

## **The Challenge and Potential of Teams**

**By Auscar Wambiya**

Teams have great potential for solving hard problems in challenging contexts. They obviously bring more knowledge, skill, and experience to the work than any single individual could. They provide flexibility in how members are deployed. They offer members nonstop opportunities for real-time learning. And they have at least the potential of integrating members' diverse contributions into a creative product that is just what is needed.

Yet, as an extensive body of research has documented, teams also can go badly wrong, spinning their wheels and not even finishing their work or, perhaps, falling into a syndrome known as "groupthink," which results in a true fiasco. A team is akin to an audio amplifier: whatever comes in, comes out louder.

The challenge in teams is, therefore, to identify what it takes for teams to exploit their considerable potential while avoiding the dysfunctions that await the unwary. Although it assuredly is true that leaders cannot make a team be great, we do now know what conditions they can put in place to increase the likelihood (although not to guarantee) that a team will be effective - that it will generate a first-rate product while simultaneously becoming stronger as a performing unit and fostering the learning and professional development of its individual members.

The job of those who create or lead teams, then, is not to exhort members to work together well, not to personally manage members' collaborative work in real time, and certainly not to run their teams through a series of "team building" exercises intended to foster trust and harmony. The leader's job, instead, is to get the enabling conditions in place, to launch the team well, and only then to help members take the greatest possible advantage of their favorable performance circumstances

The potential of teams to deliver on their mandates can therefore be maximized by changing the culture of the team environment, simplifying the organizational structure, giving team members access to better information technologies, requiring more sharing of information across agencies, making social networking more accessible, improving the recruitment and training of team members and instituting a community-wide leadership development program for all team members.

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