

There is No "Why" in T-E-A-M

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven; a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to harvest up that which is planted. Ecclesiastes 3:1-2

by Ken Matejka and Bryce Walat

Today's highly competitive organizations are using groups/teams to make more and more of the critical decisions, apparently under the assumption that two heads are better than one, and consequently, twenty heads are even better than two. Most of us have a natural predisposition for working alone or working with groups. Even though the U.S. society has been historically based on "rugged indi-

vidualism", group-based decision making is the flavor of the month and possibly here to stay because organizations are faced with:

- the reality of flattened organizational hierarchies;
- the ambiguity of sudden, sweeping change;
- the cross-functional nature of most major decisions;
- the enormous consequences (personal and organizational) of a misstep;

the desperate need for something magical to spread the risk and blame.

There is a current "feeding frenzy" around group decision-making as the answer to all our ills. This misplaced emphasis sometimes surfaces in inane, autocratic demands from the powers that be that "you will all work in groups and you will love it!" "Teamwork By Force" (TBF) is a counterproductive way of integrating people into the decision-making process.



...everyone seems to be using groups to make decisions, solve problems, and complete tasks, it would appear that groups are the answer to every organizational problem. In reality, there isn't anything divine or magical about groups. Even though stories of "empowered teams" and "courageous leaders" abound, most organizations operate between these extremes. Nevertheless, the zealots seem incapable of discerning the appropriate time to utilize group or individual decision-making. These 'cult members' use groups all the time or individuals all the time.

The truth of the matter is that groups aren't always appropriate for doing certain jobs. Neither are individuals. Sometimes a strong visionary leader beats all the meetings and quality circles in the world. At other times, diverse input is necessary to overcome "The Lone Danger." Not everyone wants to work in groups or work alone all the time on a given project. Some people once wanted teamwork but couldn't be bothered now. Others are tired of individualistic policy making and crave input. Still others want to have as little change as possible before they resign, retire, or transfer, and some want to participate in some decisions, but not in others.

The key to successful group participation is knowing when to use groups and when to use individuals to get the job done. This means that you have to look at the needs of each situation and weigh the advantages and disadvantages of teams and individuals. In other words, there's a time for teamwork and a time for working alone.

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When To Use Groups

With apologies to David Letterman, here are our Top Ten situations where groups are the appropriate decision-making unit to get the job done:

- When serious commitment on the part of the group members is critical to the success of the task at hand.
- When no one person is an expert on the problem or several people have more than one workable solution.
- When the organizational culture favors and rewards team work.
- When you have lots of time to make the decision or the outcome is important enough to invest the time working in groups.
- When people want participation and empowerment.
- When you want to improve an existing product, service, or process (applied creativity).
- When others in the organization are well versed in the art and science of managing groups.
- When the task at hand lends itself to a division of labor.
- When making the wrong decision is too costly.
- When your superiors tell you to do so. Follow orders. Even here, keep everyone informed and ensure that everyone has input to build trust and cooperation.

These ten variables are only a few cases where teamwork is appropriate. Filter these, and other constraints depend on your particular needs and concerns and the unique culture and mission of your organization. You know far more about what works and what doesn't work in your organization than we do. Adjust these to fit your shop!

When to Use Individuals

The instances in which individuals are appropriate to get the job done are almost the exact opposite of those that favor teams:

- When the task doesn't require critical commitment because it doesn't affect the people involved directly or you are in an advantageous power position.
- When one person is truly an expert on the problem.
- When the organizational culture rewards individualism.
- When there is not enough time for group collaboration.
- When people want to be left alone instead of empowered.
- When an innovation is needed, requiring unique creative talents (pure creativity).
- When others in the organization think and act competitively and have not had much experience managing groups.
- When efficiency and speed are needed.
- When you are limited as to how much time and money you can spend on the task.
- When your superiors tell you to do so. Follow orders. Insubordination is cause for dismissal.

You also may have your own particular reasons for using individuals to get the job done in your organization. Once again, the needs and concerns of particular tasks in your unique organizational setting are paramount.

Group participation has turned around imperiled organizations and made good companies become great companies. But teamwork has not, is not, and will never be the cure-all for organizational decision-making and problem-solving dilemmas. The idea of group participation has been transformed into a fad, along the lines of quality circles, MBO, TA and one-minute management. Fad labeling makes deciding whether to use groups or individuals even more difficult and inhibits meaningful participation.

"You need a marvelous team to masterfully play a great symphony. But no team has ever written a great symphony and no team ever will!"

William O. Baker's "The Road to Balance and Collaboration" suggests that going too far in any one direction is a mistake for you and that balance means a balance between extremes. The healthy organization has a balance of teams and individuals working on decisions that advance the company's overall direction. The overriding question to ask when deciding on groups or individuals are:

- What are the key variables in the decision situation?
- Which approach fits the situation and enables us to get the job done?

If the team approach meets the goals, use it. If individuals meet the goals, use individuals. We leave you with this final thought: "You need a marvelous team to masterfully play a great symphony. But no team has ever written a great symphony and no team ever will!" M

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