

Different approaches in the wisdom of teams

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



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Simply, teams outperform people working alone. This is especially true when the performance requires multiple skills, judgements, and experiences.

Consultants or former consultants of large consulting firms wrote the *Wisdom of Teams*. The *Wisdom of Teams* authors have roots at McKinsey. A consulting firm based out of Dallas Texas. The authors have spent considerable time working with teams, studying them and are now using their books to impart that knowledge to those seeking to form, develop and facilitate successful teams in their organizations. However, the two books take very different approaches.

Teams are one of the catchwords of the 90's. And with them has come an explosion of literature telling us what teams are and what they are not; how to create them, measure them, use them and empower them. A new vocabulary has emerged that distinguishes work groups from work teams, and self-directed teams from all other teams.

Some of the essential lessons learned about teams and team performance are:

- Teams do not arise without a performance challenge that is meaningful to those involved.
- Real teams' results will be greater if the leaders aim their sights on performance.
- Biases toward individualism cannot interfere with the team's goals.

The Wisdom of Teams presents lessons learned from the success and failure of actual teams. The authors base their wisdom on personal experience along with extensive interviews conducted with 50 different businesses. Katzenbach and Smith's lessons are supported by case studies. "Real" teams are the focus of the book. According to Katzenbach and Smith, a "real" 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.

These elements of a team -- purpose, performance goals, common approach to work and mutual accountability-- define what teams are and how they should be managed. Teams are distinguished from work groups in that the work they perform is collective as opposed to the sum of individual contributions, leadership roles are shared, and the team does real work together that result in a specific product or service being delivered. This distinction is important, because the focus of the book is on what teams are,

what it takes to become a team and how to exploit the potential of successful teams.

The authors also present useful guidelines for determining when to use a team and when to use a work group. Teams are not presented as an organizational ideal. In fact, Katzenbach and Smith encourage looking at the organization's goals and policies to determine if a team or work group is the best choice. Their bias is that teams are worth the trouble where they support organizational goals. In their view, the potential of teams is unlimited and cultivating real teams is one of the best ways of upgrading the overall performance of an organization.

Katzenbach and Smith's advice is simple, straightforward, and practical. They look at teams in an organizational context. Certain elements are critical to team success. The organization needs to have or develop a strong "performance ethic." In other words, compelling clear purposes and performance standards need to be an important part of the organization's culture. According to Katzenbach and Smith, performance, not chemistry, shapes teams. "Real" teams emerge when the individuals in them take risks involving conflict, trust, interdependence, and hard work.

Making conflict constructive by developing ways to handle differences and concerns and molding them into common goals is when real teams emerge. The authors suggest achieving this by establishing urgency and clear direction in teams, selecting members based on skill balance, not personality, and with opportunities to learn from each other. Establishing clear start-up rules for behavior and seizing upon a few immediate performance-oriented

tasks that are challenging but achievable also help teams develop. Spending lots of time together and giving positive feedback are key.

The authors describe the senior management team as the hardest to establish they present this as a fact of organizational life that can be addressed. Their solution: start by creating a strong senior management work group and go from there. Many successful organizations using teams have them. The authors are also realists. The difficulty teams may face such as lack of management direction is described with suggestions for addressing them. Finally, and maybe most importantly, Katzenbach and Smith are optimists. They believe that most people are able to lead.

Leaders need to provide guidance and give up control and most importantly believe in the team and put them first. It is that attitude, belief in the team, that is the most important characteristic of a leader. They conclude that a strong performance ethic leads to the pursuit of common performance results that benefit customers, shareholders, and employees. An overemphasis on any one area creates distortions that lead to turf battles and politics. Managers must demand and then relentlessly support pursuit of performance by teams. This clear simple model can easily be applied to any type of organization.

All of this advice is offered while keeping jargon to a minimum. In fact, the book starts by acknowledging what we all know creating change in an organization can be difficult. Yet, *The Wisdom of Teams* provides simple strategies, to analyze organizational readiness, and alternatives that will get your organization closer to a real team environment. It outlines the basics

elements of team and then offers techniques for sticking to them to achieve success. You do not need to be a process consultant to make teams work in Katzenbach and Smith's world. In addition, this is the book's greatest strength.

While the advice offered is good, the book could be much more concise and easier to read. Many of the points are redundant. This is a good book for the beginner, who wants to understand the issues.