

PASSPORT

How Teams Learn

Research uncovers the disconnect between how we think teams learn and how they actually do.

By David Clutterbuck

The question arose during a workshop discussion with a group of training professionals: What do we know about how teams manage their learning? The group assumed there'd be lots of information available: We were wrong. Two initial literature searches conducted by post-graduates at Sheffield Hallam University and by Lisa Matthewman at University of London's Birkbeck College uncovered few references. Most of the literature dealt with how teams tackle tasks; very

little dealt with how teams manage learning. So, Clutterbuck Associates obtained funding from the European Community to explore how different types of teams manage learning.

Managers and academics view the learning team as the critical link between the learning organization and the learning individual. Yet, literature is scarce that distinguishes between team types or investigates whether different team purposes and structure lead to different

behaviors within teams. To combat that dearth of information, we talked with U.K. and Irish company managers. Our research has identified these basic team types.

Stable teams. These teams perform the same task, or variations of it, with relatively stable membership. Participants fall into routines easily and rarely question how work is done. Only under crisis, normally

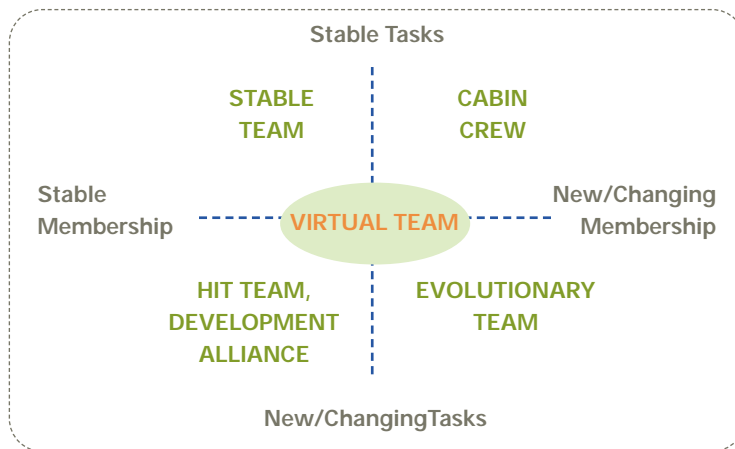
externally generated, do they put great effort into learning—sometimes not even then.

Hit teams. These teams exist for such short periods of time that before they've gone through the maturing stages (forming, storming, norming, and performing), they're disbanded and the learning acquired is scattered.

Evolutionary teams. Unlike hit teams, evolutionary teams reach maturity. But that creates an ancillary issue: how to deal with newcomers. Original members coalesce into a functioning team by shared experience and understanding of values, principles, and reasoning behind the way they run their project. Newcomers to the team lack that shared experience and, thus, find it difficult to join the club, which results in two teams: insiders and outsiders.

Virtual teams. This informal team relies on intuitive systems to ensure that learning takes place. Knowledge is its currency, so people with low levels of influence and experience may not be invited. That could explain why our research uncovered so few lower-level employees with virtual team experience.

Development alliances. Because learning is their focus, these teams have fewer inherent learning problems. They're more concerned with *what* people learn. The



attitudes, habits, and behaviors of the more experienced partner rub off—and not all of those qualities are helpful.

Cabin crew teams. These teams have a stable task but an ever-changing membership. Like airline crews, team members who haven't worked together for months are expected to coordinate and manage tasks as if they work together daily. Here, the potential to create learning partnerships is limited. Learning happens in small snatches, if at all.

All six team types experience the same problem: Job demands focus attention primarily on task achievement. The leaner the team, the less opportunity for learning, particularly away from work. Reflective time, when and if it's available, is used to solve today's urgent issues, rather than learning for tomorrow's.

Many teams found practical ways to redress the balance. In doing so, they've shown that some of our strongly held assumptions about learning in the workplace are ill founded.

Learning team leaders

Many textbooks maintain that team leaders need to act as coaches. That's a difficult task. Not only are team leaders too busy managing upwards, but also they may lack detailed knowledge of coaching.

In practice, teams with a good track record of learning have leaders who, rather than act alone as coach, create a developmental climate. They do coach, but they also establish an environment in which team members coach each other. To encourage team members to grow and develop networks of supportive peers, leaders provide stretching assignments

and collegial support.

Team leaders also allow for time to reflect and learn together. They delegate tasks, such as giving briefings, to develop individual confidence and capability. They legitimize spending time on learning by sharing their own learning goals and striving to become a role model for learning.

The learning plan

Central to creating that kind of learning environment is the team learning plan—an iterative process that focuses on what the organization is likely to demand of the team in the foreseeable future. Such introspection leads to defining broad team competencies, some of which may be needed by every member, some by just a few. Grading competencies by urgency and importance is the next logical step. The team works together to link broad goals or team competencies to their personal development objectives, which are drawn from the appraisal process.

Finally, the team examines its learning resources. If one person needs to acquire specific skills and knowledge, who within the team can help that person, either directly or as a gateway to others? Harnessing the collective knowledge and enthusiasm of the team raises the learning potential and stimulates openness.

Everyone has a role

Members of effective learning teams adopt distinct roles—partly through aptitude, partly through circumstance. We've defined various roles, which include

- coach
- reviewer—who stops the team in its activities and persuades it to reflect on what it's doing and why
- recorder—who captures knowledge within the team and makes sure that it's available to newcomers
- specialist—who is encouraged by team members to pursue his or her enthusiasm for some aspect of knowledge that interests no one else but is relevant to achieving the team's task.

The most-effective learning teams contain members who are supportive of each other's roles even though that role sometimes interrupts the focus on immediate task achievement. Everyone also takes responsibility for gathering information and ideas from outside the team and for sharing learning both with the team and others.

We've learned that organizations ignore team learning at their peril. In translating business ambitions into individual action, the support of team members and the explicit link to team learning goals are of fundamental importance. We asked senior managers why they hadn't emphasized team learning in the past, to which they replied they didn't have the tools to tackle the issue. Yet, within their organizations, some teams were already doing that independently. A challenge for the t&d profession is how to harness the instinctive developmental behaviors in the best of teams and make them more the norm.

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