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.

Multiple functions must work together	People are geographically dispersed	Relationships are temporary	No two projects are alike	The work can be uncertain and chaotic
CHALLENGES				
Conflict can arise among people with differing values, norms, jargon, and expertise.	Time zone differences and electronic communication present logistical hurdles.	People may not have time to build trust and mutual understanding.	Individuals must get up to speed on brand-new topics quickly, again and again.	Fluid situations require constant communication and coordination.
BENEFITS				
ORGANIZATIONAL Innovation from combining skills and perspectives Ability to solve cross-disciplinary problems INDIVIDUAL Boundary-spanning skills Understanding of other disciplines Broader perspective on the business	ORGANIZATIONAL Greater alignment across divisions Better diffusion of the company's culture INDIVIDUAL Familiarity with people in different locations Deeper understanding of different cultures and of the organization's operations	ORGANIZATIONAL More shared experience among colleagues Greater camaraderie across the company INDIVIDUAL Interpersonal skills Extensive network of collaborators	ORGANIZATIONAL Ability to meet changing customer needs INDIVIDUAL Flexibility and agility Ability to import ideas from one context to another	ORGANIZATIONAL Ability to manage unexpected events INDIVIDUAL Project management skills Experimentation skills

Teaming helps individuals acquire knowledge, skills, and networks. And it lets companies accelerate the delivery of current products and services while responding quickly to new opportunities. Teaming is a way to get work done while figuring out how to do it better; it's executing and learning at the same time.

To excel in a complex and uncertain business environment, people need to work together in new and unpredictable ways. That's why successful teaming starts with an embrace of the unknown and a commitment to learning that drives employees to absorb, and sometimes create, new knowledge while executing.

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.

THE BEHAVIORS OF SUCCESSFUL TEAMING

Speaking Up

Communicating honestly and directly with others by asking questions, acknowledging errors, raising issues, and explaining ideas

Experimenting

Taking an iterative approach to action that recognizes the novelty and uncertainty inherent in interactions between individuals and in the possibilities and plans they develop

Reflecting

Observing, questioning, and discussing processes and outcomes on a consistent basis—daily, weekly, monthly—that reflects the rhythm of the work

Listening Intently

Working hard to understand the knowledge, expertise, ideas, and opinions of others

Integrating

Synthesizing different facts and points of view to create new possibilities

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