Brief

Teams aren't what they used to be: we need them to be more female, flexible, fluid, open and outward-facing

Teams are more important than they ever were, and changing fast. Leaders and HR teams are having to tear up the textbook and look at them, and invest in them, in new ways

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has." Margaret Mead

We all know that teamwork is good – and the more senior the team, the greater the potential impact (positive or negative) on the organisation. In today's unpredictable, turbulent times, teams can become even more useful and important: they operate in more fluid, complex ways, manage ambiguity better and can use their diversity to reduce the danger of old habits and assumptions. So the importance of teams is increasing and more organisations are turning to team-based solutions to solve their problems and improve performance.

Teams are the perfect place start as role-models for collaboration. We looked at recent research to find the key themes for action.

1. ***Old assumptions about teams are crumbling – they are less static and continue changing***:

   Teams used to sit within the structural hierarchy, were stable over time, included people mainly assigned to that team, shared common and stable goals, performed in well-defined roles, based in one location. Now, more teams cross organisational boundaries, change and adapt their members,; roles and goals, are dispersed (are often virtual); and may operate more as a community of interest. In particular they have more often have:

   - *Tougher, more fluid and less defined challenges to meet* – they can be set up at short notice to meet new goals and opportunities, when there is often no time for rigorously defined remits. So the work of teams has changed, as they must now:
     - Take decisions faster
     - Take decisions in novel situations on unprecedented issues
     - Absorb much more data and information, from more sources.

   Smart organisations know that this requires everyone to have a broadly common team language, expectations and ways of working.

   It has also created challenges for how to evaluate, recognise and reward people who no longer have a simple, single line-manager who can fairly recognise what they are doing.

   - *Dynamic composition* – these days we see project teams, flash teams, teams with inner and outer circles, formal teams and informal networks or communities. People may be

members of many teams, and in many teams membership is based on changing availability and priorities, may well include people of different 'grades', experience and background – each with different pressures on them. All of this is a far cry of the classic stable team.

- *Technology and distance to manage* - the ability to work virtually creates enormous potential for new team structures as well as big challenges arising from 24/7 cross-cultural working. Research shows that the use of technology to collaborate and communicate across a team can strengthen, reduce or have no impact on team performance. It is all about how the technology is being used, whether it is mixed with other forms of working.

  Different technologies have different impacts on a team depending on the nature of the work to be done together. For some, rapid interaction is important (eg telephone), for others it is multiple inputs including facial expression and body language (eg video link), for others it is parallel working between different members (eg email) and for some contexts it is the ability to rehearse and edit that is important (eg email). They key is to choose what is fit for purpose, or adapt team working to available technology.

2. **The more women in a team, the smarter it is?**

A team only adds value if its collective intelligence is greater, and applied better, than that of individual members. Research does not suggest any correlations between a group's collective intelligence as a team, and the IQs of the individuals.

One recent study shows that groups of women are collectively smarter than groups of men – the result of hormones, emotional intelligence and social factors. In fact the more women in a team the smarter, collectively, it will be. Team diversity is ethically right – we now know it is also much better for performance.

3. **Team training and capability may now be more important than individual**

The faster, more fluid and flexible we require teams to be, the more important it is for everyone to have teamwork skills and a collaborative culture – and this should be core when recruiting and developing talent.

Team training can be key to improving performance, especially when it involves working on real required outcomes, or addresses the issues that may be getting in the way of achieving them.

Overall, team training is particularly valuable for: improving shared knowledge; improving decision-making; improving shared skills and processes; and building collaborative mindsets.

The outcome of everyone having team capabilities will be the ability for a team to get up-and – runquickly with little preparation, be able to adopt roles and accountabilities fast, and develop a common sense of purpose and identity with ease. The benefit of improving all this, of

course, is how transportable the skills are as people move from one team to another. Some say that this will be the truly distinguishing characteristic of future successful companies.

All of this significantly changes the capabilities and profile of a successful team leader. Above all a leader may not always choose members, may have no time to assess their strengths before assigning roles, and may not be able to use the old methods of command and control to ensure performance and accountability. Instead, a leader will need to deliver far more through enabling the maximum collective intelligence, nurturing collaboration and shared purpose.

4. ***Individual development may now be best delivered peer-to-peer by cross-training in a team***

With pressure on time and resources, and a wider range of flexible and available teams, this is now a core way to develop individual talent. It used to be a commonly-held view that it was best to do skill training to get every individual in a team to broadly the same level before doing any collective team-based training where everyone learns together (from a third party). This is now shown to be not true, for two related reasons:

- Improving each other is a strong bonding experience that improves teamwork and performance – regardless of skills

- It radically improves transfer of knowledge and is the best known route to being a 'learningorganization .'

Overall, the evidence is clear that peer-to-peer is more effective, more engaging, more motivating and faster than other methods.

5. ***'Team-building' works best when focused around the real work***

The more diverse the team, its members and their roles, and their locations, the more 'team-building' is needed. At the heart of this is ensuring a shared mental model of their purpose, their way of working, and their approach to decisions – all based around the practicalities they face. Team building is easiest and most effective with intact teams, where members are willing to take part in diagnosis and willing to speak up and contribute.

Increasingly however, the best team-building approaches can also be applied to looser more flexible groups who are working towards the same overall goals or within the same overarching strategy – even if they are not formally in a single team. A frequent example is when an executive team invite wider member of their leadership cadre to work with them – for example, with an offsite with 30 people including key people a level or two below the top team.

Overall, team-building work is particularly valuable for: improving or accelerating performance; improving trust, attitude and confidence; improving key processes (eg co-ordination, or communication); improving collective intelligence and developing shared mental models.

6. **Fast, fluid, flexible teams thrive in organisations with open, collaborative, cultures of self-governing accountability**

   When managers are members of several teams (virtual or otherwise) whose membership changes, the old ways of command and control accountability don't work. Trust, transparency and collaborative mindset become key – built on clear team purpose.

7. **The ultimate power of a team is not just what it achieves within the team, but how well it connects with the rest of the world – internally and externally**

   The textbook focus for high-performing teams was based on strength of relationship, and behaviour 'in the room'. Today, the data shows that high performance mainly comes from how much the team networks, learns and influences others, internally and externally. (See our *Brief* Who is on your side? Is managing stakeholders the most valuable thing a leadership team can do?)

'People are our greatest asset' was the great cliché. Perhaps we should be saying that collaboration and teamwork by groups of people is in fact our greatest strength.

Sources

Sources used for this Brief include:

Cross, Katzenbach: *The right role for top teams* (Booz & co, University of Virginia); Maynard, Gilson: *The role of the shared mental model in understanding virtual team effectiveness* (Group & Organisation Management); Shuffler, DiazGranados, *Salas: There's a science for that: team development interventions in organisations* (Association for Psychological Science); Tannenbaum, Mathieu, Sala, Cohen: *Teams are changing: are research and practice changing fast enough?* (Industrial and Organisational Psychology); Wooley, Malone: *What makes a team smarter? More women* (Harvard Business Review, MIT); Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashmi, Malone: *Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups* (MIT)