

developed sense of humor is often seen in top-performing teams as it helped them to deal with the pressures and intensity of high performance.

### A Few Words of Caution

Teams are not the solution to everyone's needs. They will not solve every problem, enhance every group's results, nor address every performance challenge. When misapplied, team efforts can be excessively wasteful, if not disruptive. However, when teams work well, and are focused on legitimate team tasks, they invariably outperform other groups and individuals. Appropriately focused, they represent the best proven way to convert visions and values into consistent action, and to energize processes across organizational boundaries, bringing multiple skills together to solve a difficult problem. The good news is that there is a *team discipline* that, if rigorously followed, can transform the typical resistance to teams, such as beliefs that teams waste time in meetings, squander resources, and impede decisions, into team performance. While some elements of this discipline must be learned, most center on common-sense ideas. Unfortunately, like all disciplines, the price of success is strict adherence and practice.

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## TEAM BASICS: A WORKING DEFINITION AND DISCIPLINE

To apply what we learned from our "Wisdom of Teams" research as a practical discipline in the design context, it is essential to define a team. At the heart of this definition lies the fundamental premise that teams and performance are inextricably linked. Through listening to people who are or have been members of teams and potential teams, the following definition has been developed to distinguish a team from a mere group of people with a common assignment:

*A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.*<sup>4</sup>

Teams do not happen by magic, but persistent application of the definition (or discipline, which Katzenbach calls team basics) will enhance most people's

team performance. Focusing on performance rather than personal chemistry or togetherness will shape teams more than any other factor. The team cannot apply the basics selectively; each one must be adhered to—you must “get an A on all of the basics.”

### **Small Number**

Rather than being a formulaic rule, the notion of “small number” is more of a guide. While groups of 30 or 40 people can theoretically become a team, the strong tendency is for such groups to break into subteams, due to the problems associated with larger groups interacting constructively as a group. Large groups may exhibit herding behaviors and as a result tend to settle on less clear statements of purpose, which will ultimately be detrimental to the team. Virtually all the teams encountered in the research ranged between 2 and 25 people, with the majority numbering less than 10. Several years ago, a research group at du Pont concluded after extensive study that groups with more than 12 members usually became increasingly dysfunctional as size increased.<sup>5</sup>

### **Complementary Skills**

Teams must possess or develop the right mix of skills necessary to do the job at hand. These complementary skills fall into three categories: technical or functional expertise, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and interpersonal skills. A team cannot hope to succeed without a mix of skills and talents that matches what the performance task requires. Of particular importance are the technical, functional, and problem-solving skills imposed by the project’s purpose and goals. No team can achieve its purpose without the requisite skills. It is rare for a team to include every single skill required at the outset, but teams are powerful vehicles for driving personal learning and development. As long as the skill potential exists, the dynamics of a team cause that skill to develop. Indeed, teams naturally integrate performance and learning and achieve the balance of short-term performance with longer-term institution building which has been an ongoing challenge of the popular learning organization theory.

In design, the existence of complementary skills is often the strongest building block for a team. The process of design typically involves a group of people, with varied skills and experience, playing critical roles at different phases