



# Teamwork What is it good for?

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In 1972 a crack commando unit was sent to prison by a military court for a crime they didn't commit. These four men promptly escaped from a maximum-security stockade to the Los Angeles underground. Today, still wanted by the government, they survive as soldiers of fortune. If you have a problem, if no one else can help, and if you can find them, maybe you can hire the A-Team.

The A-Team went off the air in 1987 still wanted by the government and despite a recent film recreation, there has never been a better blueprint for team building. The key elements of its effectiveness: a cigar-chomping master of disguise, an ace pilot, a devilishly handsome con man, a mechanic with a mohawk, and an amazingly cool van (sic). Those particulars might not translate to all business settings but clear definition of roles and combining differing talents is a hallmark of effective collaboration. So is small team size, although four is slightly below the optimal number which currently is defined as 4.6.

Take as an example the presence of an outside threat e.g. imminent recapture by government forces. This correlates with high team cohesion. Think of it like France and England who bloodied each other for centuries before they noticed ... Germany. Another universal characteristic of teams is that they're, well, universal. If you work for a living, we're guessing you interact with other humans. (Apologies lighthouse keepers, we'll catch you next time.)

If you think this is too pink and fluffy and marginal to the daily battle of business, consider what is happening in companies trying to restore the fighting spirit (and higher profits) by building decentralized teams. Their theme: Corporation United.

The fact is, most of what we've read about teamwork is bunkum. So here's a place to start: Tear down those treacherously motivational posters of rowers rowing and pipers piping. Gather every recorded instance of the CEO calling someone a "team player." Shred it and set fire to it. Now we can settle down to think about what it really means to be a team.

I'm certainly not against the concept of teamwork, but that's the point. All the happy-sounding twaddle obscures the actual practice of it. And teamwork is a practice. Great teamwork is an outcome; you can only create the conditions for it to flourish. Like getting rich or falling in love, you cannot simply will it to happen.

I will go further and say: Teamwork is an individual skill. This might just challenge conventional wisdom but it also happens to be the title of a book by Christopher Avery who writes, "Becoming skilled at doing more with others may be the single most important thing you can do to increase your value, regardless of your level of authority."

As work is increasingly broken down into team-sized increments, Avery's argument goes, blaming a "bad team" for one's difficulties is, by definition, a personal failure, since the very notion of teamwork implies a shared responsibility. You can't control other people's behaviour, but you can control your own. Which means that there is an "I" in team after all. (Especially in France, where they spell it *equipe*.)

Yet this is not the selfish "I" that got so much attention during the "me" decade; it's the socially defined "I" which built societies and fought their wars. Neil Armstrong didn't get to the moon through rugged individualism; there is no such thing as a self-made astronaut. "Men work together whether they work together or apart." (*Robert Frost, American poet*)

Here's both the problem and the promise of cooperation. Human beings aren't hard-wired to succeed or fail at stuff, we can go either way. You might have had this experience when you've been put into a team



and told to solve a problem - the typical result is one person dominating and others looking totally disengaged.

But if we take the time to establish norms - roles, goals, etc. - not only will we behave according to the new norms, but they will enforce rules on other group members. Perhaps to a fault as the younger or less experienced in a team can be heard lecturing other members of the group on how they ought to be adhering to the rules.

Economists and managers alike have long assumed that success boils down to personal incentives. We'll cooperate if it's in our self-interest, and we won't if it's not. But some researchers thought to ask: Would people cooperate without any incentives? The answer was - drum roll - yes, under the right conditions. Participants often cited "group welfare" as motivation.

To economists and managers with long held beliefs, this was quite shocking. To anyone who's been part of a successful team though, not shocking at all. Life's richest experiences often happen in concert with others - your teenage band, your wedding, tobogganing. The boss who assumes that workers' interests are purely mercenary will more often than not end up with a group of mercenaries. No battery of team exercises can fix that situation.

Again, let the greats show the way. During a public appearance, an A-Team cast member was asked by a fan to name his favourite co-star. "Listen," Mr. T responded. "That's wrong for me to pick a favourite, because I'm a team player and we were a team. Remember, they say there's no 'I' in team." Sure, but there was a "T." And pity the fool who forgets it.

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