Teamwork on the fly
By Amy C. Edmondson

In today’s fast-moving, ultracompetitive global business environment, you can’t rely on stable teams to get the work done. Instead, you need “teaming.”

Teaming is flexible teamwork. It’s a way to gather experts from far-flung divisions and disciplines into temporary groups to tackle unexpected problems and identify emerging opportunities. It’s happening now in nearly every industry and type of company.

To “team” well, employees and organizations must embrace principles of project management—such as scoping out the project, structuring the group, and sorting tasks by level of interdependence—and of team leadership, such as emphasizing purpose, building psychological safety, and embracing failure and conflict.

Those who master teaming will reap benefits. Teaming allows individuals to acquire knowledge, skills, and networks, and it lets companies accelerate the delivery of current offerings while responding quickly to new challenges. Teaming is a way to get work done while figuring out how to do it better.

The Rewards of Teaming
The most challenging attributes of teaming can also yield big organizational and individual benefits.

Ingredients of teaming:

The hardware

To facilitate effective teaming, leaders need to manage the technical issues of scoping out the challenge, lightly structuring the boundaries, and sorting tasks for execution. A classic error is assuming that everything a team
does has to be collaborative. Instead, input and interaction should be used as needed so that not all tasks become team encounters, which are time-consuming.

Scoping
The first step in any teaming scenario is to draw a line in the (shifting) sand by scoping out the challenge, determining what expertise is needed, tapping collaborators, and outlining roles and responsibilities.

Structuring
The second step is to offer some structure—figurative scaffolding—to help the team function effectively.
Help the group by establishing boundaries and targets.
The objective of structuring is to make it easier for teaming partners to coordinate and communicate—face-to-face or virtually.

Sorting
The third step is the conscious prioritizing of tasks according to the degree of interdependence among individuals.

The software
The software of teaming asks people to get comfortable with a new way of working rather than with a new set of colleagues.

Leaders have at their disposal four software tools: emphasizing purpose, building psychological safety, embracing failure, and putting conflict to work.

Emphasising purpose
Purpose is fundamentally about shared values; it answers the question why we (this company, this project) exist, which can galvanize even the most diverse, amorphous team.

Building psychological safety
A basic way to create such a climate is to model the behaviors on which teaming depends: asking thoughtful questions, acknowledging ignorance about a topic or area of expertise, and conveying awareness of one’s own fallibility.

Embracing failure
Teaming necessarily leads to failures, even on the way to extraordinary successes. These failures provide essential information that guides the next steps, creating an imperative to learn from them.

Learning from conflict requires us to balance our natural tendency toward advocacy (explaining, communicating, teaching) with a less spontaneous behavior: inquiry (expressions of curiosity followed by genuine listening). A useful discipline for leaders is to force moments of reflection, asking themselves and then others, “Is this the only way to see the situation? What might I be missing?” Such exploration—even in the face of deadlines—is critical to successful teaming.
Conflict can feel like a failure. It can be frustrating not to see eye-to-eye with collaborators, but differences of perspective are a core reason for teamwork in the first place, and resolving them effectively gives rise to new opportunities.