

# The State of Teams

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# Executive Summary

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## Background

As the concept of teams has evolved, it has entered our society with the implicit assumption that we will enjoy increased knowledge acquisition, deeper commitment, higher performance, and greater innovation with increasingly less need for formal leadership (Katzenback and Smith, 1993). Though few will argue against this assumption, the complexities of the group dynamic and the puzzle of how to ensure high performance remain a constant struggle for researchers and practitioners alike.

In the age of lean organizations, one could assert that most work groups in existence today are being pushed to evolve (formally and informally) toward a team philosophy as the span of control of management widens and pressures to outperform competition increase. To better understand the state of teams in today's organizations, CCL has begun researching this area. The fundamental question guiding this research is: "What role will teams play in organizations of the future?"

CCL's State of Teams report provides a broad look at the challenges, needs, and functioning of teams in today's organizations. This report was based on survey results from 118 CCL program alumni.

## Teams Are Central to Success

The results point to some interesting trends in how organizations are using teams today. First, teams seem to be alive and well within organizations and play a valuable role in organizational success. Secondly, teams are being used as much to drive change as for direct business results. As teams are created for the design and implementation of organizational change, their design seems to necessitate multiple team memberships, geographical dispersion, and collaboration with other teams.

## Team Leaders Must Be Multitalented

Team leaders are expected to be strong communicators and diplomats who also have project management skills such as organization, decision-making, and prioritization. Additionally, personal attributes—such as intellectual ability, flexibility, and courage—contribute to the profile of an effective team leader.

## Collaboration is Key

The results suggest that collaboration across teams is a significant determinant of success. The challenge for today's leaders lies in the difficulty of collaborating with global virtual teams that often share members.

## Teams Are Functioning Below the Optimal Level

In regard to the team's internal functioning, respondents believe that most teams are not functioning at their optimal level, raising the question of whether greater investment in team and team leader development could help realize their potential. Areas of particular concern in internal functioning are the coordination of activities, revolving team memberships, and ineffective conflict resolution.

## Team Coaching and Collaboration Are Areas of Development

This survey also captures market data on the current and future programming needs of team leaders. These respondents are most interested in programs focusing on team coaching, team membership, and collaboration across teams.

It is obvious from this data that teams will continue to be an important part of organizational effectiveness, though team structure and purpose may continue to change. These results provide a springboard to further research that can delve deeper into the issues and trends.

# Who Took Part in the Survey?

Over a six-month period, 118 respondents completed an internet survey with items focused on their knowledge and experience with teams. The statistics in this section are frequency percentages unless otherwise noted.

## Participant Profiles

The 118 respondents were alumni of two CCL programs—Leadership & High-Performance Teams (n=39) and Developing the Strategic Leader (n=79). Leadership & High-Performance Teams attracts participants who lead cross-functional work teams or who coach/consult to work teams. The Developing the Strategic Leader program targets individuals who have the opportunity to influence strategy in their organizations and, as a result, lead or are part of high-level, cross-functional teams. Table 2 provides demographic data describing these participants.

## Organizational Level

Approximately 80% of respondents described themselves as executives and upper middle managers, while about 6% represented the professional level. These results are not surprising considering respondents are alumni of leadership development programs geared toward leaders who are at or above middle level management.

Table 1

| Organization Level | Percentage |
|--------------------|------------|
| Executive          | 47%        |
| Upper Middle       | 32%        |
| Middle             | 15%        |
| Professional       | 6%         |

## Years of Team Experience

In this category, 47% of program alumni surveyed had between six and 15 years of experience working with or leading teams. This finding is consistent with the senior level of respondents.

Table 2

| Teams Experience (Years) | Percentage |
|--------------------------|------------|
| 0 to 5                   | 17%        |
| 6 to 10                  | 24%        |
| 11 to 15                 | 23%        |
| 16 to 20                 | 17%        |
| 21 to 25                 | 11%        |
| 26 +                     | 8%         |

## Who Took Part in the Survey? (con't)

### Industry

When we examined the respondents' industries, we found that 18% of respondents come from the healthcare/pharmaceutical sector, 17% from financial, and 15% from consumer goods. Table 3 provides results from additional categories.

Table 3

| Industry            | Percentage |
|---------------------|------------|
| Other               | 22%        |
| Healthcare/Pharmacy | 18%        |
| Financial           | 17%        |
| Consumer Goods      | 15%        |
| Government          | 9%         |
| Automotive          | 7%         |
| High-Tech           | 5%         |
| Utilities           | 4%         |
| Transportation      | 3%         |

## What Are the Trends in Teams?

Teams experts and consultants constantly theorize about current trends of work teams in organizations today. Table 4 indicates the percentage of respondents who agree with each statement. Agreement was determined by a response of 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale.

Table 4 reveals that respondents believed teams are not part of the past, but rather are alive and well within organizations. Teams are extremely important and are heavily relied on in today's business environment.

Table 4

| Team Trends                                                       | % Agree |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| People participate on more than one team at a time.               | 95%     |
| Teams are central to organizational success.                      | 91%     |
| Our team collaborating with other teams is essential for success. | 87%     |
| Team members are geographically dispersed.                        | 65%     |
| Team "sponsors" are in place to enhance team performance.         | 51%     |
| We have more informal collaboration than we do formal teams.      | 45%     |
| Teams are short-lived (together less than one year).              | 37%     |
| Teams are on the decline.                                         | 11%     |

# What Are the Trends in Teams? (con't)

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## Team Lifespan

One claim of contemporary teams experts is that teams are no longer together for long periods of time but, rather, change membership or disband frequently. Our data do not support this claim and suggest that teams are, in fact, remaining together for at least one year.

## Team Leadership Challenges

Few would disagree that leading teams is a formidable challenge. The data suggested three variables that may prove most challenging for today's team leaders. First, more than 90% of respondents reported serving on more than one team at a time. In addition to the obvious resource challenges, these findings suggest team leaders are dealing with the challenges of multiple team memberships and may be saddled with members who cannot fully commit to a task.

Secondly, approximately two-thirds of respondents reported that team members are geographically dispersed, which could lead to challenges of coordination and communication.

Lastly, roughly half of program alumni believed sponsors are in place to guide team success. This is potentially a challenge for team leaders because they may be asked to navigate their organization without advocates.

## InterTEAM Collaboration

Teams do not operate in a vacuum; they exist in the context of other teams. Therefore, one might assert that collaboration across teams is a significant determinant of success—a theory supported by 87% of respondents. Today's leaders face the difficult challenge of collaborating with global virtual teams that often share members. This type of collaboration might be a developmental focus for the future.

# What Do Teams Look Like Today?

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In addition to exploring the team trends in organizations, we were also interested in learning more about the characteristics of today's teams. The results indicate the percentage of respondents in each group who agreed with the nine statements outlined in Table 5. Agreement was determined by a response of 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale.

In general, the results indicated there is room for improvement across most of these characteristics. While team members tend to enjoy being part of a team and believe they have shared goals, they also see struggles with resolving conflict, coordinating activities, and constantly changing memberships. Only about 50% of leaders believe their team exceeds organizational expectations, leading one to ask: What are team members missing in performance?

## What Do Teams Look Like Today? (con't)

Table 5

| Characteristics of Teams                              | % Agree |
|-------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| We have shared goals.                                 | 77%     |
| Members operate across geographic boundaries.         | 74%     |
| We work well with other teams.                        | 70%     |
| Members enjoy being part of the team.                 | 70%     |
| We learn from our mistakes.                           | 69%     |
| We surface and resolve conflict effectively.          | 64%     |
| Members coordinate their activities.                  | 62%     |
| Our membership stays the same for more than one year. | 57%     |
| The team exceeds organizational expectations.         | 53%     |

## What Skills Do Team Leaders Need?

This section contained an open-ended question that asked respondents to list the three skills a team leader needs to be successful. The results in Table 6 represent the skill categories as determined through a qualitative coding and analysis process.

Table 6

| Key Team Leader Skills   | % Agree |
|--------------------------|---------|
| Management Skills        | 22%     |
| Interpersonal Skills     | 21%     |
| Leader Attributes        | 19%     |
| Setting Direction        | 12%     |
| Leveraging Relationships | 10%     |
| Building Commitment      | 8%      |
| Developing the Team      | 6%      |
| Managing Conflict        | 2%      |

# What Skills Do Team Leaders Need? (con't)

## Management and Interpersonal Skills

The largest percentage fell into the category of management skills, with an emphasis on organizing, making decisions, and prioritizing work through project management. Interpersonal skills—such as communication, listening, and diplomacy—also appeared in the top three categories for respondents.

## Leader Attributes

Leader attributes can be defined as the parts of an individual's personality that cannot be easily developed. Almost 19% of program alumni believe personal attributes—such as intellectual ability, courage, and flexibility—are essential to team leadership.

# What Are Major Team Outcomes?

The purpose of this item was to gain an understanding of how organizations are using teams today. Table 7 shows the frequency percentages for the four major categories that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the responses.

Table 7

| Key Outcome of the Team | Percentage |
|-------------------------|------------|
| Business Results        | 36%        |
| Change                  | 30%        |
| Customer Focus          | 22%        |
| Collaboration           | 11%        |

## Business Results

The top category for program alumni was business results, which included meeting financial results and delivering high-quality products. These results highlight the team's expectation for delivering business-related outcomes.

## Organizational Change

Approximately 30% of respondents believed their teams were charged with change or change management. Most respondents think of change as a process improvement, with cultural change and process alignment making up only a small percentage of responses.

## What Are Major Team Outcomes? (con't)

These scores closely followed business results, proving just how important focusing on change and uncertainty is to organizational success. Responses in this category included process improvement (systems/structure and people), cultural change, and alignment, indicating that organizations are using teams for broad, organizational impact work.

Table 8

| Catergories Under Organizational Change | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------------|------------|
| Process Improvements                    | 53%        |
| General Results                         | 37%        |
| Culture                                 | 5%         |
| System/Process Alignment                | 5%         |

## What Are Major Team Obstacles?

The team's road to success is often blocked by obstacles. The following table represents the frequencies for the top three obstacles to team success. The categories are based on CCL's Team Effectiveness Leadership Model (TELM).

Topping the list of obstacles were organizational factors and material resources—two obstacles that are not within direct control of the team leader. Based on these results, organizations might be requiring teamwork without the adequate support of materials, sponsorship, and human resources.

The two biggest obstacles under the team leader's control are group dynamics and vision. This might be explained by leaders joining new teams with the belief that people issues solve themselves and that vision is unnecessary.

Table 9

| Obstacles to Team Success | Percentage |
|---------------------------|------------|
| Organizational Factors    | 22%        |
| Material Resources        | 18%        |
| Group Dynamics            | 12%        |
| Vision/Dream              | 6%         |
| Environmental Factors     | 6%         |
| Interteam Dynamics        | 1%         |
| Geographical Issues       | 1%         |
| Interpersonal Effort      | 1%         |

# What Are Potential Teams Programs?

The program offerings section asked Leadership & High-Performance Teams alumni (Developing the Strategic Leader participants were not given this portion of the survey.) to assess the extent they agree that CCL should offer new programs focusing on a variety of teams specialty areas. Table 10 shows the percent of favorable for respondents.

Leadership & High-Performance Teams alumni were most interested in programs that focused on team coaching, team membership, and collaboration across teams. These results suggest that team leaders struggle with helping teams in crisis or who need development, working effectively with other teams, and developing high-performing team members. Leaders need help building strong teams and keeping teams on track toward exceeding expectations.

Table 10

| Future Teams Programs                                                    | % Agrees |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| <i>I agree that CCL should offer courses in the following areas...</i>   |          |
| Team Coaching (those who consult to teams in crisis or for development)  | 80%      |
| Team Membership (for more effective team membership)                     | 69%      |
| Team Sponsorship (aiding those who provide teams organizational support) | 67%      |
| Collaboration Across Teams (working with other teams more effectively)   | 64%      |
| Teaming (those who want their “work groups” to be more collaborative)    | 59%      |
| Innovation Teams (teams charged with creating new products/services)     | 54%      |
| Virtual Team Leadership (leading geographically-dispersed teams)         | 51%      |

# What Does the Literature Say About Teams?

In an attempt to examine the popular perspective on teams in business, we analyzed literature from several business publications over the past four and a half years, including *BusinessWeek*, *BusinessWeek Online*, *Fast Company*, *Fortune*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Training + Development (T+D)*, and *Training Magazine*.

We searched specifically for content on team leadership, team anecdotes, team building, virtual teams, innovation and creative teams, and team learning. Central findings from this research are described on the next page.

# What Does the Literature Say About Teams? (con't)

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## Team Leadership

Team leadership is a major focus of popular teams literature, with team leadership literature dominating nearly half of the reviewed articles. Two subcategories of articles exist within the larger category of team leadership—articles that focused entirely on team leadership in general and articles that focused on providing advice for team leaders.

## Team Anecdotes

Team anecdotes—the second largest category of articles—does not focus on a specific teams topic, but on the literature technique used to portray teams in action. Many articles used anecdotes of real teams in real situations with either positive or negative outcomes, instead of focusing on a particular team topic.

## Team Building

Team building articles provide a large majority of the content within the teams literature. Focusing mostly on individual development, personality exploration, and basic team member familiarization techniques, the team building articles provide an array of suggestions for creating more team synergy. Suggestions include using visual aids, bonding with team members, and fostering a climate of dialogue by asking feedback on shared ideas.

## Virtual Teams

Virtual team articles provide a wealth of virtual team research and suggestions. This is not surprising due to recent developments in technology and business globalization. These articles examine navigating teamwork when distance is a key factor and provide tips on working with people from globally diverse cultures.

## Team Learning

Only two articles were found on team learning that emphasize the role of team learning to the overall effectiveness of team performance. It is difficult to say whether popular publications have simply ignored the recent developments on this topic, or whether the study of team learning has not provided any new research in the last few years. These two in-depth articles about team learning may indicate a future trend similar to that of innovation teams.



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