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## Executive Book Summaries®

# Team Genius

## The New Science of High-Performing Organizations

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Teams — we depend on them for both our professional success and our personal happiness. But isn't it odd how little scrutiny we give them? The teams that make up our lives are created mostly by luck, happenstance or circumstance — but rarely by design.

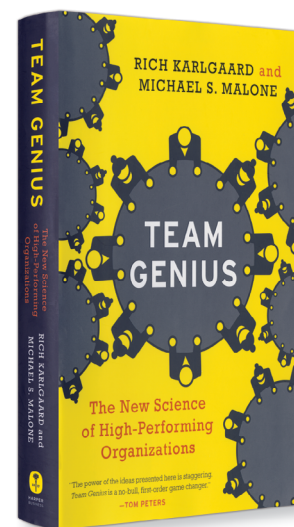
In trivial matters — say a bowling team, the leadership of a neighborhood group or a holiday party committee — success by serendipity is already risky enough. But when it comes to actions by fast-moving startups, major corporations, nonprofit institutions and governments, leaving things to chance can be downright dangerous.

Offering vivid reports of the latest scientific research, compelling case studies and great storytelling, *Team Genius* shows managers and executives that the planning, design and management of great teams no longer have to be a black art. It explores solutions to essential questions that could spell the difference between success and obsolescence.

Throughout, Rich Karlgaard and Michael S. Malone share insights and real-life examples gleaned from their careers as journalists, analysts, investors and globe-trotting entrepreneurs.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why good “chemistry” often makes for the least effective teams.
- Why cognitive diversity yields the highest performance gains.
- Why groups of  $7(\pm 2)$  and 150 are magic sizes for teams.
- Why “pairs” are so special and how many types there are.
- What the life cycle of a team is.



by Rich Karlgaard and  
Michael S. Malone

### CONTENTS

#### Change Kills – If You Don't Have the Right Teams

Page 2

#### The New Science of Teams

Page 3

#### The Power of Difference

Page 4

#### Managing Teams to Genius

Page 5

#### The Power of Pairs

Page 6

#### Trios – The Plutonium of Teams

Page 7

#### The Birth and Life of Teams

Page 8

# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: TEAM GENIUS

by Rich Karlgaard and Michael S. Malone

**The authors:** Rich Karlgaard is the publisher of *Forbes* magazine, where he writes a featured column, Innovation Rules, covering business and leadership issues. He is co-founder of *Upside* magazine, Garage Technology partners and Silicon Valley's premier public business forum, the 7,500-member Churchill Club. He is also the author of *Life 2.0* and *The Soft Edge: Where Great Companies Find Lasting Success*.

Michael S. Malone is one of the world's best-known technology writers. A veteran newspaper reporter and columnist, magazine editor and entrepreneur, he is the author or coauthor of nearly 20 award-winning books, notably the best-selling *The Virtual Corporation*, *Bill & Dave* and *The Intel Trinity*.

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## Introduction

Successful teams are at the core of powerful organizations. But what explains game-changing teams — start-up teams, creative teams, R&D teams, project teams and sales teams?

Let us be clear. When we talk about teams, we are not talking about formal teams as depicted in company org charts and Web pages. *Team Genius* is about how work really gets done. Experience says that the world's most creative and impactful work gets done by informal teams.

It's time to take a look at teams systematically and scientifically. To prepare ourselves for the world to come in the rest of this century, we need to find the genius that resides in great teams. ●

## Change Kills — If You Don't Have the Right Teams

Talking about the rapid pace of technology-driven change has become commonplace. Our acceptance of the reality of this change doesn't necessarily mean that we understand it or that we have developed effective strategies to cope with it.

Here is the uncomfortable truth: Humans run to a much slower evolutionary clock than our inventions. To use an engineering term, we are the "gating factor" that keeps a process from running faster. It is people, not scale

or technology, who determine how well an organization adapts to change.

So, whether we know it or not, the difference in our rapidly accelerating world between a perpetually successful enterprise and a struggling, dysfunctional also-ran comes down to the people in those enterprises — and even more, to how those people relate to each other as they form and re-form into teams. Maneuverability will become the new essential for sustained rising value, and it will come from the combination of global reach, great technology and highly optimized teams — *team genius*.

## Mastering Maneuverability

Maneuverability is more than rapid evolution. Sometimes even that is too slow. Rather, maneuverability is the capacity to turn, even reverse direction, quickly, to deal competently with whatever new change — technology, market opportunity or competition — has just burst onto the scene, and to do so without losing internal cohesion and breaking up. This is a challenge facing almost all institutions, from small retailers to the governments of great nations around the world.

The exponential forces at work in today's culture and economy reward winners quickly and punish losers mercilessly. Over here you'll find a resurgent Apple, but over there is sad, old Eastman Kodak; Germany on the one hand, Greece on the other; Silicon Valley and Detroit. Whether the global economy improves or worsens, this new unevenness is here to stay.



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service@summary.com

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Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; Sarah T. Dayton, Editor in Chief; Ashleigh Imus, Senior Editor; Masiel Tejada, Graphic Designer; Beth Van Woert, Contributing Editor

## SUMMARY: TEAM GENIUS

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That's not to say that older and larger organizations cannot maneuver effectively and even make stunning reversals in direction. But it is exceedingly rare. And it almost never happens unless a small, cohesive team is found at the center or top of that organization and is endowed with two other crucial factors: the power to execute its decisions across the entire organization and the trust of its players in the periphery around that team. Indeed, even the largest organizations can maneuver widely and with stunning speed in the face of rapid change if they are built out of genius teams in support of an empowered leadership. ●

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### The Magic Numbers Behind Teams

Researchers into the nature of leadership recognized decades ago that even the best leaders have a limit to their successful *span of control*, usually six to 10 people — the number of individuals whom they can personally manage at the highest levels of productivity. Beyond that, even the most talented leaders simply don't have enough intellectual, emotional or temporal bandwidth to provide the requisite personal attention. Thus, smart leaders begin to divide up their direct reports into multiple teams; each with a subordinate emplaced and empowered to serve as the new team leader.

A second force at work in creating team archetypes is *structural stability*. Here one can draw an analogy with atomic theory. Certain molecules are inherently stable due to the nature of their atomic bonds and structure. Others are much more volatile, and unless constantly maintained in the unstable condition, they will quickly revert to more stable structures.

Human teams exhibit the same combination of stability and volatility. Some teams, most obviously pairs but also large groupings such as the 150-160 people in a typical tribal village, are considerably stable. Pairs, of course, are the most stable of all, not just because of their simplicity but also because they manifest those most basic of all human relations: friendship and marriage.

But add a third team member and things become much more complicated — sometimes even explosive. Trios work, of course, but often it seems they do so only by serial pairing. After all, history doesn't show many triumvirates and troikas, especially among rulers, that have survived for long.

Beyond three members, the next optimal team size has been the subject of considerable debate. Susan Healthfield, a human resources expert, offers this: "So, optimum team size is not an easy answer. From experience and research, the optimum team size is five-seven members. The team size that continues to function effectively is four-nine members. Teams are known to function cohesively with a size up to 12 members."

Studying everything from Hutterite religious communities to the Yanomamo people of the Brazilian jungle, British anthropologist Robin Dunbar discovered that the same human group sizes appear over and over. He called them "clusters of intimacy," and he identified "cliques" of five people, "sympathy groups" of 12-15 people and "bands" of up to 35 members.

Dunbar's biggest discovery, now named after him, was that there appeared to be an upper limit to team size. Precisely: 147.8, normally rounded up as the "Dunbar number" to 150.

The figure of 150 seems to represent the maximum number of individuals with whom we can have a genuinely social relationship, the kind of relationship that goes with knowing who they are and how they relate to us.

Until now, teams have by necessity largely been recruited and formed by hunch, intuition and experience, with little to no empirical support. That is about to change. ●

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### The New Science of Teams

The most fundamental questions one can ask about teams are, "Are human beings designed to work together?" and "Can each person grow and perform at his or her best if properly fit into the right team?" Some of the most compelling new research in brain science says yes.

In fact, the human brain is evolutionarily designed so that individuals can adjust to one another's perspectives and emotions in order to engage in cooperative activity. When we engage with another person, we are, in fact, embarking on an intimate brain-to-brain connection with that person. The deeper that engagement, the greater that relationship affects our brains and our well-being to the point of actually activating genes controlling our immune systems. Thus, nourishing relationships really are beneficial for our health, while toxic ones can actually be physically destructive.

# SUMMARY: TEAM GENIUS

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## Mirror Neurons, Spindle Cells, Oscillators

The discovery of mirror neurons, among the most important findings of the last decade in neuroscience, helps us understand many heretofore paradoxical social phenomena, including the evolution of language, emotional empathy and personal social identity.

Mirror neurons are nerve cells in the brain whose purpose appears to be creating a copy of an observed action — either by the owner of that brain or, even more astonishingly, the action of others.

The discovery of mirror neurons could be a game changer, with the potential to offer breakthroughs in everything from how teams are created to the nature of leadership.

It is because of mirror neurons that people are able to emulate within seconds the emotions and actions of others. Mirror neurons also allow us to navigate our social world and create an instant sense of shared experience. And they are particularly important to leadership, because followers don't just act out the orders of leaders, they actually tend to mirror the feelings and actions of those leaders. For example, a leader who smiles and laughs will trigger similar laughter in his or her team — a process that also helps in team bonding.

Mirror neurons aren't the only cells in the brain that help regulate how we interact with others in team settings. In practice, intuition can seem like ESP, coming from a place deep in the recesses of your mind. But recent research has found that intuition is partly produced by a class of neurons in the brain called *spindle cells*. The role of these spindle cells is to quickly transmit thoughts and feelings to other cells. Within one-twentieth of a second, spindle cells trigger neural networks designed to make judgment calls with only a minimum of evidence — such as deciding whether one person is trustworthy or whether another is right for a job. In our fast-moving digital world, this ability to make accurate “gut calls” can be crucial for team leaders.

Meanwhile, another class of neurons called *oscillators* regulates physical coordination between people. When two cellists play together, they hit their notes in unison because of their respective oscillators. In a sense, human beings find harmony when their oscillators do.

For now at least, we don't know how to strengthen or regulate the firing pattern of mirror neurons, spindle cells and oscillators. But what we can understand is that these fundamental factors do exist, and not only are happiness and stress contagious, but they can spread within seconds across a team.

## Measuring Teams in Real Time

Teams these days are not just being studied statistically or as part of isolated experiments, but in real life and while they are in operation.

Alex Pentland, the director of MIT's Human Dynamics Laboratory, and his team have used “sociometers” to generate data on communication patterns and productivity of teams in real organizations. Sociometers are wearable electronic sensors that measure patterns of communication — including the amount of face-to-face interaction, conversation time, physical proximity to other people and physical activity levels — using social signals derived from vocal features, body motion and relative location. They capture tone of voice, how one faces others in groups and how much people listen and talk. For Pentland, great teams do the following:

- They communicate frequently.
- Team members talk and listen in equal measure.
- They communicate informally.
- They look for ideas and information outside the group.
- They adjust their patterns of communication.

Another way of looking at teams in real time is called *team neurodynamics*. This is the science of modeling teamwork through the measurement of members' neurophysiologic indicators. In other words, wire the team up and send them back to work. The field of neurodynamics is based on the discovery that an individual's brain rhythms become synchronized to the frequency of the stimulus presented to him or her.

All of these experiments and observations lead to the possibility of one day being able to assemble teams, test them in action and then see if their individual and group responses indicate a team that will work well together. ●

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## The Power of Difference

When it comes to teams, traditional definitions of “diversity” are meaningless. Cognitive diversity — *how* people think — is all.

One common source of this cognitive diversity is cultural and is the result of different patterns of socialization. For example, in some cultures, people tend to be holistic thinkers, and in others people tend to be more analytical. Another form of cognitive diversity can be found between

## SUMMARY: TEAM GENIUS

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socially contextual (context-dependent) and independent (context-independent) thinkers.

Here's the thing: A team needs both independent and socially attuned thinkers. Leaders also need to know the distributions of the different types of thinkers on the team and manage accordingly. Studies have found that the optimal balance of people on radical-innovation teams requires that 50 percent of the members have the following distribution of personality types:

- **Creative:** 20 to 30 percent. Teams with too many creative types struggle with implementation. That's because (surprise!) creatives are not always practical, are not concerned with rules and may initiate conflict.
- **Conformist:** 10 to 20 percent. Conformists are the backbone of the teams, and their key role is to support the creatives. Conformists help boost cooperation and improve team confidence. They make teams predictable in a good way.
- **Detail-Oriented:** as much as 10 percent. Detail-oriented people may often be risk-averse, but they help strengthen important team functions such as budgetary control. The detailers make sure that the team is still there each morning.

More than 40 years of research on diversity has been conducted by psychologists, sociologists, economists and organizational scholars. A review of this literature in 1999 by Katherine Y. Williams and Charles A. O'Reilly of Stanford Graduate School of Business underscored that diversity is a double-edged sword.

The good news is that group diversity can enhance performance, because group members bring to bear varied ideas, knowledge and skills to accomplish tasks. However, in a diverse group, members may view each other through a biased lens of stereotypes based on social categories (the same differences in race, gender and so forth that are supposed to help). This bias invariably reduces the effectiveness of the group's interactions.

### Getting the Best from Diversity

The bottom line is that your greatest chance to create a successful, productive team involves a diverse membership — but the more diverse that membership becomes, the worse the odds are that the team will survive long enough to produce those results. So you need a strategy to mitigate the cost of that increased diversity. The scientific evidence suggests that this strategy should take two tracks.

First, diverse teams need to be actively managed. Abandon now any notion you have that you can build the most

powerful team possible, wind it up and let it run by itself. In fact, the more diverse the team, the more hands-on management it will need.

Besides increasing the quality and participation of direct management, you will also need to be constantly vigilant against a number of threats to the team's continued existence. These threats include but are not limited to the following:

**Turnover:** Turnover is a problem in groups in which the members perceive each other as too different. The added stress of dealing with the "other" will drive some people to seek the safety of being with people more like themselves in other teams.

**Framing:** Framing is how a potential challenge or opportunity is presented to team members in relation to their overall project. So, how the challenge of the workforce diversity is framed by the team leader will affect how team members manage diversity-related tensions. Here, it is best to frame the value of your team's diversity as a matter of staying competitive and emerging victorious.

**Belief:** Research has found that teams with pro-diversity beliefs are better at harnessing the power of that diversity. That is, if they believe that their diversity is a competitive advantage, it will usually turn out to be so.

**Tenure:** It turns out that the longer you keep a team together, the fewer the negative effects of its diversity. Teams with high degrees of familiarity are better able to take advantage of diverse experiences among team members.

Now that you've built your team and populated it with a diverse group of members, your final challenge to keep it running at its full potential is not just to drive it to full productivity but to keep it running at that pace by minimizing its long-term losses. ●

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## Managing Teams to Genius

Fortunately, there is more than one path to team success. Fully armed with this knowledge, you should be able to find the team for you — as well as a leadership style that suits your personality and your organization's culture.

Here again, research in the last decade has revealed some interesting discoveries. One of them is that the values instilled in a team at its formation will shape the way its members approach tasks and their social interactions, and that over time those attitudes will solidify as a feature of the group's structure. That means that how your

## SUMMARY: TEAM GENIUS

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team begins will determine how it ends and how it will perform during its existence.

J. Richard Hackman, an esteemed expert on teams, summarizes the leadership challenge most aptly. He notes that you cannot guarantee team success, but you can increase the probability of it by managing at the margins and setting up the right conditions. According to Hackman, these “right conditions” are

- The team has a compelling direction: The team task is clear, challenging and consequential.
- The team is bounded (it is clear who is and who is not on the team) and stable (the team’s membership is not constantly fluctuating), and its members are interdependent (that is, they interact with one another to accomplish the team’s work).
- The team is set up with the right mix of members, who have norms of conduct that guide their behavior. Team members are different but not so different that they cannot work with each other. Team members have the right set of skills and expertise for the team task.
- The team has a supportive organizational context that provides team members with access to resources, information and training to help accomplish their task.
- The team receives coaching from experts, peers and leaders.

Up to now, all information has been concerned with the inside of teams. Now, we follow by looking at teams from the outside — from the perspective of a manager assigned to build them and ensure their success. ●

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### The Power of Pairs

In today’s tough and competitive economy, the demands of daily life at work and play are almost impossible to manage by oneself. What’s needed instead are people with complementary skills. And we find such pairs everywhere: the engineer who teams with the technical writer, the trial lawyer with the researcher, the executive with the operations expert, the inventor with the entrepreneur.

Pairs often take on a wide and colorful array of forms, some of them quite unlikely at first glance. Not only is the success of these teams not correlated with compatibility, but some of the most successful pairs consist of two people who have nothing in common and may actually despise each other. Stranger still are the pairs in which one member may be long dead — or have never existed.

Needless to say, this is not the way we normally think

of pairs nor how we typically assemble them in business, government or academia. Rather, we tend either to team up people who we think will work well together, or simply stick together the two best individuals for the job we can find. That this selection process remains so crude even into the 21st century is shocking. And yet, when those talented individuals are finally hired and put to work, they are paired with others, or put into larger teams, through a process that hasn’t changed in millennia: perceived compatibility, common interests, similar personalities, intuition and, more often than not, proximity and expediency.

Is it any wonder that, for all the empirical tools that are now brought to bear on corporate HR functions, we still have almost no ability to predict whether a given pair will actually get the job done?

When the revolution in team construction and management finally arrives, it will no doubt start with the very foundation of all teams: pairs. After all, pairs are not only the most common of human (and animal) teams, but they are also the basic bricks from which the edifices of larger teams are built. ●

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### Successful Pairing

To be human is to be a member, both serially and in parallel, with a succession of pairs — numbering perhaps in the hundreds — over the course of a lifetime.

There are pairs defined by occasion. For example,

**Chained Together by Success:** These are “antagonistic partnerships,” and they can be the strangest, scariest and most remarkable of any pair type. “Chained” pairs feature a duo of people who are hugely successful together but for various reasons simply do not get along with each other. An example here would be movie critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert.

There are pairs defined by similarity. For example,

**Castor and Pollux:** These are the “perfect partnerships,” the ideal among teaming individuals who are so much alike that they each can take on the other’s duties with barely a hitch. These partnerships can range from near clones — often taking the form of siblings such as Orville and Wilbur Wright — or very different people who still match each other in the details of their joint efforts, such as Bill Hewlett and David Packard.

There are pairs defined by difference. For example,

**Yin and Yang:** “Yin and Yang” pairs are teams of two individuals whose different skills combine to produce a

## SUMMARY: TEAM GENIUS

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complete and competitive force. These pair teams are typically found among salespeople, educators and law-enforcement officers, and in the creative business professions such as advertising, art design and copywriting. In the classic Yin and Yang teams, one individual is artistic, the other empirical. Think of the many songwriters and lyricists, from Rodgers and Hart to Elton John and Bernie Taupin.

And there are pairs defined by inequality. For example,

**Remember the Force:** “Force” pair-teams are mentor partnerships in which the two members are unequal. In a typical case, these teams consist of an older veteran who serves as an adviser and guide to a younger partner. The title of this type of team comes, of course, from *Star Wars* and the relationship between Obi-Wan Kenobi and Luke Skywalker.

### Matchmaker, Matchmaker

When it comes to the care and feeding of perfect pairs, you should start as a leader by identifying your most talented people, especially those who are described as difficult, unpopular, eccentric or odd.

Don't look at the obvious strengths of these individuals, but instead focus on their weaknesses. Compare these weaknesses to see if they can fit together in a way that neutralizes them. If you can't find a suitable match among this select group of individuals, look elsewhere in the organization. Remember, the best pairs may be quite alike, complete opposites or somewhere in between. The key is that, on the job if nowhere else, these individuals fill each other's voids.

Next, put these potential pairs in close proximity, as isolated as possible from outside influences — especially peer groups — which may amplify their differences and undermine their synergies. Assign the pair a task for which they have the requisite skills but are unlikely to accomplish as solo operators.

You should now step back but continuously monitor what happens. If the team proves to be either dysfunctional or, conversely, enjoying itself too much to get any work done, dissolve it. If it proves to be highly productive — and this will be obvious quickly — keep it intact, find more challenging projects for it and clear a path for it through the company's bureaucracy. ●

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## Trios – The Plutonium of Teams

If pairs are like inert gases — pairing up and becoming profoundly stable — trios are more like radioactive

elements: They seem to exist for only a brief time before they break down to their natural state, pairs. Make the most of your trios for as long as they exist, but don't depend on them to survive, and don't be surprised when they fail.

Trio teams inevitably take one of four forms:

**2+1 Trios:** This, at its core, is a pair to which has been added a third player in a vital but not an intimate partner-like role. The greatest strength is it's a pair with a third peripheral person acting as a consultant or specialist.

**Parallel Trios:** Often what we perceive as a trio is, in fact, two pairs sharing a common member, while the other two members rarely interact. Parallel Trios are the most powerful because the members of the trio don't actually all work together; it is possible to fill the two outside roles with individuals who are the best at what they do without worrying about their compatibility with the other, only their compatibility with the sole inside member. This architecture also features its own inherent hierarchy. Inside, because he or she is the traffic cop between the two outsiders, is the uncontested leader of the trio. This solves a lot of the stress found in most trios.

**Serial Trios:** Serial Trios differ from Parallel Trios in a temporal way. Rather than the one common member dividing his or her time between the two other members, the various members of the trio simply and sequentially work briefly with each other in pairs.

**Instrumental Trios:** If 2+1 Trios are the easiest to construct and Parallel Trios the most powerful, Instrumental Trios — three people with carefully defined roles working together on a single, equally well-defined task — are the most consistently successful.

Creating and managing trios can actually be easier than doing the same thing for pairs. That's because trios can exhibit an internal structure and a level of self-management not typically possible with pairs. They can also usually be created simply by taking a successful pair and adding a third player, compatible or not, who brings the requisite skills. ●

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## Four and More – The Wild Bunch

Most of the successful small teams range in size from five to nine members — referred to as **7±2 teams**. These teams show up almost everywhere: sports, the number of key players in sitcoms (think *Friends*), rock bands

## SUMMARY: TEAM GENIUS

(the Rolling Stones) and the number of members of the United States Supreme Court.

Managing a 7±2 team usually means that you are a member of that team. And while in theory that shouldn't make a difference, in real life it always does. And so, while you are still trying to assemble the best possible team, in the back of your mind is the lingering thought that whomever you pick you will have to work with closely on a daily basis for the duration of the project. So if you aren't careful, subjectivity can sneak into what should be a hard-nosed, objective decision.

**15±3 teams** are the smallest teams that can actually divide their labor and still have dedicated management for each resulting subteam. This formulation offers some real advantages; in particular, it means that those subteams can truly operate independently and not have to wait on a single manager racing back and forth among those teams making command decisions.

The basic rules of management theory apply: work through your subordinates, but maintain a connection with all the team members; continuously monitor the team's health; recognize hard work and achievement; defend the team against outside challenges; manage the budget carefully; and shepherd the team through major challenges and transitions. If you've built the team properly, it will take care of the rest. ●

### The Birth and Life of Teams

Every team is a narrative, a story that typically begins with a **formation phase** in which strangers are thrust together under unusual circumstances and then are forced to quickly establish their relationships with each other even as they rush to understand their assignment, divide it up and then parcel out the pieces to the right members. Soon thereafter, the team enters into an **establishment phase**, in which it needs to establish rules, metrics, milestones and its communication apparatus. And all of this must be done even as those same members begin to work on the task itself. That shift of focus from organization to actual work on the assignment marks the transition to the **operational phase**.

As time passes, and as the initial results of its work are known, the team inevitably has to adjust — resetting milestones and deadlines and coping with the personalities, idiosyncrasies and the strengths and weaknesses of its

members. This is the **functional phase**. External forces are in play as well: New competitors with threatening new products or services may appear unexpectedly, deadlines may change and budgets may shift. All of this puts further stress and confusion on the teams.

Assuming the team survives, these events ultimately have another effect: They become elements in the team's growing story, the legends and experiences that help define its internal culture. This is the **cultural phase**. The longer a team endures, the more likely it is to lose original members. The healthier a team's culture, the less productivity it will lose to newcomers making their way up the learning curve. This is the **sustainable phase**.

As the team overcomes any technical obstacles and approaches its goals, it now moves into a **maturation and consolidation phase**. The challenge now is to resist the desire to rush ahead and, instead, to maintain the pace and finish the project properly. Good teams survive to enter the **completion phase**. Once everything is packaged, bundled up and either handed or sold off, the team reaches its **end phase**.

When you do reach that end, formally announce that fact — and then celebrate. This is not a time for reserve, or weary acceptance or polite acknowledgment of a job well done. Even if you've failed to achieve all of your goals, your team deserves a full-blown recognition of its loyalty and hard work.

The teams in which we work, and the teams we lead, may not change the world. But they can make the world a better place, make our company (and everyone who depends on it) more successful and secure, and give ourselves and our teammates a more rewarding and fulfilling career. ●

#### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Team Genius* you'll also like:

1. ***A Team of Leaders* by Stewart Liff, Paul Gustavson.** Gustavson and Liff present the Five-Stage Team Development Model, which outlines the progression to creating teams of people who think and act like leaders.
2. ***Power of 2* by Gale Muller, Ph.D., Rodd Wagner.** Wagner and Muller teamed up to crack the code on collaboration and to discover what elements are crucial for two people becoming a successful team.
3. ***The Synergist* by Les McKeown.** McKeown reveals a proven method to build highly successful teams while stimulating personal and organizational growth.