
EVERYONE KNOWS ABOUT TEAMS—RIGHT?

Many management books

Many management books have been written stressing the need for teams and providing advice on team building. Much of the teams theory that is discussed in this chapter comes from *The Wisdom of Teams*, by Jon R. Katzenbach and Doug K. Smith.² This book has since become a best-selling classic in modern business literature, with close to 500,000 copies distributed globally across many countries in over 15 different languages. Katzenbach is generally regarded as the leading expert on team performance in large organizations, particularly with respect to leadership teams.* *The Wisdom of Teams*, like other texts, champions the virtues and benefits of teams; however, it approaches the theory of teams by focusing on the lessons learned by *real teams* and *nonteams* and applying these learnings to other groups struggling with their performance. Research for *The Wisdom of Teams* expanded to hundreds of people in dozens of professions and organizations. Many of the real-life examples confirmed ingoing hypotheses, but many additional insights were developed as well, and the subject of team performance was much less well understood than initially suspected. This chapter discusses what Katzenbach and Smith learned from a wide range of real-life situations in many industries, and applies that to what we learned about team performance in the design profession.

Many of Katzenbach and Smith's basic team findings may be considered as common sense by team practitioners; however, many groups striving to implement team performance do not apply their existing knowledge and miss the opportunity for a real team effort. The inability of teams to succeed without a shared purpose is common sense to most people, and yet many teams are not clear *as a team* about what they want to accomplish and why. People may have attended team-building training sessions and then struggled to translate the teachings to their work environment. In contrast, they may have been fortunate to be part of a situation where a demanding performance challenge resulted in the group becoming a team, almost without really thinking about it. One designer recalled a team experience when a project fell into disarray due to a delayed carpet delivery. The carpet was a floor finishing for an office in a skyscraper. The delay from the factory resulted in a delivery to the skyscraper after the crane was due to

leave and work permits would have expired. Together the affected parties solved the problem, which at the outset had seemed insurmountable. Yet they never thought consciously about “becoming a team”; their entire focus was on finding the best way to solve the carpet problem. That turned out to be a team.

Team performance opportunities occur at all levels and situations in organizations, e.g., teams that recommend, teams that produce, and teams that manage. Unfortunately, such opportunities are not always recognized, leaving a great deal of team performance potential untapped. Each group will encounter various challenges, but similarities are more important than differences when striving for team performance. Our traditional workplace metrics are usually not in line with promoting team performance. Job descriptions, compensation, and career paths are focused mainly on individual performance, with teams considered only as an afterthought. As a result, real teams need to establish very clear group goals, working approaches, and metrics that can offset the natural tendency to focus only on individual performance and accountability. For example, as long as Michael Jordan was concerned primarily about his own individual scoring, the Chicago Bulls did not win a championship. After Jordan elevated the importance of helping others to score, the collective score reflected the accomplishments of one of the best teams in National Basketball Association history. It is difficult for us to trust our career aspirations to outcomes that depend on the performance of others, whereas delegating or assigning accountability to one person rather than a group is our preferred method of management.

UNDERSTANDING TEAMS

Many of us may have experienced teams, but some of these experiences may have been rewarding whereas other experiences were a waste of time. The potential impact of teams is widely underexploited despite the rapidly growing recognition of the need for teams. People simply do not apply what they already know about teams in a *disciplined* manner. As a result, they miss out on performance potential, become discouraged, and fail to seek out new