Building Better Teams

A special report on why teams work well, why they don’t, and how to tackle problems in order to ensure that collaboration delivers the best results.
What makes a team successful? Many things — or maybe just one big thing, depending on who you listen to.

Some argue that agility is the key. Others say it’s psychological safety. Or maybe it’s the quality of team interactions outside of work, or having a diversity of perspectives and cognitive styles, or establishing a clear set of objectives and key metrics to make sure everyone is headed in the right direction.

There’s no shortage of popular theories on teaming out there — including many overly simplistic ones. Meanwhile, one academic-literature review of more than 100 studies conducted over the past decade has tried to parse out the statistical significance of 68 distinct factors that drive team performance. Good luck with that!

In reality, teams succeed or fail for a variety of reasons, and which factors matter most depends largely on a particular team’s context and objectives.

For example, consider trust. How much does it matter? A great deal, if you’re a Navy SEAL and your life could depend on the person next to you. Not as much, though, if you’re a sales rep on a widely dispersed field team that gathers just a few times a year.

How important is active support from your executive sponsors? At times, it can make or break a team. At other times, all you need from them is to leave you alone so you can get stuff done.

What about agile collaboration? If you’re a basketball player, it’s critical because court conditions are constantly shifting. If you’re a baseball player, you’re more focused on playing your position.

You get the idea: Context matters. Yet the literature on teams — both academic and popular — tends to gloss over this reality, offering instead either silver-bullet solutions or daunting laundry lists of factors.
At Deloitte, we've been working hard to find a better way to provide teams with the guidance they need. We call our approach Team Alchemy, recognizing that our current understanding of team effectiveness remains in the domain of protoscience. In other words, we start by acknowledging that although many aspects of team effectiveness are well known today, other aspects remain mysterious and need to be explored systematically, with humility and an open mind.

Our approach has been to define a framework that's broad enough to encompass all of the most critical factors for team effectiveness while also being simple enough for managers to understand and apply in the wild. Over the past couple years, we've tested and refined this framework — and the survey questions that illuminate it — with a few thousand people in surveys and then with a few dozen teams in deeper engagements.

This framework has three broad categories, each of which draws on a familiar phrase and contains a few subcategories:

• **Is the team ready?** Do members have the clarity they need to succeed in terms of goals and objectives? Governance and decision rights? Roles, responsibilities, and core work processes? These are foundational elements that should be in place before any team gets started — but all too often aren't.

• **Is the team able?** Do members have the diverse capabilities they need to achieve their mission, including supporting resources and the ability to adapt on the fly as things change?

• **Is the team willing?** Do members have the required commitment to succeed? This includes motivation, purpose, and a sense of trust and camaraderie — the reasons that we bother to show up for work in the first place.

Note that not all factors are internal to the team. That's important, given that many theories seem to assume that the responsibility for team success lies solely with the team. In reality, you can be the most collaborative team on the planet — a model of “Kumbaya’ togetherness — but if you don’t have the proper resources or organizational support, it won’t matter.

The Team Alchemy process is straightforward. We conduct an anonymous survey consisting of about 60 questions with all team members, analyze the results, benchmark them against those of other teams in our database, and lead a facilitated conversation lasting anywhere from an hour to a full day.

Our preliminary findings are intriguing. In the few dozen sessions we’ve run to date, clear patterns have already emerged:

• **Most teams felt that they were doing “OK.”** Very few teams believed they were either strong or weak across all major contributing factors. Instead, most teams reported medium-high levels of strength on most factors.

• **All teams found significant areas for improvement.** To date, not one team has reviewed its results and decided that no changes are needed to boost its performance.

• **All teams quickly identified action items.** Once issues were pinpointed in hard survey results, teams felt greater permission to identify and commit to corrective actions.

• **Certain factors were more frequently identified as pain points.** Specifically, many team members seemed disappointed with the clarity of their goals and access to resources (factors that are less likely to be within their control) while being generally pleased with their team’s motivation and purpose (factors that are more likely to be within their control).

• **No team had ever undergone as thorough a review of their success factors before experiencing Team Alchemy.** That’s not surprising, given the lack of comprehensive tools for team effectiveness. As the cybersecurity director for a leading technology company put it: “Being able to see all the feedback and discuss it was awesome. The framework allows you to quickly lead a team to think big and generate ideas on how to drive change, which is table stakes for strategic planning.”

Our initial results have been so encouraging that we’ve embarked on a larger journey. Over time, our goal is to deploy this approach with enough teams that we can begin to identify the larger patterns of obstacles to team effectiveness — and actions to take.
to address them — depending on specific aspects of each team: size, composition, and nature of work, among other factors.

As our Team Alchemy database grows from dozens to hundreds of teams (and, we hope, far beyond), we expect to spot patterns in what makes specific different kinds of teams successful — including, among others, the following types:

- Leadership teams.
- Virtual teams.
- Large-scale transformation teams.
- Ongoing execution teams.
- Innovation teams.

Addressing these issues has never been more important to the success of all types of organizations than during this time of dramatic workplace change due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

We don't believe for a minute that we have all the answers to the age-old question of what makes teams succeed, or that we ever will. But we are confident that we're heading in an interesting direction that will continue to deliver results.

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