Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World

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Introduction
Our world today is full of rapid, unpredictable changes and complex interdependencies. Traditional organizational models—which are built on efficiency and optimizing predictable systems—are no longer suited for these new challenges. In “Team of Teams”, General Stanley McChrystal presents a new way of thinking and leading that allows organizations to adapt and innovate nimbly in a complex world.

After leaving the service in 2010, McChrystal continued his work in this area and discovered that the Team of Teams model applies to various complex environments from businesses to non-governmental organizations.

General McChrystal was the commander of the US Joint Special Operations Task Force activated to address the growing threat of Al Qaeda in Iraq. Despite having some of the best fighters, intelligence, training, and technology, the Task Force struggled against the unstructured operations of Al Qaeda and the complex environment. It was forced to fundamentally change the way it operated and found success after it shifted from a command-and-control system to a team-of-teams model.

“The temptation to lead as a chess master, controlling each move of the organization, must give way to an approach as a gardener, enabling rather than directing.”

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7 main takeaways

Adaptation over Taylorism

It is about two different approaches to managing work: Taylorism and Adaptation. Taylorism is an approach that was popular in the early 20th century, where managers used time studies to determine the most efficient way to do work. This approach worked well for manual labor, but it failed when it came to knowledge workers in the 21st century. The reason for this is that knowledge work is more complex and requires more adaptability than manual labor. In today’s world, it’s more important to be adaptable and responsive than to be efficient. This means that instead of trying to optimize for a known set of variables, we should invest in the capacity to adapt and respond to what comes our way.

Shared Consciousness over Information Hoarding

It’s important to share information and create a shared consciousness within an organization. To overcome information silos, use low-tech tools like whiteboards and regular communication, such as daily video conferences, to promote transparency and collaboration. Leaders should focus on transparency, information sharing, and experimenting with different approaches to enhance teamwork and problem-solving.

Networks over Hierarchies

It is necessary to shift from traditional hierarchies to adaptable networks in organizations. Hierarchies can be slow and difficult to move, while networks are more agile and responsive. Create a "team of teams" to adapt to a VACU* world.

The focus is on sharing information, de-emphasizing hierarchy, building high-trust relationships across teams, and promoting cross-pollination and collaboration across various groups. Leaders should adopt a network approach for faster and more responsive organizations.

* "VUCA" stands for "Volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity"

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Gardener over Chess Player

Traditional leadership is like chess, with leaders controlling each move. Modern challenges need a more adaptable approach, where leaders create an environment promoting teamwork and autonomy. Leaders should focus on shaping the ecosystem, establishing clear goals, sharing information, and empowering individuals to use good judgment and take action, making teams more adaptable and responsive.

Empowered Execution over Scripted Directions

Leaders should focus on promoting shared consciousness within the organization by sharing information and fostering a clear understanding of the organization’s goals. This approach requires decentralizing authority and providing access to necessary information. It promotes adaptability, responsiveness, and innovation.

Resilience over Predictability

Predicting future challenges is difficult in a complex and unpredictable world. Therefore, leaders should focus on building resilience and responsiveness in their teams instead of focusing on creating specific plans for every possible outcome. They should develop adaptable systems that can handle unforeseen threats, recover from them, and benefit from shocks, allowing for flexibility in the team’s capacity to respond effectively.

Fostering Trust over Tribal Loyalties

Leaders should invest time in building a team culture that fosters trust and psychological safety, enabling better coordination and adaptability in complex environments. Indeed, trust is crucial for effective teamwork. However, traditional hierarchical structures can make communication difficult and create tribal loyalties, leading to distrust among different groups. To overcome this, leaders should focus on building trust across teams. To do so, shift from a hierarchy to a network of teams, and take proactive steps to build trust, such as rotating team members and placing the best people on other teams.

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The Environment: From Complicated to Complex

Complicated VS Complex Environments
Most of our current management models came from the industrial age, where it was possible to break down complicated systems (with many moving parts) into linear, deterministic, and measurable relationships.

However, in today’s dynamic, networked world, we’re often dealing with complex systems that come with so many inter-linkages that a tiny change in 1 component can create a non-linear impact on many components, which then affects even more components. Even if you can map out the relationships, it’s uncertain which factor(s) may trigger the non-linear escalation.

Complex Systems Are Unpredictable
Complex systems and environments—like weather systems, ecosystems, and global financial systems—are fundamentally unpredictable. Technology has only increased the speed of change to the point where a minor event could create ripples worldwide in just minutes or hours. We may have more data and advanced technology today, but our environment has also become much more complex and uncertain.
The key is to stop trying to predict or control complex systems. Instead, focus on making yourself more *adaptable and resilient*, so you can respond effectively to unexpected events.

**Match Structure To Environment**

To succeed, you must **match your organizational structure to the environment you’re operating in.** The Task Force realized that it was trying to manage a complex system with a setup meant for complicated problems. It gradually evolved to a dynamic, team-of-teams model that allowed the to respond rapidly to its highly-connected, fast-paced, and unpredictable environment.

**Structure: From Command to Team of Teams**

To respond fluidly to complex environments, your team must become adaptable and resilient. This in turn requires that they:

- **Learn to expect the unexpected** (rather than seek to predict/control the outcomes); and
- Are connected in a way that allows them to rapidly reconfigure themselves to respond to new threats or opportunities. You’ll need to **link the organizational elements both vertically** (up and down the command chain) and **horizontally** (across units and divisions within your organization, as well as across external partner organizations).

![From Command to Team of Teams](https://www.humanfirstworks.com/)

**Building a Team of Teams**

To shift from a command-and-control structure to a team of teams, some barriers will have to be overcome.

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In a nutshell, you need 2 major breakthroughs to build a team of teams: shared consciousness and empowered execution.

**Shared Consciousness**

For teams to think and act as one, they need to build shared consciousness, which in turn requires:

- **Systemic understanding** such that people can see the big picture and understand how their work is interdependent; and
- **Strong lateral connectivity** between teams, through personal relationships between individual team members.

**Empowered execution**

Once a shared consciousness gives your team the knowledge to do what is right you must also empower them to act and give them the authority.

If everyone is empowered to act without approval they will be more careful about doing the right thing. People can submit reports to management keeping them updated so they can intervene if needed. **Better to ask forgiveness than permission.**

Keep in mind that you should not empower employees to execute without first implementing shared consciousness, otherwise, they could easily do the wrong thing. Think of the financial crises as an example.

**Empowering Teams of Teams to Make Decisions**

For a team of teams to be born, leaders must be willing to let go and share power.

**This goes beyond delegation:** Leaders must deliberately encourage and nurture decision-making skills at all levels. It’s also critical that a foundation of shared consciousness is already in place—otherwise, it’ll be disastrous to simply remove constraints and allow people to do whatever they want. People **must** have the system’s perspective and context before they’re empowered with authority.

**Team of teams is a network of networks**

GM company had over 7,000 employees broken up into many teams. Each team tries to optimize itself and views other teams with hostility/competition because they don’t understand what anyone else did. You avoid this by encouraging members to forge relationships with members of other teams.

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Everyone doesn’t need to know everyone but if everyone knows a couple of people there will likely be at least one connection in your group to every other team. Implement tours of duty where team members build relationships with different teams.

**Idea flow**

Idea flow is the ease with which new thoughts can permeate a group. Pentland likens it to the spread of the flu: a function of susceptibility and frequency of interaction. The key to increasing the contagion is trust and connectivity between otherwise separate elements of an establishment.

The two major determinants of idea flow, Pentland has found, are engagement within a small group like a team, a department, or a neighborhood, and exploration, and frequent contact with other units.

**Leaders should be gardeners**

You are not playing a game of chess where you dictate every move. You create an environment where every piece can simultaneously grow like a gardener.

**Conclusions**

- If you want to solve problems in our complex world, you’ve got to work on teams.
- The key to getting a bigger organization to work together is by forming a larger team comprised of smaller teams.
- An efficient team of teams controls decision making while their leader focuses more on culture than daily operations.

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