Understanding Teams

We just looked into the nature of teams and how they change and evolve through time. As previously described, sometimes the changes emerge and happen naturally. Other times people try to catalyze the changes. This is a key concept to understand about dynamic reteaming.

This chapter details other basic concepts like the definition of *team* and how it relates to the concept of change in general. In addition, we discuss the base transformation of dynamic reteaming, which is the addition or removal of one person from the team. That's the "smallest" type of reteaming, and it might sound easy; however, depending on the person who is either moving in or out, it can be quite disruptive.

Let's take a look at the basics, then, and dig into some preliminary concepts.

What Is a Team?

If you read a definition of the term *team*, you might read that it is "a bounded and stable set of individuals interdependent for a common purpose."[1] But what if the team composition is not stable? What if it is highly changeable, as in the case of a startup engaged in hypergrowth? Is this still a team? To this I say yes. Changeable teams are teams.

The smallest unit of a team is a pair, as depicted in Figure 2-1. The pair is defined as two people working together to build something valuable for their customers. They are thought partners.

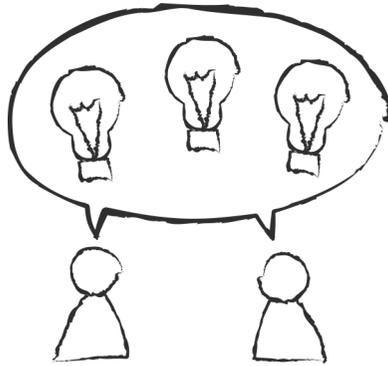1 Wageman et al., "Changing Ecology of Teams," 305.

Figure 2-1. The base unit of a team is a pair

How the pair works together is important. Is the pair a "team" when they pair program? Are they still a team if they coordinate on shared goals and do the work in parallel? I would say yes for both cases, and I would add that what makes them a team is the *shared goal and the joint ownership of the outcome*. If they are both responsible for the outcome, then they are a team. If they take responsibility for their joint work, then they are a team.

But it feels quite different when people are pairing with one computer versus working in parallel, separately, toward the same goal. There is a different notion of proximity and collaboration when you are pair programming versus when you are working in parallel. I dig into this idea in "Collaboration Dynamics that Restrict and Enable Reteaming" on page 156.

Now that we have a working definition of what I mean by the concept of a *team*, let's talk about team change, or dynamic reteaming.

Dynamic Reteaming

Dynamic reteaming is when your teams change. It could be as simple as the addition or removal of one team member. It could be as radical as pulling team members off of multiple teams to form a new team. It could even be the dissolution of the team. Dynamic reteaming happens at different rates and on different levels within our organizations. Here is our overarching definition of *dynamic reteaming*:

Dynamic
> (Of a process or system) characterized by constant change, activity, or progress

Reteaming
> To bring (people) together or apart in work or activity

Dynamic reteaming is the structural transformation of your teams. These structural transformations occur as five base patterns, which I'll describe in detail in Part II of this book. Besides structural changes, when reteaming happens other social changes happen.

In particular, dynamic reteaming creates a new "team system" or "team entity." The new people added to the team bring their interests and talents to the mix, impacting the collective intelligence present on the team.[2] They bring new learning potential and ideas to the team as a whole, as depicted in Figure 2-2.
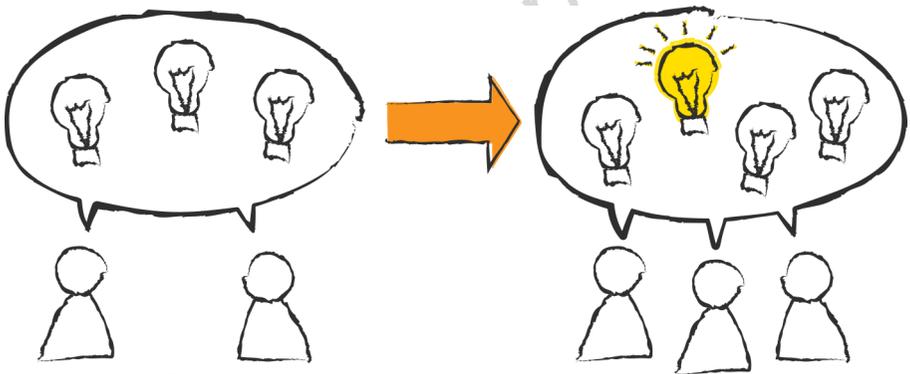

Figure 2-2. When a new person joins, they bring new ideas to the team

Reteaming helps teams learn together and do things they couldn't do before. Reteaming brings possibility. Comron Sattari, architect and cofounder of Secure-Docs, reflected on his time at AppFolio when it was a startup. When talking about reteaming, he said, "We could play to the team's strengths. There was a team with experience doing X, and the product team could say, *Okay, let's give this project to that team because they have a lot of experience with it.* So we were able to

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2 Rød and Fridjhon, *Creating Intelligent Teams*, 13.

work on things that we were good at, and new people would come in and change the makeup of the team, and then all of a sudden the team was good at something else, and we would work on that." People bring new ideas and perspectives when they change teams. There can be great intellectual power to team change.

Furthermore, Comron notes, "If the team stays stagnant, the abilities you have stay stagnant. We have people on the global engineering team for a reason: they're good at certain things, they're good team members, and mixing that up all the time is important."[3]

I would echo that importance. When you view your company as a learning community, you can collaborate with many of the people in the setting, by creatively reteaming. When you deliberately plan out the reteaming in your organization, you can provide new learning opportunities for people. People can get bored if they're not learning. Avoiding stagnation in this way can help you retain good employees.

The loss of team members—whether to another team internally or to an organization outside the company—causes a reteaming of a different kind. When a team member goes away for whatever reason, the team system is smaller, and the character and personality of the person who left is not physically there anymore. This could be a good thing if the individual was annoying or disruptive. In that case, the team could be in a better place and quite possibly ready to move on. It could also feel like a huge loss if this person was a key player with special influence in the team, such as a founder. It might take a long time to get over the loss of this person.

In either case, sometimes it "feels" like that person is still there as the thought of them lingers on almost like a ghost, as shown in Figure 2-3. Maybe others expect that any new person in their place should act just like the person who left. Or maybe you can't stop thinking about the person who left the team.

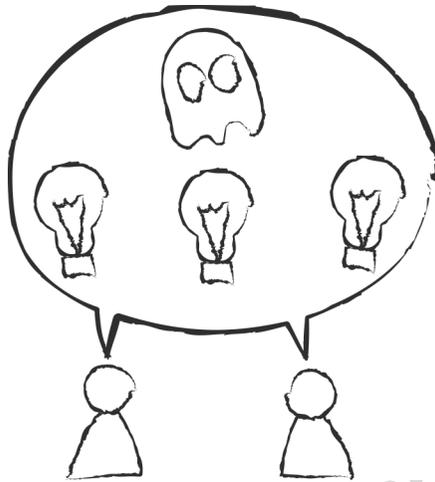3 Comron Sattari, in an interview with the author, March 2016.

Figure 2-3. When a person leaves an existing team, the team system is different. However, the thought of that person might linger like a ghost (Rød and Fridjhon, Creating Intelligent Teams*, 104–106)*

Deliberate activities to acknowledge feelings when people leave teams can help. See "When People Leave, You Have a New Team" on page 61 for ideas.

Regardless of how the dynamic reteaming happens, the feel of the team—the social dynamic—is impacted because the team system is different. It has changed its structural composition. There is often a disconnect between the structural changing of teams and the acceptance of it by the people involved. This is related to the idea of transition from William Bridges, which we will address in Chapter 13. You can't expect to change your teams and have the humans all "snap into line" and get over it quickly. In many cases, there is a delay between a structural change and the acceptance or transition into the new team structure, and so you can pay attention and try activities to help the people acclimate to their new structures.

That being said, dynamic reteaming is not easy. When people hear about the concept they might be excited because in theory it sounds great. "Let's mix up all of our teams right away! Let's implement *dynamic reteaming*!" That would be entirely shortsighted. The truth is, dynamic reteaming can be very challenging, which makes it worth your time to study. Know what you're getting into. Be prepared to deal with it when it happens naturally.

DOES DYNAMIC RETEAMING ALWAYS WORK OUT?

If you go forth and just mix up all your team members in an effort to reteam, you could cause panic, fear, and confusion. It doesn't always work out for the best. What you need to remember is that you're dealing with humans. Humans have preferences and individual personalities. We don't like to be moved around abstractly like pieces on a chessboard. Our thoughts and opinions matter. In other words, what if the people do not want to change teams? What if they feel that they are learning a lot on their existing team? It might be better to keep some teams unchanged. See the anti-patterns described in Chapter 10 for ideas about when to leave teams alone.

Reteaming done well takes great care and respect for people. There is no one-size-fits-all "installation" of reteaming. Catalyzing dynamic reteaming is challenging and nuanced. In this book, I will teach you my best tactics for success, and show you some pitfalls to avoid. I think success or failure in dynamic reteaming is impacted by several variables, such as those described in "Variables That Impact Dynamic Reteaming" on page 160. Success also has something to do with the chemistry of the team—that is, the social dynamic created by the mix of human personalities that are brought together as a team. Let's explore this.

The Social Dynamic of a Team

People talk about *chemistry* and whether it's present or not in love relationships. The term *soul mates* might come to mind. There's something mystical and magical about certain humans together, and I think there's an element of this in teams.

A team's social dynamic can answer the questions "What is that team like?" or "What is that team's personality?" Jon Walker, CTO and cofounder of AppFolio, described what a high-functioning team and low-functioning team feels like, in his experience. He said of high-functioning teams, "You feel their enthusiasm and excitement when a team is working really well. They get really excited about what they're doing. To be honest, I had one sitting outside my office. All the time they are noisy and celebrating stuff, talking with each other. But you can feel it and it feels really different."

In terms of a low-functioning team, he said, "I think the energy feels low. If you're in meetings with them it feels like, *Ah, we've got to get through this,* versus

Hey, there's new stuff that we're excited about and can learn here...What if we did this, what if we did that?"[4]

This phenomenon was noticed at MIT's Human Dynamics Laboratory by Alex "Sandy" Pentland and his staff, who study the communication patterns of teams. In a *Harvard Business Review* article, he wrote, "We noticed we could sense a buzz in a team even if we didn't understand what the members were talking about. That suggested that the key to high performance lay not in the content of a team's discussions but in the manner in which it was communicating."[5] There is something almost inexplicable about this kind of chemistry.

Damon Valenzona, an engineering director at AppFolio in San Diego, compared teams to a musical band: "You feel that magic when you're brainstorming and you kind of think like a jam session when people are riffing, right, and the drummer starts and everyone's kind of, oh, Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! And they're adding their own like playing the guitar and then the bass comes in. They're all starting to feel it, and they're all very different things, but they're kind of like adding their special sauce to this thing and it's kind of like creating something together."

The opposite to jamming, in Damon's words, is when you have more of the "command and control–like team where you have this team or project lead and then everyone else is kind of just following along and shaking their heads and then they're the ones who actually go and execute on it."[6]

Being able to identify the feel of a team just by visual cues or reading the energy is certainly not as simple as described here, and I don't mean to trivialize it. There could be a quiet and serious team that is highly engaged, but you look at the members and think they're all bored. Or you find a loud, boisterous team and assume it is delivering value continuously, but the members are goofing off most of the time and aren't producing much. But not everything lasts.

AS TIME PASSES, OUR TEAMS CHANGE

At one point our team is thriving. Later on it might degrade. Circumstances around us change. What we are working on changes. Whatever it is, the feel or dynamic of the team does not stay the same forever. Team change is a natural occurrence, as detailed in Chapter 1. As time passes in your team you might

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4 Jon Walker, in an interview with the author, February 2016.

5 Pentland, "New Science," 1.

6 Damon Valenzona, in an interview with the author, October 2016.

think, "Why aren't we as effective as we used to be?" Or, as things change around your team, maybe due to extreme growth or acquisition by another company, people might notice the shifts and wonder what happened to the company they knew before because now it "feels so different." See "What It Means When You're Asked, "How Do We Maintain Our Culture?"" on page 86 for an exploration of this topic.

At other times, when we feel that things are less productive or stagnating, we might try to change the teams deliberately in order to feel refreshed or renewed. We might try to intentionally reorganize our teams in the quest for greater effectiveness. But that's no easy endeavor. Reteaming can be very tricky and downright risky.

I like to encourage teams to reflect on their own compositions and determine how they might shift into greater effectiveness. How can they change their structure to be more effective? By asking questions like this, a team can become more self-aware as an entity, and when given the go-ahead by the powers that be, team members can even be empowered to change their *own* team composition in order to solve problems. I think that's the spirit of a self-organizing team as a concept. This concept is not readily taught with the stable-teams dogma that has permeated the Agile and organizational development spheres. I have found that it takes a bit of brain rewiring on the part of executives to trust teams to do this. It is worth the plight. It can be done. It can be coached.

Different combinations of people yield different team chemistry. You could get lucky and get the right team members together. If you do, and if they are delivering awesome value at a great cadence to customers, by all means, keep them together. However, if you have teams in a funk for months on end, and things don't seem quite right collaboratively, switching things up might be just what you need.

The bottom line to dynamic reteaming is this: Start where you are. Visualize your team structures. Observe and get to know them. Agree to pursue incremental reflection and adjustment to your teams. Experiment and learn. Adjust your team compositions accordingly. See Chapter 14 for an exploration of retrospectives as a tool to shift your teams.

We've taken a look at basic team definitions, and we've seen how dynamic reteaming is, in essence, about the structural change of teams. So how do people get on teams in the first place, and how do they get off of teams? Let's dig into the power dynamics surrounding team assignment and change.