious simplicity. Here it is – by all means grab it, complicate the hell out of it and call it your own. You might even put a 'packaged' programme around it

