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WHY GROUPS?



Groups Have a Long History of Success

People have formed work groups to accomplish goals and tasks since the beginning of human history. The small group, whose members work collaboratively for their mutual benefit or survival, is the oldest form of social organization. Groups have played a major role in both the survival of human beings and the development of human culture. Some would argue that our ability to work together was, and is, the key to human survival and advancement. Work groups have a long and remarkable track record of success. From the beginning of human history, people have utilized work groups to generate new ideas, get things done, and nurture individuals.

We Need Groups Every Day

The vast majority of people participate in work groups on a daily basis and have always done so. Imagine building a house or an airplane, putting out a newspaper, developing a strategic plan, or doing almost anything, all by yourself. Of course, there are tasks that can, or should, be done by one person, but given the complex nature of work in the 21st century, more and more tasks require people to work in groups.

There was a time when people tried to get rid of the collaborative nature of work. We set up assembly lines and precisely defined each person's job so that he or she could do that job without input from others. Often, this was effective. The industrial revolution was a success, after all. But this strategy worked best for repetitive tasks where innovation, creativity, and problem

solving were not necessary. In the 21st century, humans perform few tasks like that. Most of those jobs are left to robots.

Even during the early industrial period there were groups throughout the workplace. People made decisions together. Engineers created new products together. Managers determined schedules and hammered out work flow processes together. There was a need for work groups then, and there is an even greater need for work groups now.

Groups Increase Our Knowledge Base

Work groups reflect our growing awareness that the complexity of work at this point in history requires collaboration. More work is conducted by groups of employees than by individuals because collaboration is the only way to accomplish complex tasks. Too much knowledge and too many different skills are required for any individual to accomplish such tasks successfully alone.

The knowledge explosion led us to reevaluate the way we work. The assembly line model has lost much of its relevance. The individual contributor no longer can go it alone. Teamwork is necessary for organizational success.

When Teams Are Good, They're Very, Very Good

Lots of people don't like to work in groups. Many of us think meetings are a waste of time. Most of us have had bad experiences working in groups. Some of us associate work groups with fighting, hurt feelings, and inefficiency. This is not surprising, since many groups have difficulty functioning effectively. Even groups that ultimately succeed in becoming teams have periods that are stressful and unpleasant.

The distinction between a work group and a team is an important one in this book. A work group is composed of members who are striving to create a shared view of goals and to develop an efficient and effective organizational structure in which to accomplish those goals. A work group becomes a team when shared goals have been established and effective methods to accomplish those goals are in place. How work groups become teams is what this book is about. It chronicles how some groups develop into high performance teams and why other groups fail to become teams. Throughout the book, I refer to

groups that have not reached a level of effectiveness and productivity as *work groups* and to groups that are effective and productive as *teams*.

When a group becomes a team, there is nothing like it. Work doesn't feel like a chore. It's fun. Members of high performance teams feel involved, committed, and valued. Time flies, work flows, and people help each other to meet goals and deadlines. There's nothing like playing on a winning team. Effective teams are more productive, and that means that companies and organizations win, too. The trick to creating teams is to learn enough about how work groups function so that we can increase the chances that work groups will become high performance teams.

Creating Effective Teams

Books, articles, and research studies that attempt to describe the characteristics of high performance work teams proliferated for some time. The importance of teamwork in increasing organizational productivity was clear, and everyone jumped on the bandwagon to ensure team success. Employees and leaders went to training sessions to learn how to work in teams. In some companies, employees wore T-shirts with their team name printed on the front. Teams often were provided with leaders, coaches, facilitators, or consultants. The intense focus on teams and team performance made teamwork seem new and faddish, even though working together to get things done is as old as humanity itself.

BOX 1.1 Silly Team-Building Activities

Over the years, I've asked people to describe the silliest team-building activity they've participated in. Here are some of my favorites:

- Introductions involving linking your name with a personality trait (e.g., Chatty Cathy, Serious Sam, Jumpy Jill)
- Racing dragon boats as a team to sell more insurance policies
- Leading a blindfolded teammate along the beach
- Anything involving sharing feelings you don't want to share
- Anything that requires rope (such as rock climbing or rope bridges)
- Anything requiring construction paper

While “teaming” may have felt like a fad or a craze, it wasn’t. Groups and teams have always been with us and won’t go away. The importance of teams in the workplace is here to stay. However, there is limited awareness of how work groups function and how members and leaders can work together to create effective and productive teams.

Unfortunately, in the current decade, the focus on work groups has dramatically decreased. Instead of educating work groups, consisting of members and their leader, attention has shifted to educating team leaders. It is assumed that knowledgeable team leaders will be able to steer their groups to high performance and productivity. Between 1990 and 2000, 172 research studies of work groups and 54 studies of team leadership were carried out. Between 2000 and 2010, only 78 research studies of work groups and teams were done. During the same period, there were 126 studies of work group leadership.

This change in focus—from how group members and their leader work together to how the leader steers the group—seems to represent unrealistic expectations. If members don’t know about or understand the dynamics of groups and group development, it will be very difficult for their work group to become a high performance team. Members and leaders need knowledge and skills if their work group is to be productive.

Which strategies help work group members and their leader? Which strategies are based on solid research evidence? Which strategies are least time consuming and most cost effective? These and similar questions are on the minds of many people charged with ensuring the effectiveness of organizational work groups. The good news is that the scientific study of work groups and high performance teams has made the answers to these questions easier to come by.

We don’t yet know everything there is to know about groups, but we know enough to assist people working in groups. We know enough to answer the difficult questions posed earlier. That’s what this book is about. The goal of *Creating Effective Teams* is to translate what we’ve learned about groups and teams into straightforward, user-friendly, practical guidelines for members and leaders. This book will also provide guidance for those who interact with a particular work group and for those who manage them.

I bring about 40 years of experience with groups and teams to this project, and I’m not bored yet. Studying groups and working with their members is endlessly fascinating and challenging. Beyond that, I believe that helping work groups to become high performance teams is crucial not only to

the bottom line but also to the creation of humane, interesting, diverse, and challenging workplaces. I hope this book continues the work of the first three editions in furthering the achievement of those goals.

How to Use This Book

Originally, this book grew out of a number of requests I'd had from organizational members to write a jargon-free "how-to" book describing how work groups function and what to do to help work groups become high performance teams. While I was not enamored of how-to books, I decided to try my hand at this one because the topic is so important. My decision turned out to be a good one. *Creating Effective Teams* has been read by thousands of team members and leaders, in a number of countries, as well as by team consultants charged with helping groups to become high performance teams. I wrote this fourth edition to keep the ball rolling and to add new information that has emerged since the third edition was published.

As in the first three editions, whatever I write will be based on research evidence, and if I'm speculating, I'll let you know. I promise not to overwhelm you with references in the text; those references will appear at the end of the book. If you want more information, the references will be there for you. In fact, in response to requests from readers, I have included more references and recent studies.

I've included recent research throughout the book and a few things I've heard, witnessed, been told about, or asked people about over the years. These will appear in boxes like the one in this chapter. These anecdotes have helped me, as well as people I've worked with, to maintain a sense of humor and compassion about working in groups and teams. I hope you find them useful.

This book is meant to be used, not just read. Members of newly formed groups can get off to a good start by reading the first six chapters and discussing them together. Chapter 2 describes how groups develop and function. Chapters 3 to 6 describe what group members and their leader can do to help move the group through the stages of group development. Chapter 7 describes how high performance teams function. Chapter 8 outlines how team members can contribute to a work group's development and effectiveness. Chapter 9 describes how to be an effective team leader. Finally, Chapter 10 discusses the importance of organizational support for teams.

Talk with each other about what you've read. Use the information as a way to begin to organize your group. Refer to the book as you would a manual for a computer program. When you get stuck, find the appropriate chapter. Use the checklists scattered throughout the book to monitor your group's progress.

Once the group gets under way, refer to Chapter 3, which describes situations that often arise in the first stage of group development and outlines ways that members and leaders can be helpful during this stage. Chapters 4 and 5 do the same for groups at Stages 2 and 3, respectively. Chapter 6 outlines how to reach and sustain high performance at Stage 4.

Learning to implement this information in the work groups you belong to will take time, and reading this book once won't be enough. Attitudes and behaviors don't change overnight. If you read and work with the information, however, it will happen. And you, like others before you, will find your work groups transformed into high performance teams.