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Why Do We Form Teams When We Transition To Agile?

Premise

One of the fundamental ideas in an agile transformation to ensure success is the concept of a forming a true, stable team. Today in organizations just about any group of people is called a “team”. So we have “the management team”, the “devops team”, the “tiger team” and so on. In reality these are not true teams - or at least not what a psychologist would call a team. Rather they behave like a working group which is defined as “a group of people where the interaction is primarily to share information, practices or perspectives and to make decisions to help each individual perform within his or her work area.”

Definition of a Team

There is a time and a place for a working group, but it should not be the basic unit of execution. Why not? Because if you have a true team of people working together they will become more than the sum of its parts. This is part of how you work smarter, not harder. A true team is defined as “a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, goals and working approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable”.

Notice the difference in the definition. For example the idea of “common purpose / goals” shows a focus on team results, not individual results and implies that there is a common purpose for the team while “hold themselves mutually accountable” shows a degree of trust between team members where it is encouraged to talk about the very things we usually avoid when working with other people. Because the word “team” is so over- and miss-used many organizations start using other terminology for this concept – stable teams, squad, etc.

A high performing team takes this one level further – in addition to the above, high performing teams are deeply committed to each other’s personal growth and success. When you operate on a high performing team you’ll see a group of people:

- That is passionate about the collective results of the team
- That really do trust each other
- That often has unfiltered conflict around ideas and approaches
- That commit jointly to decisions and plans once they have been made
- That hold each other accountable for the results

For this reason, there is a focus with agile on teams – how to form them (see [What Should We Consider When Forming a New Team?](#) for more information), how to get work to them, how to lead them, how to measure them and how to help them become more effective.

Over and over again, teams have been shown to improve productivity (by 60%), predictability (by 40%), and responsiveness (by 60%) (source: Rally - see below). One transformation I worked showed an average increase in throughput (productivity) of 2.4X after a year (some teams were better, and some were worse).

Why is this a Problem in the Agile Transformation?

For most organizations the idea of teams is difficult to get to as the organization is not set up this way currently. There are mindset issues that are at odds with this approach as well as cultural issues. For example, say your organization is used to a set up where work is assigned to a person by a manager. With an team the suggestion is that you don't worry about the person (and sub-parts of people's time) but rather flow work to the team and let the team figure out how to get it done. With this new approach, from a cultural perspective, the manager will think they are losing control. From a planning perspective it opens up questions on how work will be done. There is a trust issue – can we really let the people doing the work also decide how to get the work done. And so on. These issues can be addressed (more another time).

Need To Know More?

- [What Should We Consider When Forming a New Team?](#)
- [Agile Conference - "The Impact of Agile Quantified"](#) - Source of the numbers above. Analysis done by Rally (now CA) of 13,000 teams.

[Consultant](#), [Tools](#), [TeamFormation](#), [Kickoff](#), [FirstSprint](#), [FAQ](#), [Team](#)

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