
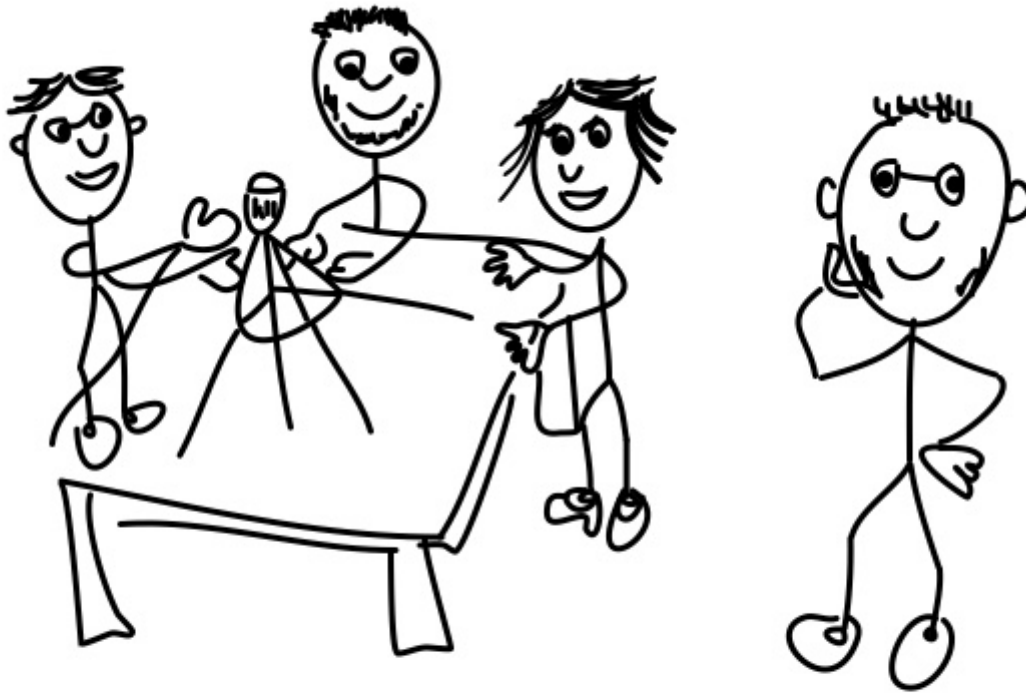


Why we need more dynamic team setups to foster motivation and self organization

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With this post I explain my current opinion about team setups, aiming to create high performance teams and/or working with dynamic team setups. I try to answer the question: **Is the focus to remain long running, stable teams to build high performance teams still valid for knowledge work environments?**

Recently I read two, at least in my view contradicting and even though really interesting books about teams:

- [Team Genius – The new science of high performing organizations](#)
- [Creating great teams – how self selection lets people excel](#)

With this post I share learnings from working with and within teams combined with learnings from these books.

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My (former?) belief in building long running teams to achieve high performing team setups

Beside other highly important team setup factors – like a vision and mission, team rules, clear roles, commitment, trust, being accountable and result focussed – I aimed for having longer running, stable team constellations. For a team it needs time:

- To grow trust (based on knowing each other deeply – best including everyone's private world, showing vulnerabilities),
- To combine strengths and weaknesses.
- And ... simply to learn how to work together.

Based on that I would have suggested that it needs at least six months to arrive at this ideal high performing state. Six months as a guess – taken from described experiences in High Performance Teams (where e.g. the Alinghi team is referenced).

I worked in just a few teams that I would consider to be a high performing team and with many teams that did not reach that state.

An experience within a high performing team

My first experience in such a team was back in 2007.

I remember that we had a **tough goal** (no detailed building instructions but an alignment on what has to happen), a **real commitment** in the team and finished our mission within a short time frame (roughly three months including everything).

It was a group of **highly skilled, technically excellent developers** – combining architectural perspectives, hands-on long term practical and pragmatic programming skills, intelligence to come up with solutions and a combination of longer term experience of working together and new members.

Interestingly everyone had at least one possible peer in the team, whom she had worked together for a longer running (min 2 years) period, that enabled faster understanding and explanations of ways and behaviors among each other.

At this time we started using parts of XP and Scrum, but topics like full automation, ... where not yet covered that good as today 😊

One important thing I remember is the fact, that **we did not need a long time (maybe 1-3 weeks) to start performing in that team.** I think it was our purpose and tough available time scope that forced us to get together and to combine our strengths. No need to go through long and steep learning curves was another aspect.

Experiences within not (yet) performing teams

On the other hand I worked in and with many teams that did not reach a high performing state – you could see that on:

- **Individual work on (many) stories** instead of a strong attitude to share and conquer a topic together (and I've seen that really often – for me a group of people and not a team).
- **Never opened vulnerabilities and hidden lines of mistrust** – beautified with a polite and never exploding atmosphere (even after more than a year of working together).
- **Weak team purpose and missing shared goals** – individuals that start pulling out of the team, working on (at worst) hidden topics, technological playgrounds that were not really connected to reaching a new valuable product increment and just a lame energy level and drive to achieve something great.

Some learnings and observations

- **One needs to push teams, to combine their abilities and work together to reach a common goal.** It is a behavioral pattern to learn and to unlearn that being the lonesome hero is not the way to continue.
- **Time necessary for team building depends on many factors** like:
 - A real team collaboration space without much distractions:
 - new topics go somewhere else or are blocked for now
 - equipment (technological and e.g. furniture, space,...) at the best – let's please not discuss what monitor, what machine someone really needs ... they know it and you have to make it happen
 - fun and relaxation zones and phases – to clarify topics in fast conversations, to get out of all time team blues 😊
 - Free choice to work in that team and for that goal – as soon as there is external force connected I think you can forget about real commitment and high performance. Even in dramatic situations, one can show the urgency and build on commitment and understanding of people – I strongly believe in that.
- **Cross language and cultural differences bring great and important diversity** into a team, but need for sure a longer time for creating an environment of trust and true common understanding that should not be underestimated. Intercultural trainings and expertise can speed up team building in that scene.

- **A highly competitive environment hunting for knowledge workers leads to higher turnover rates:**

- Even environments with high standards and satisfaction rates can get into trouble when an opportunity hits the 20% barrier.
- Hiring, in a way science describes it is necessary, seems to be impossible without an extraordinary company image, budget and major guidance by an expert.

Following science is to find the best people using big data driven search approaches and to exactly analyze what skill profile you need for extending the team.

- Luckily many of the current requests are yet not smart enough to touch peoples emotions and really directly address their individual needs – but I expect that this is just a matter of time as recruiting is a tough market and learns fast too.
- Higher fluctuations lead to instability and new team phase cycles (see Tuckman model).

- **Motivation shifts** for individuals.

Team, individual and product purpose can be strongly connected in the beginning but focus can start drifting to new, better individual goals.

Regarding motivational considerations it is important to keep an eye on that and to enable an orientation on how motivation can be kept on a high level for everyone in the team.

If that means that a team member should start a new journey by changing the team, because the current topic is not longer motivating and helpful from her point of view, I think it has to be possible (at least within some days).

- **Really reaching diversity in teams takes quite a lot of experience, time and strong leadership.** I question that many of the current environments are yet up to the task to really deal with that. Based on team genius – that narrows diversity.

Quite a few challenges for stable team setups. Especially motivation shifts and competitive environments/recruiting will undermine long running team setups.

Lets combine it with what science shows (at least what I read about it yet)?

Extract from Team Genius

Taken from Team Genius – The new science of high performing organizations (I highly recommend to read that book as it contains a lot of helpful explanation and details about teams.). I take just some quotes that seem for me to be important for this post:

- **The economic competition – is strongly about maneuverability** (capacity to turn, even reverse direction, to deal with whatever new change), it is the essential. And maneuverability needs highly optimized teams (in combination with great technology and global reach).
- Read more about [Magical team size numbers](#). 7+/-2 as the optimal team size is confirmed again. Pairs and trios build strong foundational units.
- To incorporate **diversity** (more on that in a next blog post) a team **needs stability** (and strong leadership)

- For diversity focus on real differences in culture, life experience skills and thought differences. Resists the desire of team members to recruit their friends to the team.
- **With high interpersonal congruence, diversity enhances creative task performance.** (This also shows that working with diversity for shorter running teams may be not the best decision).
- **Regarding creativity, best teams enjoy a mix of old friends and newcomers.**
- The knowledge of who is and who is not in the team is vitally important, because it enables team members to make an accurate assessment of all available resources when developing the teams goals.
- **Values instilled in a team at its formation will shape the way its members approach tasks** and their social interactions. It means that how your team begins will determine how it ends and how it will perform during its existence. In the beginning (it needs leadership):
 - Set an official start
 - Establish relations – name tags, introductions, sharing details about oneself,...
 - Clarify and give meaning to the team's task.
 - Set rules and set some early and precise milestones to reach (it also helps to look later on if the team is working properly).
 - Bound the team as one performing unit.
 - Establish norms of conduct.
- **Pair and trio constellations are the building blocks for larger teams.**
- **To really work with diversity and to consider optimal team constellation, one needs proper recruiting strategies and it requires testing various constellations.** The book describes many types of pair constellations (as building blocks of larger teams) – where some pair types are created also through spontaneous formations but the main constellation need intensive leadership to guide their setup (one needs to nurture mutual respect).

- The healthier a team's culture, the less productivity it will lose to newcomers making their way up the learning curve.
 - Equip them with all the necessary communication tools as quickly as possible.
 - The goal is to assimilate a new member into the team as quickly as possible.

Extract from **Creating great teams**

Combined with input from Creating great teams – how self selection lets people excel:

- Two factors that a group will forge itself into a team:
 - ***Do these people want to work on this problem?***
 - ***Do these people want to work with each other?***
- **Employees work best when they have choice.**
- They take more responsibility for their own decisions than those made by others.
- People are happy and most productive, if they can choose what they work on and who they work with.
- An approach of self designing teams (aka self selecting teams) to create self organizing teams fits autonomy and fosters responsibility.
 - **Autonomy** as freedom over some of all the four main aspects of work: **When they do it. How they do it. Who they do it with. And what they do.**
 - Starting on 35% higher productivity than traditionally managed organizations with managerial selection of team members. (based on research by Margareth J. Wheatley)
- A 2:1 difference regarding productivity between teams that were 95% or more dedicated (to one team and topic) compared with teams that were 50% or less dedicated.
- Stable agile teams result in up to 60% higher productivity. (Based on The impact of Agile. Quantified.)
- Based on Richard Hackman:
 - **60%** of the **variation in team effectiveness** is attributable to the **design of the team**
 - **30%** to **the way the team is launched**
 - **10%** to the **leader coaching** once the team is under way.
 - (My opinion: I guess the leader or coach influence must be much higher, as far as I experienced.)
- Ship It days (24h to build something great in a team self selecting team environment) show that self selection works and how fast these constellations get up to speed.
 - People naturally form small, cross functional teams. Between three and six people. T-Shaped people who are good at collaborating are in high demand.
 - No one chooses to work on more than one team or project in parallel.
 - People communicate face to face.
- Three simple rules for self selecting units (they called them Squads)
 - They have to be capable of delivering end to end!
 - They have to be made up of three to seven people!
 - They have to be co-located!

- Squads stayed stable in the long run. They offered re-squadifications after six months but it rarely took place. Just after a growth of more than 25% squads changed themselves.

Extract from Team: Six essentials

Taken from Team: Six essentials for building a productive team

- **Highly productive teams focus their efforts intently on accomplishing the things that will bring success.**
- **It needs drive and a robust, focused work ethic.**
- Effective teams are filled with members who trust that those around them are working every bit as hard as they are.
- It needs strong leadership to identify weak team constellations (non producers, team members who don't (can not) contribute enough in that team) and to lead these members to take on new opportunities in other, better fitting teams or even companies.

- The six essentials are **environment, camaraderie, respect, purpose, encouragement** and **celebration**
 - Create a winsome and healthy atmosphere – being an amazing place to work at.
 - Where a normal working environment is turned into an enjoyable and dynamic place in which hard work is accomplished and a team is woven together.
 - The physical setting where work is accomplished is essential in building an effective team (and it is one of the most overlooked components)
 - Always supply the team with the things that give them the best shot at being productive ... “If you could have any wish list item that would be helpful in bringing departmental success, what would it be and how would it help?”
 - A good team will look to protect, enhance and praise the work of teammates
 - If you build camaraderie among your people, they will have a very difficult time leaving your team.
 - ... it is the job of each team member to guard against being condescending or degrading to another, and to vigorously protect fellow teammates from the same things
 - Slander, gossip and biting words will fragment and in turn ruin your team more quickly than any other thing.
 - Build on genuine respect and not forced respect.
 - If you only have people on your team who are gratuitous with each other, pasting on smiles, and *showing* respect but not *being* respectful, you’ve got nothing more than smoke and mirrors.
 -
 - Great leaders keep the purpose of their organization in crystal clear focus every single day... otherwise energies will be scattered instead of streamlined, causing feelings of frustration, as well as lack of fulfillment.
 - The organizational purpose statement of your team must communicate compelling vision and your goal must act as a clear roadmap to accomplishing that vision.
 - And it is vital to point out the individual contributions that each team member has made in accomplishing that purpose.
 - Highly productive teams are highly motivated teams.
 - The best teams are the ones that have cultivated a culture of encouragement, where tanks are filled up everyday, and people are vitalized to do the work that is in front of them.
 - Try very hard to never let a good opportunity for encouragement slip through your fingers. (And it turns a little to turn someones day around).

- Negativity should have no place on your team – avoid people who suck energy out of the room with their downbeat countenance, their beaten down attitude and their seeming endless ability to sap otherwise cheerful enthusiastic people of their winsomeness. ... Do yourself a huge favor and focus attention on changing their attitudes.
- A healthy team celebrates every victory. (In reality often good work goes unnoticed while poor work almost never does). Reverse: Not celebrating victories is deflating.
- Celebration, by its nature, brings out the best in everyone and creates a team driven environment. It helps to further develop the other core essentials – environment, camaraderie, respect, purpose, encouragement.
- Problems should be dealt with privately and successes should be celebrated publicly.

And what about motivation?

A PEOPLE first approach includes happiness and motivation first. I follow CRISP's approach to use the happiness index as the primary metric.

I remember the orientation **people before customer before shareholder value** (currently I don't know where I got it from), but I really think that this is a strong commitment to build a great place to work at.

If we put motivation first, we have to consider the importance of career building too:

- with challenging tasks
- important projects/products
- real education and learning possibilities
- soft skill education

Please refer to the topic project credits based on the management 3.0 workout, to learn more about the importance of project references as career building element.

Combined with that learning environment are my following assumptions:

- During a team development individual members discover different new learning fields, that do not have to be aligned with the teams purpose and product goal any longer.
- More different projects can mean a lot more learning possibilities (I can see it from many impressive CVs, showing a lot of project references and technologies to use).
- Trying to cover these learning possibilities with slack time oder hack-events is an interesting approach – but I guess many struggle when it comes to necessary follow up steps to really bring new born pet projects to life.

And this leads to my conclusion: To work with more dynamic team approaches

Like e.g. [Valve](#), [Here](#) describe it – let's consider more dynamic team setups. For me it means that teams:

- **Form around a shared purpose and product goal** to achieve (nothing new 😊 – but how often not done like that but done with resource utilization in mind).
- Are **self selecting/designing considering important budget, scope and skill requirements to build a product** (as far as I can hear – still rarely the case and still done by management directive too often).
- **Motivation overrules team stickiness.** If somewhere else is a better way to bring in your abilities or enhance your own ones – enable team constellation changes (at least more often than trying to freeze it for many months; and this should not undermine creating enough learning opportunities inside a team too)
- **Have experienced agile coaches helping teams to get to speed fast.** Especially in early team formation phases – their support is essential to open topics/conflicts fast, build trust and get the right team work attitude in the team.
Don't be shy to invest some money to work with external coaches, if current market conditions hinder you hiring one. Recruiting them inside the company is a possibility too – but I strongly advise for experienced ones (it just takes time to get experienced with *real* team work).

Regarding a minimum timeframe a team should stay together I would trust on the team members judgement. Like described in [Creating great teams – how self selection lets people excel](#) teams stayed together for a long time and were offered to change at least every six months.

If three months (like we try it for the moment) will be too short ... let's see. At least based on experience with Shiplt days and my own learnings in teams, it is possible to get high performance fast, if you build the right environment. I'm quite sure that this approach won't fit everywhere – especially environments with steep learning curves and tough ramp up times won't be a first choice 😊

Coming back to the starting question: **Is the focus to remain long running, stable teams to build high performance teams still valid for knowledge work environments?** No – the focus is on creating motivating and highly productive environments and let people choose the form and type of team constellation they would like to perform in. If long running team setups result based on that autonomy – fair enough 😊

In the near future I'll describe the approach for self selecting and finding a model to work with we are currently experimenting with at [idealo](#). So stay tuned for some updates on that topic.

Further readings

[Lazy team members ... about social loafing and ways to prevent it in your teams](#)

[Diversity in teams](#)

[Magical team size numbers](#)

[Foster innovation by creating a learning and social networking environment](#)

[Five dysfunctions of a team](#) by Patrick M. Lencioni

[Hyper Productive Knowledge Work Performance: The tameflow approach and its application to Scrum and Kanban](#) by Steve Tendon and Wolfram Mueller

[Team: Six essentials for building a productive team](#) by Brent Eldridge