

WHOLE SYSTEMS TEAMWORK

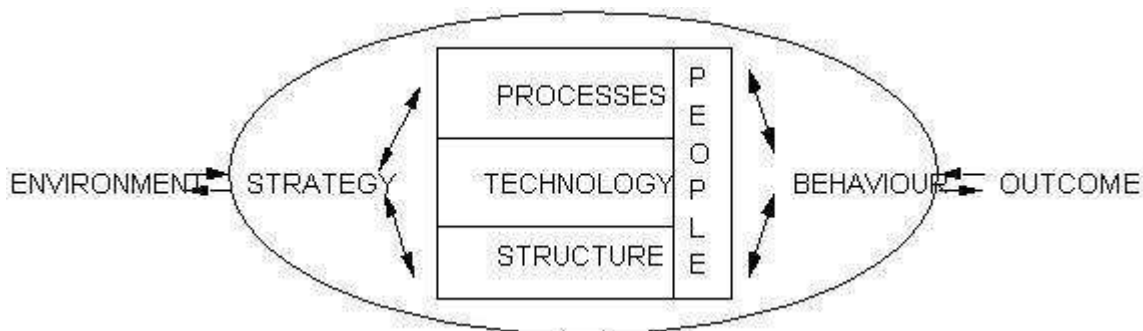
These are two “inside” stories of team-based organizations. In modern times, when “teams” are often temporary or “virtual”, cross-functional or multi-disciplinary, the meaning of “teamwork” can be forgotten and its collaborative potential can be lost. This program provides powerful illustrations of teamwork-in-action, and insight into organizational factors for effective teamwork.

Note: After viewing [PDF](#) or [Good Reading](#) references, Click Browser’s BACK button to return to this page.

OVERVIEW:

As Michael Schrage says in the Introduction to his excellent book, “[No More Teams!](#): Mastering the Dynamics of Creative Collaboration” (see *Good Reading*), “the word team has been so politicized, so ensnared in the pathology of the organization that we don’t know what it means anymore”. The irony is that teamwork is an organizational construct with the essential function of nurturing collaboration, on an ongoing basis, or for short-term crisis or high-impact creativity. In fact, the need for collaboration is increasing, rather than decreasing, both within and across organizational boundaries.

Teamwork is, however, only one dimension of an organization. To be effective, teamwork needs to be part of a whole systems design (see *Good Reading*, James Shonk: “[Team-Based Organizations](#)”, and W.O. Lytle: “[Designing a High-Performance Organization—Guide to the Whole Systems Approach](#)”).



In order for the effect of teamwork to be maximized, all of these elements of the “whole” system—Strategy, Processes, Technology & Systems, Structure, and People need to be aligned. And, within each of the elements like Structure, teamwork needs to be developed at each level and in various roles.

Increasingly today, development of teamwork involves technology and information systems (see “[Engineering for Commitment](#)”, and *Good Reading*, Mankin et al: “[Teams & Technology](#)”, and Painter: “[Socio-Technical Design of Knowledge Work & IT](#)”). For sustained success, it needs to involve supervisors as well as workers, and white collar as well as blue-collar work (see “[Whole Systems](#)

Teamwork” Story 1: Chapter 3, Team Concept in the Office, and *Good Reading*, “[Not Just an Operator: How Manitoba Telephone System & CEP Implemented Work Redesign](#)”).

There is a structural underpinning to teamwork. First, as Kimball & Mareen Fisher state in “[The Distributed Mind: Achieving High Performance Through the Collective Intelligence of Knowledge Work Teams](#)”, see *Good Reading*), what differentiates a *team* from any other collection of people is a common purpose. Moreover, it is the understanding and commitment to this common purpose that activates teamwork. In the two Stories within “**Whole Systems Teamwork**”, there are examples of how the work of individuals has become defined as their participation in accomplishment of what they refer to as the “whole job”. In both cases, degrees of multi-skilling and job rotation reinforce persons’ shared understanding of the ‘big picture’. Information systems can also be a contributing factor.

The second structural feature of teamwork is task interdependence, namely, among the tasks that individual members perform. As described in the booklet, “[Good Jobs with New Technology](#)” (see *Good Reading*), task interdependence is nowadays created very often through integrated and automated technical systems (see also Louis Davis, “[The Coming Crisis of Production Management](#)” in Vol. II Trist/Tavistock Anthology). To be effective, however, the boundaries of teams must be drawn so as to capture this interdependence, not fracture it.

With relatively independent work roles, for example, telephone directory assistance operators or sales personnel with different territories, teamwork will be in name only, unless individuals share additional tasks, such as scheduling, quality control, or common customer service, that are ‘indirect’ but essential tasks to getting the job done most effectively. Indeed, teamwork only flourishes in multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary settings, if and when there is “an extra ingredient...like a sort of metadiscipline...not just a blurring of professional boundaries but creation of a new way of working” (see *Good Reading*, Wilson & Pirrie: “[Multi-disciplinary Teamworking](#)”).

A third key component is shared leadership. As the Stories in our Program illustrate, there can be varying degrees of shared leadership, from the self-directed form where “Everybody Leads” to the relationship between a “coaching” style of supervision combined with specific leadership tasks performed by individual team members in variations of the “star” model. (For more information on the stages and options for leadership and team development, see *Good Reading*, Painter: “[Beyond Teams](#)”). Nevertheless, if all essential leadership responsibilities rest with one individual, the supervisor will become a one-person ‘team’, with minimal ownership by anyone else in outcomes beyond ‘my own job’.

There are also structural factors like ‘membership’ size and physical proximity. What is at issue is the possibility for individuals to communicate sufficiently and to actively or visibly support each other. Conventional wisdom is that work groups larger than 12 persons have difficulty functioning as a *team*, difficulty ‘yes’, but not impossibility. With effective procedures and systems, the effective size limit may be closer to 15 or 20 persons (see “[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)”: Story 1; and, “[Responsible Self-Management](#): Story 2).

As for physical or geographical separation, new information technologies make communication much more possible. However, most anecdotal evidence is that face-to-face meeting is required in the initial stages and periodically, for effective “virtual” teamwork. Shared values and rewarded goals are two other supporting strategies for Virtual Knowledge Team integration (see *Good Reading*, Kimball & Mareen Fisher: “[The](#)

[Distributed Mind](#)”). There are now substantial examples of teamwork effectively and quickly assembled (and dis-assembled) across organizational divisions, in “customer capture” teams and “rapid product response” units (see *Good Reading*, Jay Galbraith: “[Organizing to Deliver Solutions](#)”).

Both Stories in “**Whole Systems Teamwork**” offer clear illustration of the dynamics that teamwork is intended to deliver. In poignant and personal testimonies, employees talk about the support that they experience from co-workers. The wonderful paradox is that this mutual support empowers the individual who “never feels alone” while exercising a higher-level of responsibility. In fact, it is this heightened response capability, to emergencies or new creative opportunities, that is the *synergy* and power of teamwork.

SAMPLE THEMES:

- i) The work organizations highlighted in this program are products of **Whole Systems** design. Teamwork applies at all levels, and impacts on all roles in the organization.
See “[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)”
Story 1: Chapter 1, A Participative Team System;
See also: “[Responsible Self-Management](#)”
Story 2: Chapter 1, Total Involvement;
See also “[Engineering for Commitment](#)”
Chapter 1. Systems-Thinking & Lou Davis
- ii) The personal meaning of **Teamwork & Collaboration** is demonstrated in the empowerment and support that are experienced by a variety of workers and managers, in both office and manufacturing environments.
See “[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)”
Story 1: Chapter 2, Broad Skills & Job Rotation;
Story 2: Chapter 2, Empowerment + Support + Whole Job.
- iii) There are different experiences with **Job Rotation**, which indicate some of the alternatives.
See “[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)”
Story 1: Chapter 2, Broad Skills & Job Rotation;
Story 2: Chapter 2, Empowerment + Support + Whole Job;
See also: “[Responsible Self-Management](#)”
Story 2: Chapter 2, Flexible Multi-Functional Work Units.
- iv) There are examples of the **Team Concept in the Office**.
See “[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)”
Story 1: Chapter 3, Team Concept in the Office;
See also: “[Engineering for Commitment](#)”
Chapter 6: Legacy for the Information Age.
- v) In **New Roles for Workers**, their “direct” tasks in production or service are varied and add-up to a meaningful ‘whole’ job. Just as significant, if not more so, is the addition of ‘indirect’ tasks like shift administration, scheduling, and quality control of the ‘direct’ production or service activities.

See "[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)"

Story 2: Chapter 1, *Shared Leadership by Employees*,

Story 2: Chapter 3, *Just-In-Time Decisions*

See also: "[Responsible Self-Management](#)"

Story 1: Chapter 2, *Doing the 'Whole' Job*

Story 2: Chapter 3, *Operator=Knowledge Worker*;

See also: "[A Learning Organization](#)"

Story 1: Chapter 3, *Employees & The Customer*

See also: "[Engineering for Commitment](#)"

Chapter 5: *Social System Design*.

- vi) Various alternatives are illustrated for a **New Role for Supervisors**. In "[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)" Story 1, Supervisors are in the role of "coach", though partly to ensure that they do not become intrusive to the work of their teams, they are also heavily involved in project work. In this program, Story 2, the team is self-directed and the traditional supervisory role has been eliminated. Supervisors have new roles as Training Coordinators, Facilitators, and Customer Service Representatives.

See "[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)"

Story 1: Chapter 5, *Team Leaders & Management*;

Story 2: Chapter 4, *New Roles for Supervisors*;

See also: "[Participative Work Design](#)"

Story 1: Chapter 4: *New Roles for Workers, Supervisors & Managers*;

See also: "[Responsible Self-Management](#)"

Story 2: Chapter 4, *Process Coordinators*.

- vii) There are **Challenges**, and teamwork "takes work". However, as workers and supervisors in these innovative workplaces say with candour, "It can get done", and in fact, "It gets done!" For rich insight into group relations, see the chapter "[Varieties of Group Process](#)" in Volume I: Trist/Tavistock Anthology. (See also in *Good Reading*, Painter: "[Beyond Teams](#)".)

See "[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)"

Story 1: Chapter 4, *Team Challenges & Benefits*

See also: "[Participative Work Design](#)"

Story 1: Chapter 3: *Re-Designing Existing Facilities*.

- viii) The **Benefits** of teamwork are also very apparent.

See "[Whole Systems Teamwork](#)"

Story 1: Chapter 4, *Team Challenges & Benefits*;

Story 2: Chapter 5, *Extraordinary Results*.

See also: "[A Learning Organization](#)"

Story 1, Chapter 5, *Quality Pay-Offs*.