

Self-Organizing Team

A team which works together toward a goal, have the ability and authority to take decisions and readily adapt to changing demands is a self-organizing team. In a self-organizing team, work is not pushed but pulled.

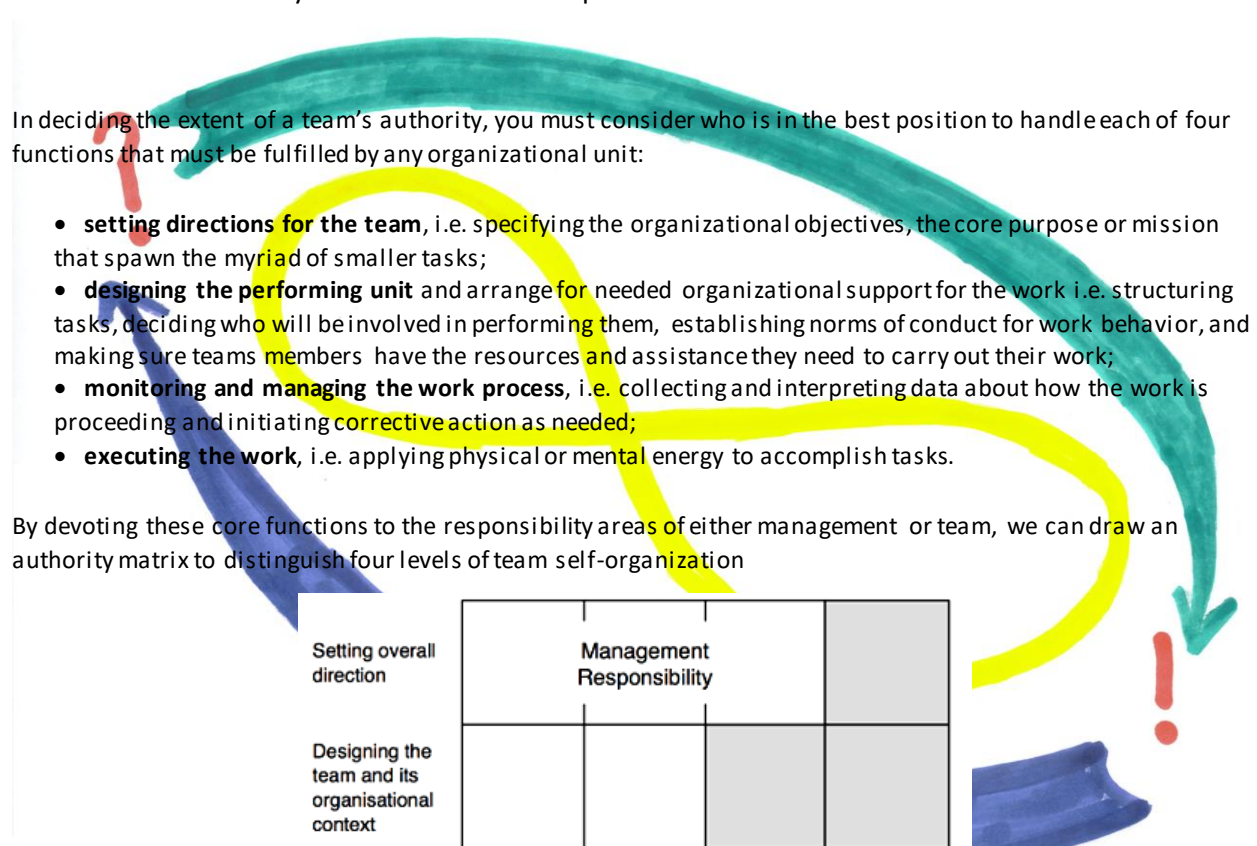
A team has four features:

- Joint tasks to fulfill a compelling mission;
- Clear boundaries in terms of information flow, alignment with other organizational units, resources or decision-making policies;
- Authority to self-manage within these boundaries; and
- Stability over some reasonable period of time.

In deciding the extent of a team's authority, you must consider who is in the best position to handle each of four functions that must be fulfilled by any organizational unit:

- **setting directions for the team**, i.e. specifying the organizational objectives, the core purpose or mission that spawn the myriad of smaller tasks;
- **designing the performing unit** and arrange for needed organizational support for the work i.e. structuring tasks, deciding who will be involved in performing them, establishing norms of conduct for work behavior, and making sure teams members have the resources and assistance they need to carry out their work;
- **monitoring and managing the work process**, i.e. collecting and interpreting data about how the work is proceeding and initiating corrective action as needed;
- **executing the work**, i.e. applying physical or mental energy to accomplish tasks.

By devoting these core functions to the responsibility areas of either management or team, we can draw an authority matrix to distinguish four levels of team self-organization



Setting overall direction	Management Responsibility			
Designing the team and its organisational context				
Monitoring and managing work process and progress		Team's Own Responsibility		
Executing the team task				
	Manager-led teams	Self-managing teams	Self-designing teams	Self-governing teams

Since the world is not just black and white, we see more than just one form of self-organization - an umbrella term for a continuum encompassing:

- **manager-led teams** that leave team members only the authority for task execution while managers monitor and manage work processes, design the context and set the direction. From our point of view, many expert groups in functional silos as well as traditional project management “teams” are practical examples of this set-up;
- **self-managing teams** put members not just in charge for task execution but also for managing their progress. Within IT, we see a lot of Kanban teams applying this approach either focusing on team tasks or on team-bridging value streams;
- **self-designing teams** give members the authority to modify the design of their team and/or aspects of the organizational context in which they operate. Most real management teams are in this position as well as some Scrum teams especially when Lean/Agile is scaled;
- **self-governing teams** have responsibility for all four core functions as shown by corporate boards of directors, worker cooperatives or start-ups.

Despite all these structural differences there are a few criteria that all kinds of self-organizing teams have in common. Self-organizing teams are characterized by (refer: The Science of Self-Organization and Adaptivity by Francis Heylighen):

- distributed control
- continuous adaptation to a changing environment
- emergent structure from local interaction
- both positive and negative feedback
- resilience due to the system’s ability to repair and adjust

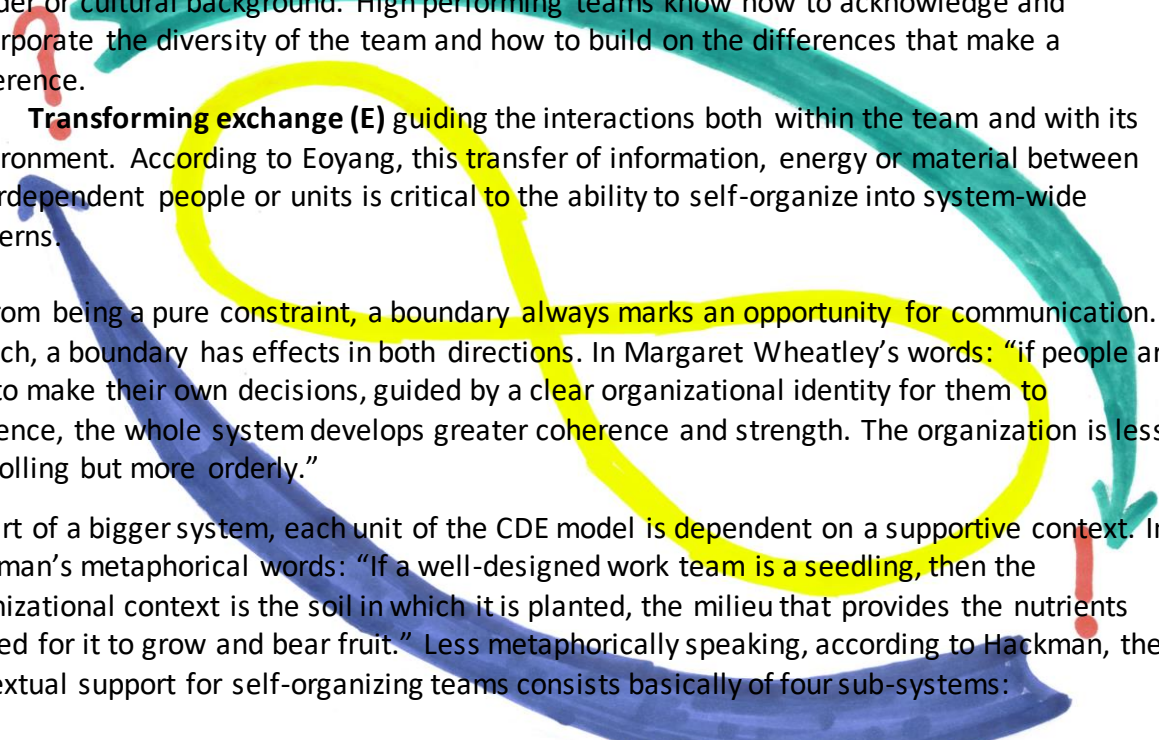
First of all, we should remind ourselves that **becoming a self-organizing team does not happen overnight**. Nor is self-organization something that happens one time and remains forever within the very same boundaries. As a matter of fact, a team is **never done** with the process of self-organization. They have to continually reorganize themselves in a sense-and-respond manner to shifting demands and contexts. In other words, self-organization is an ongoing process: whenever the set-up changes, the organization and the team need to repeat the whole process.

Self-organization is not just about the whole team within its specific organizational context. **Each team member has to self-organize as well** to figure out what to do and how to do it. And every day, everyone on the team has to coordinate his or her self-organization with the rest of the team. In order to synchronize, we run regular meetings such as the Daily Standup, Sprint Reviews or Retrospectives.

Self-organizing teams are **built on a tricky balance of similarity and difference**. Paradoxically, in order to effectively exploit their differences, team members need to share enough similarities. Team members have to grant each other some trust in the first place. Without a certain amount of trust in advance they can neither explore their individual backgrounds nor inspect and adapt current work processes. Later on, an appropriate balance of recognition and reward

as well as fair play are important factors for further self-empowerment. Disrespect kills self-organization in a similar way to social loafing.

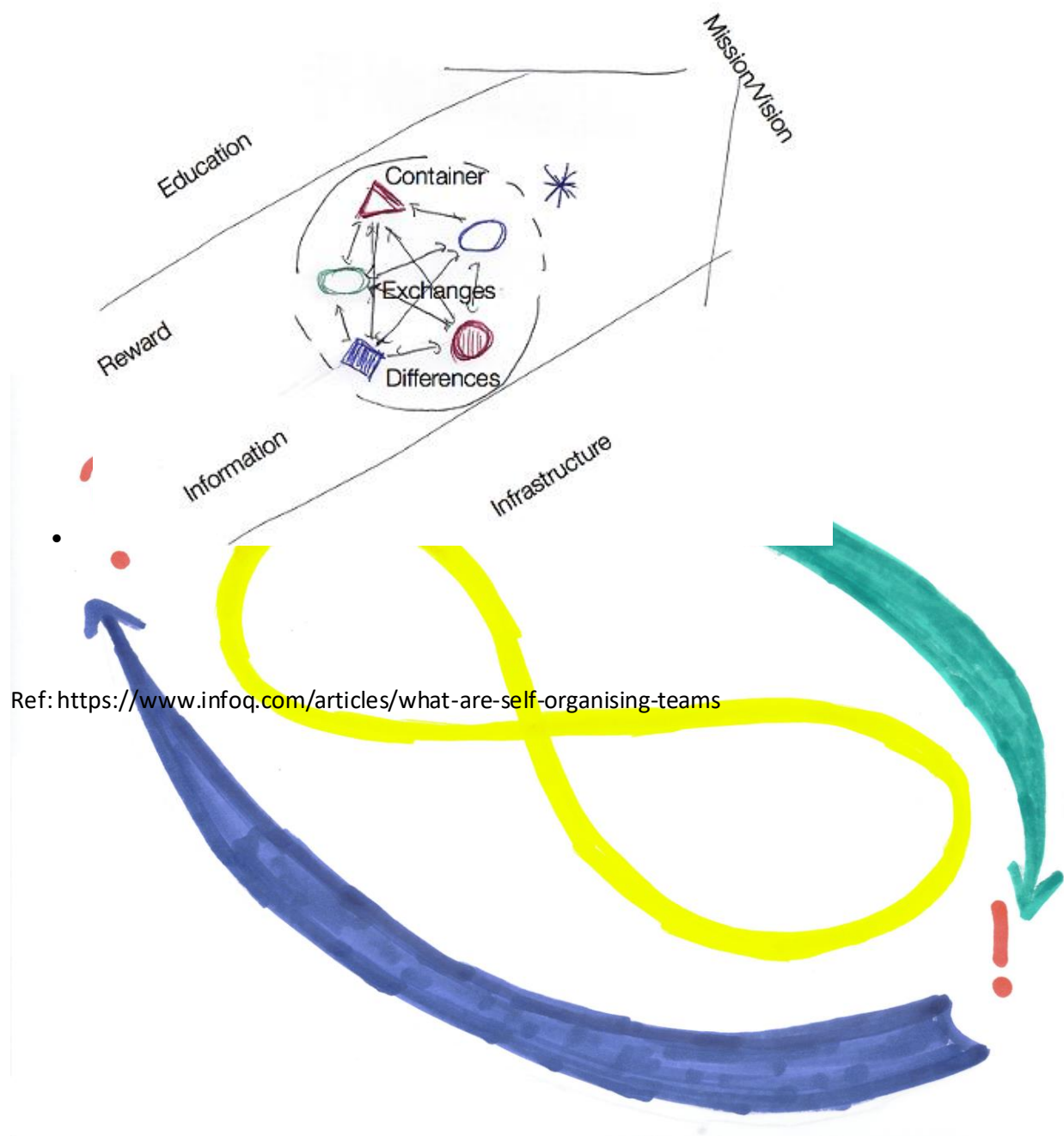
Self-organization does not mean the team gets to decide everything themselves. Self-organizing teams are not boundary-less. On the contrary, a clear set of expectations and responsibilities is needed to contain self-organization. In article on “Conditions for Self-Organizing in Human Systems” Glenda H. Eoyang points out three conditions that must be met for the self-organizing process to generate coherent patterns:

1. **A containing (C) boundary** that surrounds the system to define its identity. Simply speaking, there is no clear “self” without a clear separation of “the other ones”. This kind of container builds on organizational pillars such as a clear-cut mission, a compelling direction and challenging goals, operating guidelines and clear decision-making policies.
 2. **Significant differences (D)** such as different knowledge, experience, education, age, gender or cultural background. High performing teams know how to acknowledge and incorporate the diversity of the team and how to build on the differences that make a difference.
 3. **Transforming exchange (E)** guiding the interactions both within the team and with its environment. According to Eoyang, this transfer of information, energy or material between interdependent people or units is critical to the ability to self-organize into system-wide patterns.
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Far from being a pure constraint, a boundary always marks an opportunity for communication. As such, a boundary has effects in both directions. In Margaret Wheatley’s words: “if people are free to make their own decisions, guided by a clear organizational identity for them to reference, the whole system develops greater coherence and strength. The organization is less controlling but more orderly.”

As part of a bigger system, each unit of the CDE model is dependent on a supportive context. In Hackman’s metaphorical words: “If a well-designed work team is a seedling, then the organizational context is the soil in which it is planted, the milieu that provides the nutrients needed for it to grow and bear fruit.” Less metaphorically speaking, according to Hackman, the contextual support for self-organizing teams consists basically of four sub-systems:

- **information** – in terms of providing teams the data that members need to competently plan and execute their work
- **infrastructure** – in terms of appropriate physical space (a factor many co-located teams struggle with), technical infrastructure and money.
- **education** – in terms of any training, coaching or technical assistance the team may need
- **reward** – in terms of providing positive, economic as well as symbolic consequences for good team performance.



Ref: <https://www.infoq.com/articles/what-are-self-organising-teams>