

## How Teams Work

Teams are often temporary groups, yet they can help an organization build its long-term competitive strength by discovering new products and services, by developing new ways of serving customers and clients, and by creating new systems that enhance an organization's efficiency.

If your organization has charged you with an important business initiative, it's possible that you may need to form a team to address that challenge. But before you start recruiting, determine whether a team really is the best way to achieve results. For many kinds of work it's more efficient and less expensive to have individuals or workgroups handle the job.

### Teams Are Good for Complex Tasks

Teams are often the best choice for addressing complex problems and issues that affect many parts of the organization. Examples might include enterprise resource planning and implementation, a strategy for expanding the organization's products and services into the global market, or the development of an Internet business model. Through its members, a team can represent the thinking of a broad spectrum of stakeholders and act accordingly.

Teams can also help address controversial organizational change. When an organization expects resistance to a resource realignment, for example, or to a new business initiative, teams can increase the speed at which new ideas are accepted and help spread commitment to new strategies by communicating through its members to the company's different functional areas.

## Do You Really Need a Team?

*When Company X acquired Company Y, the leaders of the newly combined entity formed integration teams using members from both companies. The teams cut down on the “them versus us” mentality, chose the best elements from each organization’s processes and culture to create new business systems, and diverted employee energy away from complaining and sabotage toward constructive problem solving and cooperation.*

Simple, straightforward tasks don’t demand a team. Teams seldom perform well right from the start (it takes time for people who don’t know each other and who don’t normally work together to merge their different interests and viewpoints into a team). Given that limitation, it would be difficult for you to justify the expense of setting up a team to accomplish a simple task with a short timeframe.

*Company A wanted a fresh look for its printed materials, including a new logo and slogan. The decision to create an updated image was tied closely to the company’s new vision statement and to its new global strategy. The company’s management didn’t create a team for the job but instead handed it to a few individuals in the corporate communications group, which worked with an outside design agency. The organization achieved participation and endorsement from other areas of the company using surveys and presentations that required few other resources.*

## Teams Are Good for Innovation

If your organization has assigned a challenge to you but isn’t sure what the solution should be and hasn’t been able to articulate an approach to solving the challenge, forming a team can be your best strategy. Teams are excellent vehicles for driving toward

innovative, elegant, even unexpected answers to thorny business problems.

Teams spark innovation because they create a climate in which different opinions and viewpoints rub against one another. The friction among members can lead to creative perspectives that outpace what any individual might have otherwise achieved. Teams can produce results that can't be predicted from knowing the individual qualities and strengths of its members.

*Organization B needed to cut 15 percent from its operating budget. Top management decided that it wouldn't simply lay off workers to reach the bottom line. Instead, it created a cross-functional team and gave it the goal of proposing ways to trim the budget without sacrificing quality or people.*

A team can be an effective engine for imagining and designing new systems, structures, and processes. But once the system is in place (or for any established system for that matter), managing the system doesn't require a team – in fact, it's an extravagant waste of time and energy to create a team to manage a familiar system.

*In developing an organizational presence on the Internet, Company C formed an alliance with a technology company to develop a content-rich Web site that it hoped would drive new customers to its products and services. With little experience in content development, Company C formed a cross-functional team to create a system for finding, evaluating, and producing content from the knowledge it had gained over many years in the marketplace. After the system was in place and working to satisfaction, Company C turned over the development process to a workgroup so that the team members could return their attention to their original functions.*