

4 *What Have Traditional Teams Taught Us?*

(Written in collaboration with Claire Whittington)

Few areas of research or practice are as prone to fads and the reinvention of the wheel as are the fields of business management and ICT. When these two worlds merge, or collide, as they do with the motivation and structure behind virtual teams, then we should beware. In particular, not everything about virtual teams is entirely new, nor do their implementation and support require entirely new principles and practices. We can learn much from what is known about co-located teams. Equally, although the past ten years or so have seen a real emphasis on teams in all types of organization – sometimes seeming to be the first solution looked for in response to any requirements or problems – lessons about team design and implementation have been known for a long time, although these have not always been positive ones ...

We trained hard ... but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up in teams we would be re-organised. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation in life by re-organising, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress whilst producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralisation. (*CAIUS PETRONIUS, AD 65*)

WHY TEAMS?

The rationale for teams has been different for different types of organization at different times. For some, teamworking has organizational advantages, such as improved production systems flow, greater labour flexibility and better quality. For others, the personnel gains of higher commitment, involvement and motivation or reduced labour turnover and absenteeism will be the goals. In recent years, some companies have utilized the delayering (literally, the removal of organizational or supervisory layers) consequences of teamworking, and the resulting flexibility of the workforce, to cut costs by reducing labour, whether or not it is dressed up as downsizing or rationalization or some other euphemism.

Of course, with so many different reasons for implementing teamworking, we will find very different types of team. To begin with, they may be a real team exhibiting all the characteristics of teamworking or they may be merely a group or collection of people; they can also be formally constituted with specifications and roles and a management system that recognizes teamwork or they can merge together, often for a specific purpose at a specific time in informal groupings. Therefore teams can be temporary or permanent (or at least operating over a considerable period of time). They can be constituted horizontally – in which case all team members have similar job grades and degrees of responsibility even if they have different functions – or they may be vertical teams – in which case there are representatives from different technical and

RELATIVELY SYNCHRONOUS TECHNOLOGIES

ELECTRONIC MEETING SYSTEMS

A fairly expensive solution to the need to obtain and manage multiple contributions to decision-making is provided by electronic meeting systems (EMS). These have been used to enhance group discussions and problem-solving in face-to-face meetings for a long time – for instance, supporting very simple balloting or voting on controversial topics. Their adaptation to virtual teamworking has enabled synchronous but distributed collaboration. EMS works efficiently on common LANs or wide area networks (WANs). The software can help overcome common problems in meetings, such as tendencies to be sidetracked or to not allow everyone to have a say. They can provide anonymity for the contributors, without concerns for hurting people’s feelings or being seen as stupid or missing the point (although such anonymity can be something of a two-edged sword, of course).

EMS resembles a chat function as ideas are expressed simultaneously. The fact that comments can remain anonymous facilitates the free flow of ideas by eliminating pressures for social conformance. Ideas can be noted and allocated to different categories for discussion at a later date. Again, the anonymity means that members do not feel pressured into making decisions too early about the importance of certain ideas or tasks. Anonymous voting allows ideas to be formally rated and prioritized so that outlines of work schedules or projects can be created. Teams can split up and work in subteams on individual areas. Individuals can respond to an identified set of topics in any order, making comments and suggestions at their own pace, with the facilitator deciding on the degree of anonymity.

It is common for EMS systems to be integrated with other systems, such as audio and video, to further enhance decision-making. For example, with audio it is possible to give the reasoning behind particular decision-making processes.

Table 5.5 highlights the advantages and disadvantages of EMS.

Table 5.5 *Advantages and disadvantages of electronic meeting systems*

<i>Work process to be supported</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Discussion/problem-solving	<p>Pros: Can promote good generation and discussion of ideas.</p> <p>Cons: If anonymity is provided, contributions may become more careless or disruptive.</p>
Group interaction and participation	<p>Pros: All team members can feel less inhibited about contributing. Less chance of some members dominating a meeting.</p> <p>Cons: Real interaction can be very limited and discussion threads can feel stilted or can get lost.</p>
Avoiding misunderstanding and resolving conflict	<p>Pros: Team members may be more reflective about what they will say compared to face-to-face meetings. With anonymity, conflicts may be reduced.</p> <p>Cons: Limitations in information richness may sometimes breed misunderstandings. Nature of anonymous contributions may cause disharmony.</p>
Data sharing	<p>Pros: Documents can be shared online, although the main use is for short discussions of documents that have already been read.</p> <p>Cons: Little real feeling of sharing. Limits to data or information handled.</p>

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