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# How Teaming Supercharges Collaboration



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## **NASA does it. We show how your organisation can embrace teaming, too.**

In the complex, uncertain and fast-changing world we live in, success and even survival require intensive collaboration among individuals, organisations and countries. The outcomes of such collaboration can be breathtaking – consider the growth of Netflix and Amazon, the rebirth of Microsoft and General Motors, the successful launch of the James Webb Space Telescope.

Yet, most people and organisations fail to collaborate, preferring competition to cooperation. In business, **up to 70 percent** of strategic alliances fail and more than half of joint ventures do not survive their 10th anniversary.

## **Why collaboration stumbles**

There are good reasons that collaborations often falter: physical distance, time zone differences and unequal access to information, to name a few. However, the biggest obstacles are psychological.

For millennia, people have grown, learned, played and worked in small groups. In modern times, as villages gave way to cities and farms to factories, hierarchy has become the way to organise and manage human and other resources. However, it fosters an **individualistic, uncollaborative** mindset characterised by distrust of strangers, unwillingness to share information and a strong preference for working independently or with familiar others. It also leads to a focus on personal gains, avoidance of initiative and risk, and shifting of responsibility.

These behaviours make effective collaboration problematic, even when individuals appreciate the need to work together.

### **The promise of teaming**

Our research shows that it need not be this way. Many companies demonstrate that effective collaboration is possible in large organisations. These companies embrace what Harvard Business School professor **Amy C. Edmondson** calls “teaming” or “collaboration on the fly”.

Teaming is both a philosophy and a practice that reflects the realities of the 21st century. It can be applied in different contexts among individuals, groups and organisations. Unlike the **agile approach**, teaming is not limited to a specific project management methodology. It can be used in both traditional and non-traditional workplaces.

Teaming allows people and organisations to collaborate in order to learn. It transforms the ways they operate, solve problems and experience the **state of flow** without having to build traditional teams or offer incentives.

### **NASA and the teaming effect**

An example of the teaming effect comes from NASA. In 1979, the United States government, concerned about the increasing number of aviation

incidents and fatalities, commissioned NASA to produce a report on how safety could be improved. The space agency assembled a team of 50 industry insiders as well as 20 astronauts, scientists and psychologists. The group explored the challenge together before breaking into smaller groups to examine specific problems.

They came up with recommendations ranging from fresh cockpit designs to new training for pilots and traffic controllers. The [200-page report](#) had a profound impact on the global aviation industry, which drastically improved its safety record over the following 20 years.

## **Achieving the teaming effect**

What is behind the teaming effect? It boils down to three factors. The first is the task at hand. Teaming allows participants to solve unique, complex problems – a strong motivator in itself.

Edmondson introduced the concept of a teaming super-goal that is important for each participant but can only be achieved through collaboration. An example would be the [epic rescue of 33 Chilean miners](#) in 2010.

The second factor is people. Collaboration is easier when participants are aware of their own limitations, are proactive, tolerant and open to new ideas and experiences. They are also willing to share. While it goes without saying that team members should be experts in their professions, they should also possess behavioural skills such as effective listening and speaking, supporting, challenging, reflecting and learning.

The third factor is platforms. This refers to the workspace set-up, rules and procedures, formats and technologies that enable collaboration. [GitLab](#), a software development company founded in 2014, supports 1,500 employees working from home across 70 countries with a nearly 3,000-page handbook that describes the company's rules and procedures. Employees co-create these rules and invent various teaming formats, including specialised groups for problem-solving and interest-based communities. Platforms such as Slack, Dropbox and Jira provide them with powerful tools for synchronous and asynchronous collaboration.

## How to implement teaming?

Over the past 10 years, we have helped dozens of organisations in Europe, Asia and the Middle East embrace teaming. They range from a giant financial institution to a mid-sized manufacturing company. We call our method, which is grounded in **Kurt Lewin's Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze** social theory of change, the initiate-integrate-institutionalise model. Here's how it works:

### ***Initiation***

The goal of this stage is to spark organisational interest in teaming. Initiation can take on different forms; one of the most effective is an online teaming programme.

The programme combines traditional learning tools such as videos, webinars, case studies, self-assessments with a learning journal, a buddy group and a project. In the learning journal, each participant documents their progress, the obstacles they face, the lessons they learn, and the questions they need to answer.

The buddy group encourages participants to collectively reflect on their journeys, exchange feedback and **feedforward**, and support and challenge each other through regular online meetings initially facilitated by professional coaches.

The most important element of the programme is the project. Participants from different organisational units form groups to design and implement projects that directly contribute to the organisation's objectives. The projects range in scope, but all require cross-functional collaboration, out-of-the-box thinking and intense collaboration.

Three factors make or break the initiation stage: participation and endorsement of the senior leadership, the scale of the programme, and delivering meaningful outcomes. The first factor is self-evident. As for the second, the number of participants should be large enough to introduce the

whole organisation to teaming and produce visible change. Think 50 participants for a 1,000-employee company and 200 for a 10,000-strong organisation, assuming participants are drawn from different departments and levels.

The third factor for success requires that participants solve real problems and deliver real outcomes, thus ensuring the teaming experience is relevant and meaningful. For example, the retail business of a large energy company reversed stagnating non-fuel product sales by introducing environment-friendly petrol stations and expanding their product offering. A large financial institution overcame internal competition between business line managers by creating new collaborative formats and adapting a teaming vocabulary of cooperation and support.

At this early stage of the teaming journey, tangible results win over people and give teaming much-needed credibility.

### ***Integration***

The second stage is about making teaming part of organisational culture and the company's operating system on a larger scale. In this phase, senior leaders articulate and reiterate their belief in teaming, explain what it means in the organisation's context, and set organisation-wide goals and expectations for all employees.

The teaming programme expands to many more participants. Graduates from the initiation stage become teaming ambassadors and coaches. Teaming protocols and standards emerge and spread throughout the organisation. Key HR systems are adjusted to reflect the teaming philosophy, focusing on execution as learning, psychological safety, fluid teams and enabling leadership.

Organisational structure and workplace design evolve to become more collaborative. Teaming allows for serious breakthroughs, solves organisational pains and makes a noticeable contribution to the top and bottom lines. As an example, a regional real estate developer we worked with improved EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and

amortisation) margins by 30 percent two years after adopting teaming.

Two factors critical to the success of the integration stage are a well-functioning teaming platform and what we call “rolling leadership”. Platforms, as outlined above, are best tailored to the organisation’s activity, size, location and culture. A good platform should be co-created and innovated by as many people as possible, rather than dictated by the top.

While teaming is built on self-organisation and lateral ties, leadership remains crucial. The role does not come from any title but is situational and rotated among team members. We call it rolling or 4E’s leadership: Leaders *engage* team members emotionally and intellectually by involving them in setting the course and the rules of the game; *enable* by fostering psychological safety, providing resources and creating a productive environment; *encourage* through feedback and praise, helping members learn and cope with challenges and failures; and *exit* after preparing successors to take on the role.

### ***Institutionalisation***

The goal of this ongoing stage is to entrench teaming as a shared philosophy and way of working across the organisation. Teaming principles and new cultural norms become embedded in key organisational processes including recruitment, evaluation, remuneration, promotion, training and communication.

Feedback and attention to individuals are critical at this stage. Leaders must create effective communication channels that enable them to hear what the organisation thinks about teaming and how it is being implemented, and to make necessary changes if required. They should also ensure that every employee receives fair and comprehensive feedback about their progress in learning and applying teaming. Those who are struggling should be given help, such as extra training, individual coaching or group support.

In today's complex and fast-paced environment, the ability to effectively collaborate across boundaries is more critical than ever. Teaming offers a powerful framework for organisations seeking to harness the full potential of

collective capabilities.

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