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## Why teamwork remains hit or miss by Christopher Avery

After 20 years of focus on teaming in industry, teamwork effectiveness in IT projects remains hit or miss. While some teams are highly effective and others highly ineffective, most are of middling effectiveness. Statistics on IT project success support this observation all too well. One recent study indicates that three in 10 IT projects still fail, and that's after great strides to improve IT project management and risk [1].

Why does this condition persist? Is this the way it has to be? If not, what will increase team effectiveness across the board?

First, let's clarify what we mean by team effectiveness. Most agree that team effectiveness and team performance are linked, where effectiveness is an indicator and performance is a result. If a team operates effectively, it has a good chance of achieving the task for which it was formed. So effectiveness is a leading indicator and a means to a desirable end.

Most people know team effectiveness through experience -- the experience of excellent interpersonal dynamics within a group that shares responsibility to get something done. These excellent interpersonal dynamics are relatively well documented, and one study accounts for them based on three different factors: goodwill and cooperation, respect for individuals, and trust [2]. When these dynamics are present, a team looks and feels effective, which portends successful performance.

Why? Goodwill and cooperation, respect for individuals, and trust provide a supportive context for a group to freely generate, share, and transform knowledge together. And that is what IT project teamwork is all about. The puzzle, however, is that while these factors are excellent predictors of team effectiveness, they don't lend themselves to direct managerial control; that is, most managers don't know how to go to the office and crank up goodwill and cooperation a few notches.

### **Why Hit or Miss?**

So if team effectiveness is a known critical indicator of project performance against objectives, why does team effectiveness remain hit or miss? I see five potential reasons.

#### **1. It's Normal (or It's Not)**

Some argue that team effectiveness within a population of teams will always fit a normal curve, with a few teams at the tail end of the curve and most occupying the fat part in the middle. But I've observed systems where the curve is highly skewed in one direction or another, and I've witnessed individuals who consistently create the conditions for higher -- or lower -- performance on the teams they serve. Something in these systems -- and people -- distorts the normal curve and allows for the

fat part of the curve to move toward greater or lesser effectiveness. So I don't believe that hit or miss has to remain the norm.

## **2. It's Cultural (or It's Not)**

Others argue that the hit-or-miss nature of team effectiveness is cultural, that we in the West just aren't cut from the team cloth; we're raging individualists and always will be. But I consistently observe that such individualists align and team up brilliantly when it's in their own interest to accomplish something larger than themselves. When asked if they lose their individuality while working in highly effective teams, most professionals say, "No way." In fact, high-performance teamwork provides expanded opportunity for individual expression, identity, and uniqueness. It's when people operate in ineffective groups that they feel a loss of individuality and must fight to retain their autonomy, status, and dignity. Diversity, it turns out, is not solely a moral issue; it is a functional imperative for effective teamwork and innovation.

## **3. It's Lack of Know-How**

A few brave souls would step forward and say that despite the bravado to the contrary, we really don't know how to create consistently effective knowledge teams. I believe that this is generally true but does not have to remain so. The bulk of available scientific knowledge about how to create, develop, and sustain highly effective teams is not being accessed and used. In fact, the opposite is true. Most of what managers and professionals hold to be true about teams is based on a comprehensive and compelling but 40-year-old mythology about the nature of teamwork and team building. It is no wonder our attempts to create consistently effective teams fall well short of the mark and we stop trying. Until this mythology is effectively dispelled, it ensures that teamwork effectiveness will remain dreadfully hit or miss.

## **4. It's Hard**

Effective teamwork is hard because it involves tending to emotional energies at work, which we don't want to do unless the emotions are commitment and passion. And it's hard because teaming is a nonlinear, adaptive process, and we want to manage work in a linear fashion. Bill Gore, the founder of W.L. Gore & Associates, a company known for innovative products and a uniquely empowering culture, put his finger on the essence of the team management problem: managing teamwork, he says, is a complex, adaptive process that never gets less complex but always more so [3]. It's also difficult to foster consistently effective teams in organizational environments that value individual status over collective accomplishment.

## **5. It's Risky (Maybe)**

If I were an enterprise manager in IT today, I could imagine pondering my deeply held mythology about teamwork effectiveness, concluding how difficult it would be to trust that mythology to create consistently effective teams, rejecting the whole notion as too loony, and instead adopting a less risky approach of linear project planning and individual performance management.

## **References**

[1] Gaudin, S. "Many Major IT Projects Still Fail." *Datamation*, 16 June 2003.  
[http://www.itmanagement.earthweb.com/it\\_res/article.php/2222391](http://www.itmanagement.earthweb.com/it_res/article.php/2222391)

[2] Marshall, R.J., and J.M. Lowther. "Teams in the Test Tube: Managing Team Performance in an R&D Organization." *Proceedings from the International Conference on Work Teams*, Dallas, Texas, USA,

## A critical path to effective teams by Christopher Avery

Perhaps I paint too pessimistic a picture, and maybe teamwork effectiveness and performance is better than it was 20 years ago. Maybe our expectations have outdistanced our ability to meet them. I don't know. However, when I ask IT professionals about their experience of teamwork effectiveness -- and I've asked tens of thousands in recent years -- I get a consistent "so-so" response.

So what will it take to create consistently more effective teamwork across the board? It will require two things, both of which, in turn, require a hard look at the truth.

### **Unrealistic Performance Expectations**

We don't yet expect individuals in the workforce to take ownership for the quality and productivity of every relationship at work. Yet we expect them to work successfully in teams -- environments of shared responsibility, where one's performance and paycheck depend on what one accomplishes with others over whom one has no direct control. We expect to hold individuals accountable for a work product within their area of expertise, yet we buy into their blame and justification when their excuse is that they were assigned to a bad team.

To understand this, we need to take a quick view from the 50,000-foot level. Management science starts with two concepts: differentiation (wholes into parts) and integration (parts into wholes). We manage organizations by taking big jobs, breaking them up, assigning the pieces to people, and then integrating the pieces into wholes. Over the past two centuries, management science has learned more about successfully dividing work up into parts (and assigning the parts to specialists) than it has about connecting the parts. This emphasis is evident in the way we collectively define and manage roles and accountabilities and in our shared assumptions about people's ability to work together. In our educational system and career paths, we create highly educated specialists and focus them on bounded parts of work. This creates huge gaps between these well-bounded roles and thus the need for integration. But we do not fundamentally expect or require smart, highly educated professionals to be able to keenly address the problems between well-bounded tasks. And the problems between the gaps hold the greatest opportunity to add value.

As a society and as managers, we have low expectations of smart people's abilities to work well together. We cite specialization, ego, competitiveness, sensitivity, aggressiveness, conflict avoidance, and Myers-Briggs personality style differences as reasons for the inability of smart, highly educated people to work well together. We need to stop this line of thinking.

We've evolved into flatter, more networked structures in which people must attempt to manage complex interdependencies in order to get work done. We expect people to struggle though, because

they are resilient (we even provide resiliency training so people can bounce back from being knocked down in internal corporate warfare), but deep down, we hold onto the notion that the situation is hopeless. Unless ...

We change our tune, develop faith in smart people's abilities to learn a new way of relating at work, and recognize teamwork as an individual skill, with identifiable principles and communication skills that anyone with an elementary school education can learn and master. And smart, highly educated professionals are not let off the hook because of the advanced nature of their specializations and accomplishments.

We must fundamentally change our beliefs and expectations about people's abilities to build responsible and productive relationships at work. They can.

## **Education and Awareness**

Along with raising our expectations, professionals must learn some basic principles and skills that support effective teamwork. As a society, we have thousands of years of accumulated models, metaphors, and language about working in hierarchies, yet we have just a few decades' worth of models, metaphors, and language about working in teams. In my experience, smart, highly educated professionals don't understand the basic concepts and skills to work in, lead, or manage teams. And our efforts to teach those principles and skills have fallen way short, often perpetuating a mythology that just doesn't work.

## **Teamwork As an Individual Skill**

To be successful in a shared-responsibility environment, the following concepts must be mastered:

- **"Tall" versus "flat" relationship structures** -- successful participation simultaneously in hierarchies and teams
- **Shared responsibility** -- accomplishing tasks with others over whom you hold no direct control yet on whose coordinated effort your performance relies
- **Simultaneous cooperation and competition** -- choosing cooperation rather than fear-based competitiveness as your default relationship strategy and knowing when and how to choose competitiveness to protect true scarcity
- **The principle of the least-invested coworker** -- motivating peers and dealing effectively with perceived freeloaders and other difficult team members

In sum, the critical path to creating more consistently effective teams starts with taking ownership for perpetuating a society, a workforce, and a workplace where smart, highly educated and highly paid professionals are not really expected to acquire, practice, and master integrative skills. We must reexamine our fundamental assumptions about what bright people can and cannot learn. And we must modify our beliefs about leading, managing, and working in team-based environments. In US-led industries, we must dispel the great mythology about teaming and team effectiveness and focus on applying and disseminating a proven science of teamwork.

My hope is that your search for more consistently effective teams starts with an examination of your own contributions to the problem and your responsibility to learn, correct, and improve. There is an "I" in "team," and you are it.

-- [Christopher Avery](#), Senior Consultant, Cutter Consortium